The Texture of Everyday Life: Carceral Realism and Abolitionist Speculation

Shea Hennum
Southern Methodist University, shennum@smu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholar.smu.edu/hum_sci_english_etds

Part of the Literature in English, North America Commons, and the Literature in English, North America, Ethnic and Cultural Minority Commons

Recommended Citation
https://scholar.smu.edu/hum_sci_english_etds/20

This Dissertation is brought to you for free and open access by the English at SMU Scholar. It has been accepted for inclusion in English Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of SMU Scholar. For more information, please visit http://digitalrepository.smu.edu.
THE TEXTURE
OF EVERYDAY LIFE:
CARCERAL REALISM AND
ABOLITIONIST SPECULATION

Approved by:

____________________________
Prof. Jayson Gonzales Sae-Saue
Associate Professor of English

____________________________
Prof. Tim Cassedy
Associate Professor of English

____________________________
Prof. Darryl Dickson-Carr
Professor of English

____________________________
Prof. Anoop Mirpuri
Associate Professor of English
THE TEXTURE
OF EVERYDAY LIFE:
CARCERAL REALISM AND
ABOLITIONIST SPECULATION

A Dissertation Presented to the Graduate Faculty of the
Dedman College
Southern Methodist University
in
Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
For the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
with a
Major in English
by
Shea Hennum
B.A., Literary Studies, University of Texas, Dallas

July 31, 2023
The Texture
Of Everyday Life:
Carceral Realism and
Abolitionist Speculation

Advisor: Professor Jayson Sae-Saue
Doctor of Philosophy Conferred: July 31, 2023

Exploring the ways in which prisons shape the subjectivity of free-world thinkers, and the ways that subjectivity is expressed in literary texts, this dissertation develops the concept of carceral realism: a cognitive and literary mode that represents prisons and police as the only possible response to social disorder. As this dissertation illustrates, this form of consciousness is experienced as racial paranoia, and it is expressed literary texts, which reflect and help to reify it. Through this process of cultural reification, carceral realism increasingly insists on itself as the only possible mode of thinking. As I argue, however, carceral realism actually stands in a dialectical relationship to abolitionist speculation, or, the active imagining of a world without prisons and police and/or the conditions necessary to actualize such a world. In much the same way that carceral realism embeds itself in realist literary forms, abolitionist speculation plays a constitutive role in the utopian literary tradition.

In order to elaborate these concepts, this dissertation begins with a meta-consideration of how cultural productions by incarcerated people are typically framed. Building upon the work of scholars and incarcerated authors’ own interventions in questions of consciousness, authorship, textual production, and study, this chapter contrasts that typical frame with a method of abolitionist reading. Chapter two applies this methodology to Edward Bunker’s 1977 novel The
Animal Factory and Claudia Rankine’s 2010 poem Citizen in order to develop the concept of carceral realism and demonstrate how it has developed from the 1970s to the present. In order to lay out the historical foundations of the modern prison, chapter three looks back to the late 18th century and situates the emergence of the penitentiary within debates regarding race, citizenship, and state power. Returning to the 1970s, chapter four investigates the role universities have played in the formation of carceral realism and the complex relationship Chicanos and Asian Americans have to prisons and police by analogizing the institutionalization of prison literary study to the formation of ethnic studies. Chapter five draws this project to a conclusion by developing the concept of abolitionist speculation, or the active imagining of a world without prisons or the police and/or the conditions necessary to realize such a world, which I identify as both a constitutive generic feature of utopian literature and something that exceeds literature altogether. In doing so, this dissertation establishes an ongoing historical relationship between social reproduction of prisons and literary forms that cuts across time, geography, race, gender, and genre.
# Table of Contents

Acknowledgements .................................................................................................................. vii

Guide Quotes .......................................................................................................................... ix

Introduction: The United States of Attica ............................................................................... 1

1.1. Consciousness, the Ordinary, and the Literary ................................................................. 7

1.2. Nation, State, Capital ....................................................................................................... 17

1.3. Neoliberalism, the Carceral State, and Paranoia ............................................................ 31

1.4. Abolitionism .................................................................................................................... 49

Chapter 1: Abolition as Method ............................................................................................. 54

2.1. Prisons and the Production of Authority .......................................................................... 56

2.2. Prison Writing and Corrective-Extractive Reading ......................................................... 68

2.3. Abolitionist Reading ....................................................................................................... 80

Chapter 2: Carceral Realism .................................................................................................. 92

3.1. A Brief History of Carceral Realism ............................................................................... 95

3.2. The Production of Carceral Consciousness .................................................................. 124

3.3. What is it like to be an American? .................................................................................. 151

Chapter 3: The Long 1790s .................................................................................................. 157

4.1. What is an American? ...................................................................................................... 160

4.2. The Making of Americans .............................................................................................. 179

4.3. The Unmaking of Americans ......................................................................................... 202
Chapter 4: (Counter)Revolution and the College Campus ........................................... 223
  5.1. The Police ........................................................................................................ 226
  5.2. The University ................................................................................................ 246
  5.3. The Contradictions ....................................................................................... 267
Chapter 5: Abolitionist Speculation ........................................................................ 283
  6.1. The Defamiliarization of Everyday Life .......................................................... 287
  6.2. The Dispossessed .......................................................................................... 306
  6.3. The Alienated .............................................................................................. 322
Conclusion: With Love/In Solidarity ........................................................................ 333
Bibliography .......................................................................................................... 345
Acknowledgements

As I argue in this dissertation, authorship is a collective endeavor and collective production. The dissertation itself is no different, and its author is a collective that stretches from New York City to Chicago, from Seattle to Los Angeles, and from Colin College and University of Texas, Dallas to Southern Methodist University. It is the story of my life, and of all the lives that have made mine possible. Because a full settling of debts is not possible here, in this brief space, let my thanks suffice.

First, I want to thank my family: my parents, Shane and Catherine Hennum, who supported my love of reading and writing from a very young age, and who I hope to have made proud; my sister, Caitlin Hennum, with whom I have often fought but from whom I have learned significant lessons; and my grandmother, Madeleine Johnston, who remains my biggest fan.

I want to thank the faculty of Southern Methodist University who supported and challenged me over six long years: Jayson Sae-Saue, Darryl Dickson-Carr, Tim Cassedy, Lisa Siraganian, Rajani Sudan, Tim Rosendale, Martha Satz, Samantha Pergadia, Paul Edwards, Lori Stephens, Bruce Levy, Dennis Foster,

Thank you as well to my fellow graduate students, without whom I wanted have survived: Jordan Ivie, Kim Urban, Zac Thriefley, Ian Shaughnessy, Ally Barber, Moises Hernandez, Zachary Johnson, Steph Buongiorno, Kevin Pickard, Amanda Atkinson, Kelsey Kieser, Andrew Spencer, Aisha Matthews, Eli Hook, Roseanne Brooks, Erin Rhodes, and Carole Degrasse. I am especially thankful for James Ray, with whom I shared an office for several very
happy years; Cole Ryberg, the *homo ludens*; Will Roudabush, the philologist; and Matt Clemmer, the encyclopedia. Together we turned the quad into the agora and the law school courtyard into the Capitol Hill Açaí Zone. This time together was among the happiest of my life.

I want to thank Sabrina Starnaman, who was the first to ask me to think about Ursula K. Le Guin and Octavia Butler together; Charles Hatfield, who first showed me what it meant for a book to contain the universe; and Andy Amato, who first taught me think about communism like an anarchist and anarchism like a communist.

I want to give special thanks to Don Jorgensen, Joshua Burke, and Uhuru Rowe. Their experiences, their correspondence, their friendship, and their support has enriched my life, enabled me to survive, allowed me to contribute to something greater than myself. Perhaps more than anyone, it was for them that this project was pursued; it was because of them that it took the shape that it has; and it is to whom that it is must dedicated.

Finally, I want to thank my partner Kendall Dinniene. Kendall has done more than anyone to support this project, and me as I completed it. Many of its insight are the direct result of conversations with her. I owe her everything.
Guide Quotes

“[T]he fundamental problem of political philosophy is still precisely the one that Spinoza saw so clearly, and that Wilhelm Reich rediscovered: ‘Why do men fight for their servitude as stubbornly as though it were their salvation?’ How can people possibly reach the point of shouting: ‘More taxes! Less bread!’? As Reich remarks, the astonishing thing is not that some people steal or that others occasionally go out on strike, but rather that all those who are starving do not steal as a regular practice, and all those who are exploited are not continually out on strike: after centuries of exploitation, why do people still tolerate being humiliated and enslaved, to such a point, indeed, that they actually want humiliation and slavery not only for others but for themselves? Reich is at his profoundest as a thinker when he refuses to accept ignorance or illusion on the part of the masses as an explanation of fascism, and demands an explanation that will take their desires into account, an explanation formulated in terms of desire: no, the masses were not innocent dupes; at a certain point, under a certain set of conditions, they wanted fascism, and it is this perversion of the desire of the masses that needs to be accounted for.” – Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari.¹

“But alas! even crime has power to reproduce itself and create conditions favorable to its own existence.” – Frederick Douglass.²

“I know your language, but I wish it were silence. The seeds are sown in all the small acts of violence.” – Tune-Yards.³

“Is there time to stop the foul process underway? Will we have the means to do it? Will the huge movement, which has roused so many men and women throughout the world, so many organizations resolved not to let an injustice so barbarous be perpetrated, be powerful enough to stop it?” – Jacques Derrida.⁴


² Fredrick Douglass, “Preface” to The Red Record, by Ida B. Wells-Barnett, 1895, [https://www.gutenberg.org/files/14977/14977-h/14977-h.htm](https://www.gutenberg.org/files/14977/14977-h/14977-h.htm)


“Our spring bring us with our hands bound,
Our teeth knocked out,
Our heads broken,
Bring us shouting curses, or crying,
Or silent as tomorrow.
Bring us to the electric chair,
Or the shooting wall,
Or the guillotine.
But you can't kill all of us.
You can't silence all of us.
You can't stop all of us—
Kill Vanzetti in Boston and Huang Ping rises
In China.
We're like those rivers
That fill with the melted snow in spring
And flood the land in all directions.
Our spring has come,
The pent-up snows of all the brutal years
Are melting beneath the rising sun of revolution.
The rivers of the world will be flooded with strength
And you will be washed away—
You murderers of the people—
Killers and cops and soldiers,
Priests and kings and billionaires,
Diplomats and liars,
Makers of gas and guns and guillotines.
You will be washed away,
And the land will be fresh and clean again,
Denuded of the past—
For time has given us
Our spring
At last.” —Langston Hughes.  

“When history is written as it ought to be written, it is the moderation and long
patience of the masses at which men will wonder, not their ferocity.”—C.L.R. James. 

“The mob within the heart
Police cannot suppress
The riot given at the first
Is authorized as peace


Uncertified of scene
Or signified of sound
But growing like a hurricane
In a congenial ground.” –Emily Dickinson.7

“[I]nsurgency is not only an insurgency that is before and against the police, but insurgency is even before ontology. It’s before that too. It’s before the metaphysical foundations of the police.”
–Fred Moten.8

“Vogliamo Tutto! [We Want Everything!]” –Popular slogan among Italian operaists during the 1970s.

“There’s a new world coming
And it’s just around the bend.
There’s a new world coming,
This one’s coming to an end.” –Cass Elliot.9


Introduction:
The United States of Attica

In July of 1972, professional boxer and amateur poet Muhammad Ali traveled to Dublin for a match with Alvin Lewis. There, Ali gave a promotional interview with Cathal O'Shannon for Ireland’s national public television station, RTÉ. As he brought the conversation to a close, O'Shannon turned from boxing to focus on Ali’s creative output, asking the boxer to recite a poem that he had written. Ali obliged, asking the audience: “Better far from all I see,/ To die fighting to be free/ What more fitting end could be?” This opening question animates the untitled poem, which meditates on freedom, power, the state, racism, and incarceration. Narrated by a prisoner facing death, the pem’s speaker works through these concepts by considering the possible other lives he could have led: dying alone in bed, splattered across a highway, appeasing those forces that have destabilized his life. However, in contrast with these more cowardly, senseless, or banal deaths, the poem’s speaker is proud of the noble death he faces. As Ali puts it:

Better calling death to come
Than to die another dumb
Muted victim in the slum
Better than of this prison rot
If there’s any choice I’ve got

\footnote{Ali, 0:2:05-0:2:15.}
Rather than suffering a premature death in the putatively free world, or a protracted one in a concrete box, the speaker instead chooses his death. Framing this act of rebellion as a heroic expression of freedom, Ali’s poem critiques the condition of incarceration by rendering death preferable to captive life while, at the same time, gesturing towards its limits. By identifying with the position of the prisoner, Ali situates his audience in an antagonistic relationship with those forces that make death a preferable alternative to life. In doing so, he demonstrates the ways in which art enables rebellious ideas and energies to travel and circulate, the ways in which it helps cultivate the desire for revolution.

Indeed, a consideration of Ali’s poem draws us into its world, its conditions of production, and the nature of its rebellion. Before Ali recited his poem, O’Shannon offered his audience some context for what they were about to hear, noting that this poem had been written “about the time of the Attica riot.”12 Affirming this, Ali elaborated by briefly narrating how, less than a year before, Attica Correctional Facility in New York had been seized from the state and held by the inmates for four days. New York State Police eventually reclaimed the prison by shooting more than a hundred people and killing forty-two—many of whom were civilian hostages.13 “With the exception of Indian massacres in the late 19th century,” The 1972 New York State Commission on Attica determined, “the State Police assault was the bloodiest one day encounter between Americans since the civil war.”14 While some of the Atticans may have appreciated this posthumous designation as Americans, many of them contended that the state

12 Ali, 0:0:12.

13 Ali, 0:0:25-0:1:05.

held them outside this category while they lived. In fact, it was the state’s violation of their protections and entitlements as citizens that precipitated their rebellion. In the “15 Practical Proposals” made to Commissioner of Corrections Russell Oswald, for example, the prisoners demanded nothing more radical than those most fundamental and basic protections allegedly secured by the Bill of Rights: freedom of association, freedom of the press, freedom of religion, freedom from political persecution; as well as an end to slave labor, access to fresh food, healthcare, and an education.\(^\text{15}\)

By articulating these particular demands, the prisoners underscore something that most people take to be so obvious that it’s often perceived as not worth mentioning: prison is a place where people are formally and informally stripped of their status as citizens (people whose freedoms are circumscribed and secured by the state) through the deprivation of those freedoms. In litigation by prisoners, for example, demands are often demands for civil rights: the recognition of their rights as citizens. Demands for the most basic protections and entitlements enshrined in the U.S. constitution need to be made in the first place precisely because prisoners are denied them as both a function and condition of their incarceration. In this way, incarceration helps draw and enforce the distinction between non-citizen and citizen, American and other, as it is experienced in everyday life. Citizenship, therefore, requires prisons as an existential condition of its own reproduction. If we understand the Attica rebellion as an attempt to seize the entitlements and protections of citizenship, then we can understand it as an attempt to abolish the concept of citizenship. By insisting on the universality of these rights and protections (regardless of one’s legal status), the prisoners of Attica refused the idea that they only extended to citizens.

The inclusion/exclusion through which the state defines citizenship, therefore, begins to break down. Its ideological underpinning becomes unmoored. The prisoners of Attica self-consciously understood their project in this way, insisting that their goal was to forge common ground with free-world people. “We’ve called upon the conscientious citizens of America to assist us in putting an end to this situation that threatens the lives of not only us, but of each and every one of you, as well,” they write in their “Declaration to the People of America.” They do so in order to “bring us closer to the reality of the demise of these prison institutions that serve no useful purpose to the people of America, but to those who would enslave and exploit the people of America.” By adopting the perspective of these prisoners, who intend to unsettle citizenship, we can begin to recognize the ways in which free-world people are subject to prisons too.

While their revolt was repressed, the rebels’ nonetheless succeeded in drawing the public’s attention on the intimate relationship between prisons and citizenship and thereby antagonizing its reproduction. Inspired by the rebellion, Michel Foucault made his first visit to a prison, touring Attica in 1972 and offering an interview. Speaking in a minor Marxist key, he observed that

prison is an organization that is too complex to be reduced to purely negative functions of exclusion; its costs, its importance, the care that one takes in administering it, the justifications that one tries to give for it seem to indicate that it possesses positive functions. The problem is, then, to find out what role capitalist society has its penal system play, what is the aim that is sought, and what effects are produced by all these procedures for punishment and exclusion? What is their place in the economic process, what is their importance in the exercise and the maintenance of power? What is their role in the class struggle?”


17 The Inmates of Attica Prison, “Declaration to the People…,” 8.

Understanding the disciplinary technology of the prison within a political economy dominated by capitalism, Foucault describes it as the site of investments and wages; as something underwritten by ideological commitments; and something that operates through acts of violence and fear. This is just to say, in other words, that prisons are bound up in a vast array of social relations: their ongoing social reproduction entails the circulations of money, ideological values, and affective relations, which are bound up in conditions of work, regimes of law and law-enforcement, and the cultural forms that mediate these things. Determining and determined by these social forces, prisons shape the contours of society by enforcing the boundaries between communities and extracting people from them. In this way, prisons repress certain features of social life but produce others through this repression. “So the question one obviously asks,” as Foucault puts it, “is what does the machine produce, what is that gigantic installation used for, and what comes out of it?”19 What kind of subjectivity is produced by prisons and by the penal society that employs them? What does it mean to be an American within such a society: to be a subject of and subject to the carceral state? How is that subjectivity experienced? How is that experience reproduced? Moreover, what role does cultural expression play in the composition of that experience? How, for example, does literature mediate, (re)produce, or otherwise express and shape that experience?

This dissertation offers a provisional answer to these questions by developing the concept of carceral realism: a cognitive and literary mode that represents prisons and police as the only “realistic” response to social disorder. As I illustrate over the course of this dissertation, this form of consciousness is endemic to neoliberalism and it is experienced as racial paranoia.

19 Foucault, “Michel Foucault on Attica,” 27.
Engendered by the racially-uneven application of state power, and pivoting on the language of “the people” and “the nation,” carceral realism mystifies (racialized) class war as race war. (Re)asserting race as an ahistorical, biological phenomenon that determines individuals’ behaviors, capacities, and social value, carceral realism transforms a historical, cross-racial struggle over the means of social reproduction into an eternal conflict between internally-undifferentiated groups. These groups, carceral realism insists, are separated by insuperable biological differences, which are reified through the production of inter-racial violence. This inter-racial violence, in turn, naturalizes racialized feelings of enmity, fear, loathing, anxiety. These feelings are experienced as racialized paranoia, and they serve to orient and animate ordinary behavior of hoarding and the anticipatory protection of one’s hoard from a racialized threat: the policing of boundaries defined by and through privatization. In doing so, this paranoia serves to reproduce the racial order that underpins the capitalist economic order and thereby helps secure neoliberalism’s conditions of reproduction. Through these means, carceral realism reifies itself and insists on itself as the only possible mode of thinking with accelerating force.

As I elaborate in chapter five, however, carceral realism actually stands in a dialectical relationship to abolitionist speculation, or, the active imagining of a world without prisons and police and/or the conditions necessary to actualize such a world. This practice, as I argue and intend to demonstrate, develops in and through struggles against carceral realism and its persistent efforts to impose itself.

As I elaborate below, I take these forms of consciousness to be crystallized in and by language and literature. This is to say that these forms of consciousness are social productions that develop unevenly over time. Because it expresses and mediates this social production, culture has served as a tool in the construction of consciousness and a site where that
construction is contested and fought over. Literary texts, therefore, depict, express, and circulate its ongoing and dynamic nature. As such, literature is also a thing over which competing tendencies within a social formation struggle. From this perspective, literature crystallizes the contradictory movements of the society that conditioned its existence. Texts consequently offer a glimpse at how the forms of thinking that characterize this society have come to be, the struggles that produced them, the ways in which they have been imposed, and the ways in which that imposition has been contested. Accordingly, this project reads a wide selection of American national literature, or literature that depicts or otherwise participates in the production of individuals as citizens, in order to understand what “being an American” means, how that meaning is produced, how that meaning is experienced in everyday life, and how literature mediates this experience. To that end, this introduction begins the dissertation at its highest level of abstraction. I begin here in order to get clear on the key concepts and presuppositions that underpin and orient my investigation.

**Consciousness, the Ordinary, and the Literary**

Sidestepping debates between neuroscientists and philosophers regarding the origin, nature, and precise definition of consciousness, I use the term in the ordinary senses of “thinking,” “subjectivity,” “experience.” Further, I follow literary critic Raymond Williams in understanding language as practical consciousness. This formulation is derived from Williams’ reading of *The German Ideology*, wherein Marx and Engels write that “language is practical consciousness, as it exists for other men, and for that reason is really beginning to exist for me

---

20 For a fuller account of these debates, see Michael S.A. Graziano, “Understanding Consciousness,” *Brain*, Volume 144, Issue 5, (May 2021), 1281–1283.
personally as well; for language, like consciousness, only arises from the need, the necessity, of intercourse with other men.”  

21 In contrast with earlier scholars who have taken Marx and Engels as saying that languages emerge as an effect of social relations, as though life and language can be temporally ordered or that they have a cause-effect relationship, Williams argues that language is “an indissoluble element of human self-creation.”  

22 Language, in other words, is immanent to the social intercourse within which it circulates.

Rather than a product of thought, then, language is thought as it is lived. “As individuals express their life,” Marx and Engels go on to write, “so they are.”  

23 This verb “express” is crucial for Marx and Engels, as well as for Williams, because, in addition to the transmission of information, it refers to “the experience of speaking with others, of participating in language, of making and responding to rhythm or intonation which has no simple ‘information’ or ‘message’ or ‘object’ content.”  

24 Rather than merely representing an aspect of the world, language plays a role in the collective and ongoing project of (re)constituting the world. An individual’s psychological interiority is externalized by language and these externalities are, in turn, internalized by individuals in and through language. In this way, language socializes an individual; it is a place where and means through which an individual shares themselves with


22 Williams, Marxism and Literature, 29.


24 Williams, Marxism and Literature, 32. C.f. Karl Marx and Friederich Engels, Die deutsche ideologie in Werke, band 3 (Berlin: Dietz Verlag, 1978), 21. In the untranslated version of the passage that Williams’ interprets, Marx and Engels use the verb äußern, or “to express.”
others and shares in others's experiences. From this perspective, language is something common rather than private. It represents a means by which a given form of life, which is an eminently social formation, composes and recomposes itself. Accordingly, it is in language that a form of life reveals the nature of its composition and reproduction.

These autopoetic and self-revealing qualities of language are part and parcel of what the organic intellectual Antonio Gramsci calls the “specific conception of the world” particular to a given human community, which contains two dialectical elements: “good sense” and “common sense.” By “good sense,” Gramsci means the critical, reflexive tendency contained within this conception of the world, whereas “common sense” represents the “most widespread conception of life and of man,” which is uncritically accepted and reproduced. Common sense, in other words, comprises that which is taken for granted or is otherwise understood as obvious by a particular group of people, while good sense represents the inherent capacity of such a community to transform its common sense. Together, good sense and common sense comprise consciousness. Understanding a particular form, style, or kind of consciousness, then, requires us to understand the language that holds together a particular form of life. Understanding this language requires an understanding of these two constitutive and often contradictory aspects, as well as the social process through which they develop.

Following Gramsci, I understand this process as a class struggle, and I proceed from the premise that while “every social stratum” or class produces its own form of consciousness, those forms are overdetermined by whatever class dominates the others at a specific historical

---


26 Gramsci, 326, n.5.
conjuncture.\textsuperscript{27} In contrast with the more popular use of “class” to mean “income level” or “tax bracket,” or to refer to an ensemble of cultural signifiers, Gramsci writes in the Marxist tradition that understands class as an abstraction: as a social relation and social process. Or, as Marxist historian Ellen Meiskins Wood explains it: classes are dynamic, historical productions, which are composed of different and sometimes contradictory components. These components are related to one another in historically particular ways, and the classes they constitute are, in turn, related to other formations. “It is in this sense,” as Wood puts it, “that class struggle precedes class.”\textsuperscript{28} Rather than preexisting formations situated in relation to one another, Wood observes that it is these relations and interactions that form classes, which are characterized by their differential, conflictual relations to the means of social reproduction, or, the dynamic totality of means by which and modes through which a society reproduces itself culturally and biologically. Belonging to a class, therefore, means inhabiting a particular position within society and relating to a historical configuration of things, resources, ideas, practices, institutions, organizations, processes, and other people in a particular way \textit{on an ongoing basis}. Rather than something over which classes sometimes or incidentally struggle, it is the ongoing struggle over these things that produce classes.

Because a ruling class, by definition, exerts relatively greater control over the means of material production (the use of resources and the provisioning of goods), they also wield inordinate power over the means of “mental production.”\textsuperscript{29} Possessing a relatively greater

\textsuperscript{27} Gramsci, 326, n.5.


\textsuperscript{29} Marx and Engels, \textit{The German Ideology}, 67.
capacity to determine the distribution of work and the provisioning of resources that serve as the material basis of social life, a ruling class determines the intellectual formation of the society over which they rule with greater force than those classes subordinate to them. By producing and imposing its own definitions of reality, Stuart Hall and his co-authors write, the ruling class constructs “a particular image of society which represents particular class interests as the interests of all members of society.”  

Gramsci calls this ideological expression of class domination “hegemony,” which secures the legitimacy of a political order through the production of popular and seemingly spontaneous consent. While Gramsci distinguishes hegemony, or “direction”/“leadership,” from the “direct domination” of the state, I intend to demonstrate the ways in which this ideological domination is produced, maintained, and reproduced through direct domination and how that direct domination produces that ideological prevalence. They constitute dialectical aspects of a single process and practice of social domination. Accordingly, I use “hegemony” and “domination” as synonyms, and I freely interchange them throughout.

This is not to say, however, that a ruling class simply imposes its worldview on passively subordinate classes, which seamlessly internalize it, happily adopt it, and perfectly reproduce it. Domination, as Foucault famously pointed out, implies and entails resistance, which contests


31 Gramsci, 12.

domination and the conditions that underpin it. Although a ruling class seeks to completely and
totally determine the composition and direction of social life, it cannot. There are always people,
places, and practices that challenge it, refuse it, or otherwise elude its imposition. These
repudiations take many forms, which subvert, undermine, and unsettle a ruling class’ hegemony.
These forms of unsettling include the contestation of a hegemon’s terms and conditions as well
as the development of practices and spaces outside the hegemon’s ambit. These challenges force
a ruling class to adapt, which requires them to constantly incorporate those things that exceed its
control. In fact, it is through the interminable re-securing of its hegemony in the face of
challenges that a hegemony accumulates authority. In this way, hegemony is an ongoing process
through which the conditions of domination are provisionally secured through the production and
recuperation of resistance and alterity.

From this perspective, consciousness is a place where classes struggle as well as
something over which they do so. Consequently, subjectivity itself is its product. After all, as
historian Joan Scott reminds us, “It is not individuals who have experience, but subjects who are
constituted through experience.” It is, in other words, the experience of class struggle that
produces individuals as such. Because it precedes consciousness and determines its form and
function, class struggle reveals its dynamics and tensions through such a production. This is not


to suggest, however, that the workings of a given subjectivity are transparent or even that individuals are best positioned to make sense of their own experiences. As Louis Althusser points out, subjectivity is experienced by the subject as though it has no outside, as though thinking has always and will always occur in its present mode. As a consequence, an individual experiences their own subjectivity as something eternal and essential, as something that has no point of production and undergoes no process of becoming. In this way, consciousness mystifies its conditions of production and renders its exterior opaque to its interior. Because of this self-concealing character, Scott points out, subjectivity is “at once always already an interpretation and something that needs to be interpreted.”

Through such an interpretation, the class interests that orient and animate a particular form of consciousness can be drawn out and discerned.

To that end, this dissertation seeks to understand the prevailing form of consciousness in our contemporary society, which entails an analysis of its critical and common senses. Because they are dialectically related to one another and to the intellectual formations of other classes, these aspects of thought can only be understood as a dynamic, complex, and ongoing process of historical becoming. In addition to understanding the mental content being reproduced, interpreting consciousness therefore requires an interpretation of its mode of reproduction: the ways in which that mental content reproduces itself as well as the means by which, ends toward


36 Scott, 797.
which, and conditions under which it does so. These conditions include the shifting terrain on which hegemony is fought over, and the dialectical character of the relationship between struggling classes. It is, in fact, through these shifts and conflicts that consciousness emerges, and because it serves as the elementary site of social reproduction, it is this social intercourse that reveals the nature of consciousness under the aspect of becoming.

As Raymond Williams points out, however, studying this dynamic process in its fluidity involves broadening the rubric of “sense” to include “sensation.” In addition to common sense and good sense, consciousness also consists of feeling. This is “not feeling against thought, but thought as felt and feeling as thought: practical consciousness of a present kind, in a living and interrelating continuity.”\(^{37}\) From this perspective, consciousness is an experience with the complementary and inseparable aspects of thinking and feeling, sensing and sense-making. Feeling includes feelings, that is, emotions or affects, but it also refers to sensation in a broader sense: those unconscious mental, and preconscious physical, reactions to external stimuli, which mold an individual’s perception of their world without their volition. For example, consider the common experiences of having your mood shifted by the weather, or a particular smell, or some difficulty digesting yesterday’s lunch. Affected by these things, you find your perception of and response to the world shifted. Things that might have been clear the day before are hazy, things that you might be patient with tomorrow are annoying today. These mundane instances exemplify the ways in which the putatively “outside” world permeates an individual’s body and thereby affects their consciousness, stimulating biological processes and unconscious reactions.

---

operative at a level over which the conscious mind has no direct power or complete knowledge. In this way, feeling structures thought and therefore constitutes an important element in the process of thinking and the nature of experience.

Primarily concerned with the ordinary ways and ordinary language in which these dominant thoughts and structures of feelings are expressed, (re)articulated, and (re)constituted, and the banal conditions under which they are experienced, I undertake this dissertation in what literary critic Toril Moi calls “the spirit of the ordinary”: an attitude toward reality attuned to the particulars that detail the routines of everyday life. Rather than a method, theory, or doctrine, this “unmistakable tone, or aura, or atmosphere” is merely the paying of attention to those things that typically go without saying. Accordingly, I draw upon the insight of cultural historians and critics, philosophers, sociologists, psychologists, and political organizers such as Mariame Kaba, who pleads with her readers to “train ourselves to see the mundane rather than focus on the spectacular and excess.” In this way, we can better understand those aspects of reality whose presence has become so commonplace that we are blind to them. Following Kaba’s injunction, I attend to texts and aspects of texts that other critics have overlooked for various reasons. In some

38 For a fuller exploration of the ways in which “[t]he ‘atmosphere’ or the environment literally gets into the individual,” see Teresa Brennan, *The Transmission of Affect* (Cornell: Cornell UP, 2004), 1.


40 Moi, 63; 3.

41 Mariame Kaba, *We Do This ‘Til We Free Us: Abolitionist Organizing and Transforming Justice* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2021), 91. These thinkers include Saidiya Hartman, Christina Sharpe, Michel de Certeau, Dorothy Smith, Erving Goffman, Lauren Berlant, Sigmund Freud, and Ju Yon Kim.
cases, this oversight is due to the obscurity or perceived banality of texts, such as ‘zines, blog posts, pamphlets, letters, or obscure poems, anthologies, autobiographies, and essays. In other cases, however, these aspects include unassuming and granular details of language, passages whose meaning is taken as too obvious to be interpreted, depictions of mundane life, or generic formal features: those aspects that appear to be somehow above commentary because, having become habitual or reflexive, they routinely pass through our minds below the threshold of awareness.

Given the literary focus of this project, perhaps the biggest influence in this regard is ordinary language philosophy (OLP). Like Moi, I understand OLP as “the philosophical tradition after Ludwig Wittgenstein [and] J.L. Austin, as constituted and extended by Stanley Cavell.”

In contrast with a post-Saussurean account of language as signifiers that refer to or represent signifieds, as though there were some gap between words and the world, OLP posits that the meaning of a word is its use in language. This is merely to say that individuals do things with words and, in doing things, externalize some conscious or unconscious interiority. This includes not only emotions and ideas, but desires, intentions, attitudes, and values as well. “To say that texts are actions and expressions,” Moi elaborates,

is to remind us of the obvious: that sentences, utterances, texts don’t generate themselves; that they are spoken or written by someone at a particular time, in a particular place; that words reveal the speaker; that once words are uttered they can’t be undone; that utterances, like other actions, have consequences, ripple effects spreading far beyond the original moment of utterance.

Coming to understand a word or phrase’s meaning is then an effort to grasp these conditions, relations, and effects rather than to reveal something that has been concealed, or identify a gap

---

42 Moi, 1.

43 Moi, 196.
between signifier or signified, or to treat meaning as a quality that inheres in a word rather than in a given use of it. Ordinary interpretation is, in other words, a process through which the world itself is elaborated in, by, and through language: an ongoing and constant grappling with the linguistic aspects of the world and with the worldly aspects of language. Though they are certainly more complex and more deliberate than banal uses of language, literary texts such as novels, poems, and plays bear no ontological distinction. Instead of essences, they are distinguished by modes, aspects, styles, conventions, expectations, contexts, readers, and intensities. Accordingly, neither “the ordinary” nor “the literary” has a privileged place in this dissertation. I use the former to refer to any experience whatsoever, while I use the latter to refer to any lettered cultural production whatsoever.

Although Marxism and OLP are typically understood as antithetical, they seem to me to be obviously well-suited to one another. In fact, they seem to share a number of key suppositions. Compare, for example, Williams’ and Gramsci’s accounts of language above to Moi’s own, or to Wittgenstein’s claim that languages are immanent to forms of life, or Cavell’s insistence that we learn words and the world together.⁴⁴ Attributing these ideas about language to Marx and Engels, Williams and Gramsci help constitute a Marxist tradition that “really is,” as sociologist Henri Lefebvre puts it, “a critical knowledge of everyday life.”⁴⁵ As thinkers working


in this tradition have reiterated, the everyday is where life is experienced and it therefore represents the very thing that politics intend to transform. Underpinning Marxist critiques of everyday life, this transformability presupposes a conception of the ordinary as something historical: as something that has not always been as it is and will one day be something other than it is. There is nothing obvious about the ordinary, in other words, nothing mundane about the mundane. It is something formed through struggle, something over which we struggle, and the field on which we struggle.

**Nation, State, Capital**

Because its goal is to understand the reigning mode of consciousness in US life, this dissertation undertakes an examination of American national consciousness: the mundane form of thought that the US state strives to interpellate citizens into; that it supposes all citizens share; and that it contrasts with the supposed ideologies and attitudes of non-citizens. Following Benedict Anderson, I understand the nation as one particular “style” of imagining community, which is defined by the presence of three aspects: limitation, sovereignty, and community. Presuming horizontal relationships among citizens rather than a hierarchical relationship between ruler and subjects (a community), nations claim law-making and law-enforcing power (sovereignty) over a territorially limited ambit. This is to say that a group of people constitutes a nation insofar as they: 1) imagine themselves as an internally undifferentiated and formally equal group; 2) they imagine themselves already in possession of state power; 3) there exists a state apparatus with which to wield it. In this way, “nation” refers to: “a country”; “a people”

---

supposed to inhabit that country; and a way in which “the people” and “the country” people are related to one another.

Although Anderson himself does not theorize the state, we can synthesize the classic formulations by anarchist philosopher Gustav Landauer and liberal sociologist Max Weber in order to understand the state as a set of social relationships that determine and distinguish between the legitimate and illegitimate uses of violence in a particular society.47 Or, as Marxist geographer Ruth Wilson Gilmore and organizer Craig Gilmore more recently put it: “A state is a territorially bounded set of relatively specialized institutions that develop and change over time in the gaps and fissures of social conflict, compromise, and cooperation.”48 In contrast with the traditional Leninist definition of the state as merely “an organ of class rule, an organ for the oppression of one class by another,” the Gilmores theorize the state as a dynamic and uneven apparatus with different, sometimes contradictory capacities, orientations, interests, and functions that (re)constitute themselves in and through struggles between and among social groups.49 These capacities determine who to protect and who to serve, who to violate and who to abandon, who to correct and who to neglect, who to defend and who to offend. While these

47 C.f. Landuer: “The state is a social relationship; a certain way of people relating to one another. It can be destroyed by creating new social relationships; i.e., by people relating to one another differently”; and Weber: “A compulsory political organization with continuous operations will be called a 'state' insofar as its administrative staff successfully upholds a claim to the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force in the enforcement of its order” (54). Gustav Landauer, “Weak Statesmen, Weaker People,” The Anarchist Library, https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/gustav-landauer-weak-statesmen-weaker-people.


capacities includes what Gramsci calls “Law,” or what Althusser calls the ideological and repressive apparatuses of the state, it also includes redistributive capacities that construct and maintain critical infrastructure, such as roads, bridges, dams, energy infrastructure, and access to clean air and water. Because they are deployed by different people at different historical conjunctures to different political ends, these unevenly empowered capacities are not merely weapons of class war: they are sites and objects of class struggle as well.

As Marx and Engels argue in the *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, the modern class struggle is waged between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat: those who own capital without producing it and those “who live only so long as they find work, and who find work only so long as their labour increases capital.” The bourgeoisie get to live on profit, in other words, while the proletariat must work to live. Although this taxonomy is routinely criticized for its perceived incapacity to account for an economy such as the US’s, wherein workers sometimes own capital and capitalists sometimes labor, such critiques overlook the mediating term that Marx and Engels themselves offer: the petty or petit bourgeois. Though they may only own a small enterprise, a small parcel of land, a single rental property, or a small portion of a large firm, the petty bourgeois are nonetheless capitalists. They own and through that ownership they passively accumulate: not just money, but power. Their interests are, therefore, the interests of the capitalist. Because their investments are small, however, they cannot buy labor-power the way more powerful capitalists can and are sometimes required to exert themselves to grow their holdings. What’s more, the relative size of their holdings makes them subject to the whims of

---

50 Gramsci, 247.

other capitalists with greater accumulations of wealth and social power. As a result, write Marx and Engels, they are “constantly hurled down into the proletariat” and “they even see the moment approaching when they will completely disappear as an independent section of modern society, to be replaced, in manufactures, agriculture and commerce, by lookers, bailiffs and shopmen.”

This petty bourgeois anxiety is best exemplified by the common injunction to shop local, the frequent contrasts between hedge funds and “mom and pop” proprietors, the romance of “small business owners” and “Main Street,” which are beset by “billionaires,” “corporations,” and “Wall Street.” These rhetorical synecdoches represent a symptom of capitalist production for its totality of social relations. While multinational corporations and monopolistic financial institutions do pose an existential threat to smaller capitalists, they do not obviate the asymmetry of power that inheres in the social and legal relationship of private property: the dynamic that inheres in the fundamentally undemocratic relationship between employer and employee. Rather than the expenditure of labor-power in and of itself, it is these relations to things and other people that marks an individual as a big capitalist or a small capitalist, a capitalist or proletariat.

To this point, Marx and Engels introduce the lumpenproletariat, which includes those workers who cannot (or will not) find or perform licit work, those that neither own capital nor reproduce their means of subsistence through waged labor. Describing them as a “passively rotting mass thrown off by the lowest layers of the old society,” Marx and Engels conceive of the lumpen as that socially marginal group of people whose exclusion from society is a structural feature of capitalism. This “dangerous class,” this so-called “social scum,” constitute a

52 Marx and Engels, Manifesto, 493.

53 Marx and Engels, Manifesto, 482.
structural surplus of people who are kept underemployed and unemployed, underhoused and unhoused, in order to ensure that capitalism can continue to produce surplus-value in the form of profit: buying cheap labor, selling commodities, and accumulating rent.\textsuperscript{54} Like the capitalists, the lumpenproletariat reproduce themselves outside of or in excess of waged labor. Unlike the capitalist, however, they do not passively live on the surplus of others’ labor. In this way, their existence reminds us that class is not an identity attached to certain kinds of labor or leisure but a particular relation to others and to the means of social reproduction.

However, as Marx notes elsewhere, the term structuring these class antagonisms, “capital,” is not merely a thing: it is itself a social relationship. “A cotton-spinning jenny is a machine for spinning cotton,” he writes. “It becomes capital only in certain relations.”\textsuperscript{55} From this perspective, capital is an agglomeration of commodities that enable the production of more commodities; something purchased with money that can, in turn, be translated into greater sums of money. As such, capital represents a social production over which its collective producers have relinquished their control: selling their commodified labor-power to an individual who privatizes the social surplus. The capitalist purchases this commodity, among others, and utilizes them to produce goods or fulfill services that are then exchanged as commodities for a profit.\textsuperscript{56}

\textsuperscript{54} Marx and Engels, \textit{Manifesto}, 482.

\textsuperscript{55} Marx, “Wage, Labour and Capital,” 207.

\textsuperscript{56} Though it functions slightly differently than commodity production, rent-seeking fits into this paradigm as well. Rather than trading a commodity for profit, rent-seeking trades access to a commodity for profit. In this case, space, a platform, a machine, or some sort of intellectual property is still being privatized and commodified but its sale does not include the trade of its possession. Use is leased out, but possession remains with the property-owner. In this way, rent-seeking, like financialization (accumulating money through the circulation of money), represents the highest form of capital accumulation: the accumulation of profit without having to produce a good or deliver a service. This is worth noting in the current context, which has seen big
Capital, therefore, consists of those commodities that condition the production and distribution of other commodities. Because it is this kind of commodity that conditions the ongoing production and exchange of commodities, it is capital that conditions the possibility of profit. Accordingly, capitalism (as a mode of social reproduction) tends towards its production and appropriation. In this way, capital represents an accretion of dead, alienated labor, which dominates living labor. It is, therefore, an embodiment and engine of economic domination. However, this form of domination implies a broader network of social domination that conditions its reproduction: those forces that commodify labor-power in the first place, and that through the commodification of other resources (land, water, food, housing, healthcare, education, et al.) leave the proletariat with nothing to sell but its labor-power: the creation of a condition whereby an individual must earn their living. Accordingly, the accumulation of capital represents an accumulation of social power over those broader relations that compel the reproduction of that economic relation.57

Although many thinkers have perceived deficiencies in the applicability of this perspective to questions of race and racism, political theorist Cedric Robinson has more convincingly demonstrated the reciprocal constitution of class and race. Rather than breaking with the feudal social order as many have claimed (Marx included), Robinson argues that capitalism emerges out of and is therefore continuous with such an order. In these Euro-medieval societies, as Robinson demonstrates, the conditions of work were determined by an individual’s perceived biological affiliation. For example, work such as usury, which was considered morally

capitalists, small capitalists, corporations, hedge funds, “tech” firms, and universities tend toward rent-seeking (subscription-based models) at accelerating rates.

57 This formulation is derived from the one offered by Marx and Engels: “Capital is, therefore, not a personal, it is a social power,” (Manifesto, 485).
repugnant by the Christian ruling class, was assigned to Jews, while more physically laborious and less desirable work went to colonized people, such as Slavs and the Irish. Underpinning these work assignments and the value they were perceived to hold were common ideas about the moral and intellectual faculties of these various groups: limits and propensities held to be functions of biology. What Robinson identifies, in other words, are the ways in which labor was already racialized to the emergence of capitalism. Moreover, Robinson draws our attention to the ways in which these racial designations were functions of antisemitism, imperialism, and colonialism. Or, in other words, he draws our attention to how the conditions of work were produced by what Robinson’s student, Ruth Wilson Gilmore, calls racism: “the state-sanctioned and/or extra-legal production and exploitation of group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death.”

Because it was itself conditioned by racism in the first instance, “the development, organization, and expansion of capitalist society pursued essentially racial directions.” Rather than an ancillary feature of capitalism, then, or a distinct form of oppression that converges (intersects) with it, racism serves a structurally necessary role in the reproduction of capitalism by organizing the differential allocation of work, capital, value, life, and death. Drawing on the anti-apartheid work of South African student-activists in the 1970s, Robinson calls this historical structure “racial capitalism.”

---


While Robinson is often misunderstood as describing a particular form of capitalism, I follow literary critic Jodi Melamed in understanding racism as a constitutive feature of capitalism in general. As Melamed explains in her more recent explication of the term:

Capital can only be capital when it is accumulating, and it can only accumulate by producing and moving through relations of severe inequality among human groups—capitalist with the means of production/workers without the means of subsistence, creditors/debtors, conquerors of land made property/the dispossessed and removed.61

It is the inequality between these groups that conditions and contours capitalism and, as I elaborate over the course of this dissertation, these categories and distinctions are intensely racialized. Through the racially-uneven application of state power, certain groups are more intensely exploited than others. This exploitation renders groups materially and symbolically unequal, and makes these exploited groups more vulnerable to future exploitation. They are more likely to be killed, maimed, and incarcerated by the police and vigilantes; evicted by landlords; kicked out of classrooms; fired by bosses; and rejected or subject to higher interest rates by financial institutions, insurance companies, and credit lenders as a function of an individual’s somatic features, which are transformed into an index of their violability. Exploiting this vulnerability, these state-sanctioned actions reproduce it, creating a group of people who can more easily be compelled to work more difficult jobs, harder, for less remuneration. These people can be charged higher rent, or a higher interest rate on a mortgage, loan, or line of credit. They are forced to live in areas with toxic water, poison air, fallow land, and underdeveloped infrastructure, which makes them physically more vulnerable to things like cancer and asthma. The property they are able to accumulate is devalued and can be more readily seized through eminent domain or civil asset forfeiture. At the same time, and through the same means, other

groups of people can access less demanding jobs for higher wages, and they can benefit from the accumulation of rent, interest, and property. These distinctions between who can live and who must die are experienced as racial differences, which is expressed as, and is an expression of, a set of material conditions. In this way, race enshrines the inequality that capitalism requires by concretely manifesting the abstraction called class.\(^{62}\) Or, as Stuart Hall puts it, “Race is thus…the modality in which class is ‘lived,’ the medium through which class relations are experienced, the form in which it is appropriated and ‘fought through.’”\(^{63}\) Operating from this perspective, this dissertation draws on more recent scholars of racial capitalism, as well as earlier scholars who understood race as a constitutive feature of capitalism without recourse to Robinson’s term.\(^{64}\) For simplicity’s sake, however, I typically use the unqualified term “capitalism.” Though I do occasionally use “racial capitalism” in instances when it benefits me rhetorically to reiterate or reassert the exploitation and production of group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death that underlies capitalism.

However, rather than representing the racialized inequality endemic to capitalism as a mere contradiction to the equality inherent to the putative universalism of the nation, I follow


\(^{64}\) These scholars include Eric Williams, Claudia Jones, C.L.R James, Oliver Cromwell Cox, Kwame Nkrumah, W.E.B DuBois, Frantz Fanon, Walter Rodney, Stuart Hall, Angela Davis, George Jackson, Huey Newton, Fred Hampton, and Lorenzo Kom’Boa Ervin. Any insights about race and class that emerge through this dissertation are owing to them. Any failures to grasp these concepts in their simultaneity are my fault to bear.
philosopher Kojin Karatani in understanding capital, the state, and the nation as mutually constitutive formations. They each mediate the relationship between the other two. From this perspective, the nation authorizes the state to resolve the contradictions between real inequality (capitalism) and imagined equality (nation) by modifying the former so that it better conforms to the latter. Conceiving of the state as a form of exchange, as a means of appropriating and redistributing resources in exchange for the consent to be governed, Karatani argues that “plunder precedes redistribution. It is precisely in order to be able to plunder continuously that redistribution is instituted.” From this perspective, the primary function of the state is expropriation and the ongoing reproduction of the conditions necessary for expropriation: the redistribution of resources through which it legitimizes its authority. In part, then, the state produces the nation by drawing the distinction between plunderer and plundered, those who share in redistribution and those denied it, those who belong in the nation and those who belong to it. Because the form and function of the US state is overdetermined by an economic order in which capitalists wield a disproportionate quantum of social power, the interests of capitalists are politically overrepresented such that the state composes the nation as if such class interests were universal. The US state produces, in other words, a nation of capitalists and a white nation as a single formation.

As historians, critical legal scholars, and cultural critics such as Mae Ngai, Leti Volpp, Ian Haney Lopez, Patricia Williams, and Lisa Lowe have demonstrated, this production of Americans as white is not merely theoretical. It has been outlined in law and reinforced by law

---


66 Karatani, 6.
enforcement: by regimes of racial apartheid such as Jim and Juan Crow, which legally partitioned white communities from black and Chicano people; by the long history of legislation, adjudication, and executive action that prohibited immigration from Asia, that frustrated naturalization and assimilation of Asians who immigrated any way, and that policed and imprisoned those that did manage to naturalize and assimilate; and by the warfare and lawfare that has incorporated and expelled indigenous people into citizenship depending on the changing interests of the U.S. state. Through these means, the state excluded non-white people from the rights, privileges, and protections of citizenship, shaping a white citizenry that imagines itself as white and bourgeois by tying those concepts together in law. Indeed, as critical legal theorist Cheryl Harris has famously argued, this quality of whiteness is itself the legal entitlement to own property. Through law, whiteness was made socially coeval with proprietorship, which has historically formed the ideological basis of citizenship. Blackness, inversely, was made socially coeval with fungibility: the capacity to be owned. Emerging at the founding of the US republic, this racialized distinction between white people, who were eligible for citizenship because the law recognized their right to own, and non-white people, who were ineligible for citizenship because they were vulnerable under and to the law, continued to structure US life into the 1960s. While the legal dimension of these apartheid regimes was formally abolished through legislation and judicial precedent in the 1950’s and ‘60s, whiteness as a social and psychological wage persists into the present, as evidenced by racial compositions of public schools, the racially-uneven rates of unemployment, and food apartheid. As scholars such as Tamara Knopper, Michelle Alexander, and K-Sue Park have demonstrated, American apartheid persists through putatively colorblind means: through racially-uneven credit scoring, student debt burdens, medical debt, consumer debt, interest rates, rates of homeownership, property values, and rates
of incarceration. By these other means, America continues to produce itself and its citizens as white.

This is not to suggest, however, that all legal citizens are white or that non-white people do not participate in and reproduce the production of America as white. Indeed, as Dylan Rodriguez has argued in his recent theorization of multiculturalist white supremacy, the last thirty years have been characterized by state and capital’s increasing openness to a racially diverse capitalist class and state bureaucracy.  

Because state and capital continue to organize one another toward the reproduction of bourgeois life, however, they accept functionaries of color insofar as those would-be functionaries accept the legitimacy of bourgeois life. They accept those people of color who strive to obviate their own vulnerability to capitalism, by reproducing its racial order and thereby legitimating it. The black police officer or corrections officer distinguishes himself from other black people by seizing and exercising the power to brutalize black people, for example. The Chicano Immigrations and Customs Enforcement (ICE) officer signals his belonging to America and thereby lessens his own vulnerability to deportation by performing the task of deporting and caging Latinx people. The Korean immigrant integrates into American life by echoing capitalist orientalism about “Communist China” and thereby distancing himself from Asia (and the non-capitalist, non-individualist, non-American values the continent is regularly employed as a synecdoche for). In any case, the presumptive path out of non-citizenship, out of unfreedom and into freedom, is trod by reifying the racialized criteria for national belonging, which reinforces the vulnerability that characterizes non-citizenship: an amorphous field comprised of the criminalized and imprisoned, the native and the immigrant.

---

While these groups of people are non-identical, they nonetheless share a common condition of vulnerability to policing and imprisonment, which materially and ideologically produces the American citizenry.

In order to discern the form, function, and texture of American national consciousness, which is outlined by this distinction between citizen and non-citizen, this dissertation examines American national literature. As Benedict Anderson argues, newspapers and the novel form have historically been instrumental in the formulation and articulation of national identity and the formation of national consciousness. Writing together, philosopher Gilles Deleuze and psychoanalyst Félix Guattari go even further, arguing that “national consciousness, whether uncertain or oppressed—necessarily passes through literature.”68 If this is the case, it is because nations have to be imagined: thought into being, but also embedded in consciousness. Historically, literature has served a principal role in constructing and socializing this idea. In contrast with other scholars who narrowly define national literature as those texts that directly write a nation into being, interpellate citizen-readers, or that allegorize/romanticize national formation, I take national literature to be any literary document that outlines or otherwise depict the experience of being American. In addition to these texts that directly produce nations and national subjects (i.e. citizens), we can also include those texts that describe the material procedures through which the nation, in the sense of “a people,” is materially rearranged. Specifically, it focuses on literature that depicts (in some form or fashion) the ultimate expression of state power in the neoliberal era: prisons, policing, surveillance.

68 Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, “What is a Minor Literature?” *Mississippi Review* vol. 11, no. 3 (1983), 16, emphasis added.
While it is worth pointing out that the application of state power and the sub-genres of citizen-subjectivity it interpellates people into (the state’s expectations and prescribed codes of conduct) are uneven across lines of gender and sexuality, an analysis of these gendered differences falls outside the scope of this dissertation. Indeed, women are the fastest growing segment of the prison population, and the whole history of incarceration has been structured by the vexed role of women in prison. The gendered differences in social roles and functions, as well as in the state’s prescribed code of conduct, has, for example, required the state to develop different justifications for incarceration and different modes of criminalization. Moreover, the differential treatment of women and queer people has required the state to enforce laws in contradictory ways. These differences multiply when the differences between women are compared: when, for instance, the differential treatment of black women and white are compared. These differences are significant and complex enough that analyzing them would require a dedicated dissertation project.69 Instead, this dissertation intends to illustrate the ways in which incarcerated and free-world people offer readers a more general theory of prisons’s racial logic. Cutting across lines of gender and geography, this logic characterizes carceral institutions in general: despite the differences between federal and state prisons, between state

prison administrations, between state prisons and municipal jails. However, this is not to
downplay the significance of those differences. Rather, I intend to identify a theory of prisons
that is held in common across them despite their differences.

**Neoliberalism, the Carceral State, and Paranoia**

Bracketed on one side by the long 1960s and on the other by the election of Ronald
Reagan, the period between 1960 and 1980 represents the historical emergence, development,
and hegemony of neoliberalism: a phase of capitalism that presently dominates the capitalist
world-system. “Neoliberalism,” economic geographer David Harvey explains

> is in the first instance a theory of political-economic practices that proposes that human well-
> being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within
> an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and
> free trade. The role of the state is to create and preserve an institutional framework appropriate
> to such practices.  

“Neoliberalism” describes, then, a mode of governance: a logic of social reorganization
embodied by a set of private and public policies that direct market and state power. Seeking to
liberate markets, which is to say, free capitalists from state oversight, this logic cedes social
power to capitalists through the privatization and elimination of public services, the easing of
regulations on private firms, the deindustrialization and flexibilization of labor, and the
financialization and liberalization of national economies so that capital can more freely circle the
planet while workers remain locked in place. These policies have been effected through
executive action and national legislation, as well as inter-state compact, and their functionaries
have included both Republican and Democratic politicians at every level of government. The
ideology underpinning this social logic can be summarized by the widespread belief that private

---

enterprise can deliver social services more efficiently and effectively than the state. Efficiencies of labor and cost being innately good (or so this fairy tale says), and private enterprise being the engine of efficiency, the market is understood as the more effective legislator of social life. Accordingly, those governmental functions that can be commodified should be, and those that can’t should be operated as much like a business as possible. In so doing, neoliberalism outsources the task of governing to the market and thereby blurs the distinction between state and market power. Crystallizing the nature of neoliberalism, this conflation is perhaps best exemplified by current Mayor of New York Eric Adams’ description of NY as a “corporation” and of himself as its “CEO.”

While it is often popularly misunderstood as emerging on the historical scene with the 1979 election of Margaret Thatcher in the U.K. and 1980 election of Ronald Reagan in the U.S., neoliberalism actually first appears in its recognizable form in Chile in 1973. With the help of the U.S. military, Augusto Pinochet overthrew the socialist Allende administration and subsequently ceded control over Chile’s economy to a group of economists who had been trained by Milton Friedman at the University of Chicago. These Chicago Boys, as they came to be known, were free-market fundamentalists who took the market’s capacity to regulate itself in the best interests of rational participants as an article of faith. Following this orthodoxy, the Chicago Boys formulated a “shock doctrine,” and advised Pinochet to drastically reduce public spending, narrow the tax base, privatize public infrastructure, and open the country to direct foreign investment. These policies facilitated the multinational accumulation of capital at the expense of

---

71 Quoted by Jeff Coltin, “‘New York is a corporation. I’m the CEO of New York City,’ @NYCMayor says. ‘I’m going to put my systems in place,’ Feb. 3, 2022, 5:48 pm, https://twitter.com/JCColtin/status/1489385231341821956.
Chilean workers, whose lives were increasingly characterized by austerity and depredation—the symptoms of which were met with overwhelming military violence.\textsuperscript{72} The “shock doctrine” was, in other words, a program of privatization, financialization, public austerity, and repressive violence.

Although the shock doctrine’s influence on Reagan, Thatcher, and their advisors has been well documented, a similar policy consensus was already forming prior to their elections. Paul Volker, for example, served as the Chairman of the Federal Reserve from 1979 to 1983, which gave him control over US monetary policy. Originally appointed by President Jimmy Carter, Volcker operated from the capitalist orthodoxy that inflation is caused by an excess of consumer power (a combination of low unemployment and high wages), and, as a result, he resolved the inflationary crisis of 1980 with the “Volcker Shock.” By raising Fed interest rates and constraining capitalists’s access to credit, Volcker starved them in order to induce belt-tightening. In order to maintain the growth of profits, masses of people were thrown into unemployment, scaring an even larger group of people into accepting their frozen, depressed wages. From the top down, the Volcker Shock produced a recession in order to curb the power of workers and consumers. While Volcker’s appointment and his subsequent use of power represent inflections points in the emergence of neoliberalism, Volcker himself had already been developing this weapon of class war for a decade. In 1971, for instance, other countries began converting their massive supply of US dollars into gold and, in order to meet the demand, President Richard Nixon instructed Fed Chair Arthur Burns to devalue the US dollar. This produced an inflationary crisis, which Nixon resolved by directing Treasury Secretary John

\textsuperscript{72} For a fuller account of these policies and their effect on the Chilean people, see Naomi Klein, \textit{The Shock Doctrine} (New York: Picador, 2007), 27-88.
Connally to end the convertibility of dollars into gold and thereby transform it into a fiat currency. Pursued under advertisement from Undersecretary for International Monetary Affairs Paul Volcker, the “Nixon Shock” created the conditions for subsequent financial crises, such as the inflationary crisis of 1980 and the Mortgage-Backed Securities crisis that threatened the global economy in 2007. Because the end of the gold standard was matched with a centralization of price and wage controls, it represents a still incipient stage of neoliberalization in which the absoluteness of market power and total antipathy towards administrative state power was not yet common sense. Nonetheless, it evinces a longer history of neoliberalization than is typically narrated.73

When viewed as a moment within this longer history, Reagan’s 1980 election was symptomatic of an emergent ideological consensus among the ruling class that developed over a long period of time. This consensus considered increases in the social power of the (lumpen)proletariat as an inhibition on economic growth, which is to say, capital accumulation, which should consequently be removed. Identifying the redistributive and administrative capacities of the state as conduits of (lumpen)proletariat power, Reagan and his administrators asserted that these capacities were categorical inhibitions on growth. The administration’s

73 Alternatively, we could read neoliberalism as the globalization of New York City’s response to deindustrialization and post-war white flight, which drained the city of its tax base and made it impossible for it to meet its financial obligations. This financial insolvency made the city too great a credit risk for financial lenders, and it was unable to service its municipal debts or make payroll. By 1975, the city was facing a fiscal cliff. To avert disaster, New York state created the Emergency Financial Control Board, which allowed the state to seize control of NYC’s budget. Their solution was to downsize the city government and privatize goods and services that the city had been providing. 40,000 city employees were laid off; libraries, fire stations, and hospitals were closed; wages for municipal employees were frozen; subway fares were hiked; and the City University of New York began charging tuition for the first time. This combination of austerity, privatization, and financialization (especially in regards to the state’s redistributive capacities and educational institutions) would prove hallmarks of neoliberalization across contexts.
economic policy served to deepen this consensus by stripping back these state capacities and making them less functional, less desirable, and more vulnerable to future austerity. In his inaugural address, for example, Reagan responded to the inflationary crisis precipitated by the Nixon Shock by insisting that “In this present crisis, government is not the solution to our problem; government is the problem.”

His solution was to outsource the management of society to the market. Here we can see how earlier stages of neoliberalization induced crises which provided the pretext for an intensification of neoliberalism, which represents itself as a solution to the problems it engenders. By the 1990s, this form of governance, and the libertarian beliefs about the government and the economy that underpinned it, had become the unspoken common sense among middle-class people: the shared terrain on which both major political parties operated. “The era of big government is over,” as Bill Clinton put it in his 1996 State of the Union Address. Indeed, like Tony Blair’s New Labour government in England, Clinton’s presidency was marked by the scaling back of the welfare state, the deregulation of financial institutions, and international free trade agreements—policies undertaken to electorally outflank post-Reagan Republicans from the right. Besides the North American Free Trade agreement, perhaps the most famous example is 1999’s Gramm-Leach–Bliley Act, which allowed commercial banks to operate as investment banks for the first time in sixty years. This deregulation did enable financial institutions to accumulate wealth and concentrate power, but, in


doing so, it set the stage for the 2007-08 financial crisis by enabling commercial banks to take increasingly risky bets on future economic growth with depositors' pension funds, retirement funds, and savings accounts. They lent out money to borrowers who could not pay it back, invested in bonds backed by mortgages (the value of which they were inflating with their own lending), and sold the risk off as a commodity whose value was tied to a housing bubble on the precipice of bursting.\textsuperscript{76}

When the bubble did inevitably burst, financial institutions began to crumble under the weight of their own machinations and the entire capitalist world-system was faced with an existential crisis. Advised by Paul Volcker himself, President Barack Obama resolved the crisis via a process of quantitative easing begun by President George W. Bush: buying distressed assets from private lenders and pumping nearly $700 billion into these failing institutions between 2008 and 2012; bailing them out without taking any substantive measures to curb their outsized role in the global economy or to rein in the behavior that caused the crisis in the first place.\textsuperscript{77}

Developing what has become an increasingly important component of neoliberal dogma, the political right criticized Obama’s policies for expanding the national debt. In doing so, neoliberalism’s reactionary wing represented the solution offered by its progressive wing as a failure of the state and, therefore, as justification for an intensification of austerity. This redoubling of neoliberalism was expressed by the election of Obama’s successor, Donald Trump,

\textsuperscript{76} It is worth noting in this context that it was this exact behavior—down to their over-leveraged speculation on mortgage bonds specifically—that precipitated the collapse of Silicon Valley Bank earlier this year.


37
who accumulated political power by trading on the popular perception of him as a competent businessman *as opposed to* a politician. Once in office, he used his political power to strip back the state’s administrative capacities and more effectively sell himself as a commodity. In this way, he exemplifies the changing same of American electoral politics: various styles come in and out of fashion, but the substance remains consistent.

Dialectically reconfiguring and being reconfigured by these neoliberal policies over the last fifty years, the US state has developed into what Ruth Wilson Gilmore and Craig Gilmore call “the anti-state state,” which “grows on the promise of shrinking.”78 While this promise is most loudly made by the conservative right, it commonly underpins the commitments of nominally progressive politicians as well. For every Republican presidential candidate intending to close whole departments of the government, for example, there is a Democratic congressperson, mayor, or city council member working to privatize public education, public utilities, or public land. In some ways, these promises have been kept. Indeed, as the policies of the Reagan and Clinton administrations exemplify, the last fifty years has seen a steady scaling back of the state’s redistributive and administrative capacities, including the defunding of public schools and universities, welfare and entitlement programs, and federal departments such as the EPA, FDA, and IRS. Governors, for example, routinely refuse Medicare and Medicaid expansions in their state. Likewise, the maintenance and upkeep of critical infrastructure, such as roads, bridges, dams, railways, and sewage and plumbing systems has been chronically underfunded by municipal, state, and federal administrators, which has resulted in train derailments, crumbling bridges, and the failure of cities to deliver potable water to residents. At

78 Gilmore and Gilmore, 152.
the same time, the federal government has appropriated indigenous lands and sold off blocs of it to private developers, while the land nominally reserved for indigenous people has been used as the route for oil pipelines and the site for hydraulic fracturing. Through these successive waves of administrative defunding, however, the state’s repressive and carceral capacities have continued to grow and grow and grow.

These tectonic shifts in state capacity are visible in the year-over-year increases in police budgets at the federal, state, and municipal level irrespective of crime rates. The Dallas Police Department’s budget, for example, reached $612 million for the 2023 fiscal year—a $40 million increase from fy2021.\(^7\) Meanwhile, crime rates in Dallas have been on the steady decrease following a twenty-seven-year period of irregular and inconsistent rises that peaked in 1992 before sharply falling.\(^8\) Dallas is more or less typical in this regard, and examinations of other municipalities, states, and indeed the country as a whole, reveal a similar trend: crime rates begin rising around 1975, spike sharply across the 1980s, and peak around 1992 before falling rapidly over the following years. They have continued to decline steadily since then, and today, the national crime rate of 0.004% is approximately half of what it was in 1990.\(^9\) Although there is


8\(^{\text{Per } D \text{ Magazine, which derives its data from the Dallas Police Department, there was a combined total of 2,375 reported murders, rapes, robber, aggravated assaults, and burglaries for a population of 729,099 people in 1963, making the crime rate 0.003%. This rose to 0.008% in 1975. By 1992, the murder rate alone was 0.005%, but by 1995, the overall crime rate had fallen to 0.004%. D Magazine, “Dallas Crime Through the Decades,” 28 Dec. 2015, https://www.dmagazine.com/publications/d-magazine/2016/january/dallas-crime-rates-through-the-decades/}}\)

no evidence to suggest a correlation between increases in police funding and this drop in crime rates, police spending continues to increase year over year. In fact, whether or not crime rates go up or down matters little and police budgets rise regardless. When crime goes down, the police are viewed as effective. They should therefore be loaded with more resources to improve their work. When crime goes up, however, the police are perceived as ineffective because they do not have the resources they need. Either way, we are told, we must give the police more money. In addition to ballooning police budgets, the last fifty years have also seen a boom in prison construction and an explosion in the prison population. Between the 1973 emergence of neoliberalism and Clinton’s 1996 declaration that the era of big government was over, for instance, the number of incarcerated people went from 200,000 people (1970) to 1,585,400 (1995). Despite the so-called death of big government, however, the prison population has since jumped from approximately 1.6 million people to 2.3 million (2020). That’s in addition to the approximately four million people under various forms of state supervision, such as probation, parole, or bail, which exist to corral people, and tightly regulate their freedoms of expression and association. As these populations have grown, the number of administrators required to manage it and the facilities in which to do so have grown. To house these people, for instance, California alone built twenty-three new prisons between 1984 and 2007, while 350 new prisons were built in West Texas, Mississippi, Georgia, and Appalachia between 1980 and 2000.82 Today the carceral capacities of the state—its prisons, police stations, ICE detention facilities, probation administrators, courts, and prosecutors’ offices—employ millions of people and cost hundreds of

billions of dollars to maintain. In 2021 alone, the US spent a combined total of $277 billion funding police departments and prison administration.\textsuperscript{83}

As early as 1963, the organic intellectual James Boggs noted this metastatic repression creeping across the social landscape and tied its development to the US’s consumer society. “Stop an American and begin to make serious criticisms of our society,” he writes, “and nine times out of ten his final defense will be: ‘But this is the freest and finest country in the world.’...If you casually mention the police state to an American, the first thing that comes to his mind is some other country. He doesn’t see his own police state.”\textsuperscript{84} Sixty years ago, Boggs was already observing how the repressive apparatus of the state was expanding and carefully analyzing the relationship between that repression and the maintenance of capitalism. As a worker on a Chrysler assembly line, Boggs’s witnessed firsthand the automation and outsourcing of manufacturing work. He experienced the ways in which American prosperity was merely an abundance of commodities, and how that abundance was secured through racialized exploitation, extraction, and disposability. This dialectic produced the freedom to consume while, at the same time, undermining workers’s capacity to consume: a contradiction managed by an expanding apparatus of repression. In Boggs’s own time, this “silent police state” in the US had already dwarfed the bureaucracies of the Cold War boogeyman–China, Cuba, the Soviet Union–and


made their authoritarian characteristics pale in comparison.\textsuperscript{85} Since then, this police state has exploded in scale, scope, and size, and it continues to grow year after year after year.

From this perspective, we can see that the carceral state expands not in relation to crime but in relation to neoliberalism. In fact, as criminologist Loïc Wacquant argues, the carceral state serves a necessary role in neoliberalization by mitigating its consequences and securing the highly-exploitable labor it requires to function.\textsuperscript{86} This is to say, in other words, that the austerity politics of neoliberalism impoverishes people by hurling them into debt and precarious work; it stagnates wages and outsources operating costs onto workers and consumers; it repeals the social safety net and turns more and more aspects of social life into increasingly unaffordable commodities, including housing, healthcare, and education. This leaves individuals increasingly vulnerable to landlords, bosses, and financial institutions such as banks, credit card companies, student loan servicers, and collections agencies. This precarity disciplines workers into waged labor while pushing others toward illicit means of subsistence, driving them toward the commission of crime in order to survive. At the same time, however, neoliberalism continuously expands this category of crime and thereby makes increasing numbers of people vulnerable to state violence: arrest and incarceration, as well as conscription in the military, police force, prison administration, and the bail-bonds industry. Consider, for example, the fact that baby formula is one of the most shoplifted retail items in the country.\textsuperscript{87} Rather than responding to the

\textsuperscript{85} Boggs, 91.

\textsuperscript{86} Loïc Wacquant, “Class, Race & Hyperincarceration in Revanchist America,” \textit{Socialism and Democracy} vol. 28, no. 3, (2014), 82.


42
desperate need to feed babies that this trend indicates, capitalists place the formula behind locked
cases that are guarded by security forces and surveillance equipment. If you cannot afford to feed
your child, you will have to risk arrest or death to do so. This vulnerability to state and market
forces makes individuals increasingly vulnerable to other forms of interpersonal violence, such
as domestic abuse, sexual assault, theft, and murder, which, in turn redoubles their vulnerability
to state and capital by pushing them to the margins of society. In some cities, the production of
this vulnerability is so intense that non-state attempts to ameliorate its effects are also
criminalized. From this perspective, crime is both a product of capitalist society and its
condition of possibility. After all, an economic arrangement structured by the legal relationship
of private property requires some mechanism to enforce those laws and transgressions of them.
Accordingly, we can understand prisons and police as an apparatus that emerges and expands as
neoliberalism’s solution to the cascading social crisis engendered by capitalism. They discipline
transgressors of the neoliberal order, while providing jobs and income to those abandoned by
capitalists and the state. Or, as Wacquant puts it, the “planned atrophy of the social state” was
“matched and complemented” by the “sudden hypertrophy of the penal state.”

In much the same way that social atrophy takes the form of privatization, penal
hypertrophy includes offloading the maintenance of public infrastructure onto private business,
as well as non-profits and other non-governmental organizations (NGOs), which are linked
together to form a prison industrial complex (PIC). Although the PIC is sometimes narrowly

---

88 Cities across the country, for example, have made it illegal to share food with unhoused

89 Wacquant, 82-83.
understood as a network of private prisons, or the jailing of individuals for profit, it actually refers to the “elaborate set of relationships, institutions, buildings, laws, urban and rural places, personnel, equipment, finances, dependencies, technocrats, opportunists, [and] intellectuals in the public, private and not-for-profit sectors” that link public prisons to other public infrastructure, institutions, and money, as well as private firms and capital, financial institutions, non-profits, and NGOs. In this sense, “PIC” refers to that expansive array of social relations that link prisons to capitalism in general. Growing together and coming to share the task of managing society, the PIC and carceral state form a single set of relations that are embodied by their most profound manifestations: prisons and the police. Evidencing these entanglements are the facts that the Mayors of New York and Chicago are themselves former police officers who traded on those experiences to accumulate electoral power; the Secretary of Defense, Lloyd Austin, sits on the Raytheon board of directors; and the CIA has its own venture capital fund, In-Q-Tel, while the Walt Disney Company operates a Global Intelligence and Threat Assessment department. From this perspective, we can recognize that prison is a social force that acts on society in order to produce carceral geographies: spaces structured by and toward the reproduction of prisons and jails. This social force takes forms private and public, governmental and economic. For this reason, I use “PIC,” “carceral state,” and “prison” or “the prison” interchangeably throughout this dissertation.

The nature of this social force does not, however, appear ex nihilo. Rather, they arise in response to the historical movements of the 1950s and ‘60s that threw the post-war social order into crisis. This period saw the influence of Soviet and Chinese socialisms grow in geopolitical

---

90 Gilmore and Gilmore, 150.
influence, and various liberation movements emerged across Southeast Asia, Africa, the Caribbean, and South and Central America. These movements in the global South rippled throughout the North, which was experiencing a period of massive economic growth. This growth secured the legitimacy of capitalism by supplying workers with an abundance of secure, high-wage labor and consumers with an ever-increasing diversity of novel and low-cost commodities. Supplementing this prosperous consumer society was a robust and well-funded welfare apparatus that provided for people in retirement and improved things like roads, bridges, and public transportation while making things like higher education more widely accessible. Building upon the Keynesian programs of the New Deal, technological innovations made during WWII, industrial capacities developed by the war, and new markets opened after the war, capitalism delivered on its promise of raising Americans’ standard of living. However, as scholars such as Jill Quadagno, Ira Katznelson, and Harvard Sitkoff have pointed out, these gains came at the expense of and were often not extended to black, indigenous, and Asian people and the communities they comprised. Compounding this inequality was the fact that while returning soldiers (in the abstract) were hailed as liberators, freedom fighters, and anti-fascists, soldiers of color were themselves subject to the same kind of racialized violence and deprivation that characterized the societies they were being told they had liberated. Moreover, the desegregation of the military had demonstrated to soldiers that social life could, in fact, be desegregated. At the same time, Ruth Milkman argues in *Gender at Work*, the war effort thrust white women into waged labor en masse and gave many of them their first experiences of independence from the

---

91 It is this experience, for example, that forms the basis of John Okada’s 1957 novel, *No-No Boy* and Leslie Marmon Silko’s 1977 novel, *Ceremony.*
men in their lives. This germinated a disdain for patriarchal domestic relations, and a desire to secure financial freedom through waged work.

When the post-war efforts to return to pre-war ideas of normalcy met these wartime experiences, the convergence created social tension, which was exacerbated by growing movements for decolonization and a growing interest in alternatives to capitalism. Developing dialectically with one another, these movements conjured what Marxist philosopher Herbert Marcuse calls “the specter of a world which could be free”: mass interest in socialism, communism, anarchism, and a panoply of spiritual beliefs that seemed to offer an alternative to capitalism; popular movements for black liberation, women’s liberation, queer liberation, native sovereignty, and prominent demands for solidarity with the third world. These movements contested various aspects of capitalist life, challenging not just the inevitability of capitalism but also its desirability and viability. Accordingly, capitalists wielded the carceral capacities of the state in order to repress these movements by infiltrating them and breaking them up, imprisoning individual members and assassinating leaders, incorporating and recuperating their revolutionary desires. Because the architecture of the neoliberal state formed itself so as to repress these movements and reassert the hegemony of capitalism, these movements naturally determined the design of that structure. That is to say that neoliberalism came into existence and continues to reproduce that existence through the repression, recuperation, and diffusion of the black, native, Asian, queer, feminist, working-class freedom dreams that bubbled up at the end of the long

---

92 In his 1945 novel, *If He Hollers Let Him Go*, Chester Himes offers a particularly complex portrait of the ways these moments of racial and sexual segregation converged on one another in the war years of the early 1940s.

1960s: an operation that is manifest through the liquidation, dislocation, and assimilation of black, native, Asian, queer, feminist, working class life.

If the application of state power shapes a citizenry and thereby produces a national consciousness, as I have argued above, then the increasingly powerful carceral state orients citizens toward the everyday reproduction of surveillance, austerity, and anticipatory violence. Or, as Adam Curtis puts it in one of his numerous documentaries on neoliberalization, neoliberalism has made us all into Richard Nixon. “Just like him,” Curtis argues, “we have all become paranoid weirdos.”94 Indeed, the story of neoliberalization can easily be narrated as a proliferation of surveillance, a growth in behavior monitoring technology, and the state’s deepening intrusion into private life.95 During a recent visit to the Kroger at Forest Lane and Greenville Avenue, for example, I counted two to three omni-directional cameras dangling over each checkout line. Each self-checkout station had an additional camera overhead, which transmitted images to a massive monitor at the front of the store, while an additional camera on the checkout station transmitted an image of the customer back at themselves, “Monitoring in Progress” flashing incessantly at the bottom. As surveillance proliferates so too do the reminders and notices that you’re being surveilled. We are always being watched, and always aware of being watched. Accordingly, we scan every one of our items instead of just walking out with


them, because we believe in advance that we will be caught and, if we did get caught, we know
the police officer at the front of the store, with his bulletproof vest and semi-automatic rifle, will
be there to stop us. Reflecting the surveillance and paranoia that characterized Nixon’s tenure in
the White House, as well as the FBI directorship of his contemporary and ally, J. Edgar Hoover,
everyday life in 2023 is overflowing with constant and ubiquitous surveillance that has come to
be accepted as just the way things are. We have been made paranoid through the normalization
of hypervisible and omni-present surveillance, which habituates us to fear and the anticipation of
violence. In this way, paranoia has become naturalized to us and therefore, paradoxically,
completely invisible to us.

In her description of paranoia, literary critic Eve Sedgwick theorizes it as a constellation
of “hatred, envy, and anxiety” that determines who to hate, who to envy, and who to attack under
the guise of proactive self-defense.96 This articulation is derived from the work of psychoanalyst
Melanie Klein, who describes paranoia as a relationship wherein a subject seeks to “master and
control all its objects.”97 In this way, paranoia compels the individual to distance themselves
from bad things (thoughts, sights, people, behavior, words, spaces, institutions, etc.), which elicit
negative affects (sadness, fear, loathing, anger, discomfort, etc.). It authorizes violence against
them and reframes that violence as self-defense. By enacting that self-defensive violence,

96 Eve Sedgwick, “Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, or, You’re So Paranoid You
Probably Think This Essay Is About You,” in Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy,

97 Melanie Klein, “A Contribution to the Psychogenesis of Manic-Depressive States,” in The
paranoia justifies itself while, at the same time, imputing those bad objects with negative values and ensuring that they will elicit negative affects in the future. Through this self-perpetuating mechanism, paranoia reproduces the conditions for its future reproduction, and grows “like a crystal in hypersaturated solution, blotting out any sense of the possibility of alternative ways of understanding or things to understand.” 98 In concert with this diagnosis, anthropologist John Jackson, jr. argues that this “paranoid reasoning…characterizes American understandings of race and difference today.” 99 Though he mistakenly splits feeling and reflex from thought and deliberation when he claims that racialized paranoia “inhabits the gut, not the mind,” his broader point obtains: paranoia is a matter of the unconscious or pre-conscious rather than conscious mind. 100 It is, in other words, a reflexive understanding of the world, which expresses itself in attitudes towards objects, people, styles, and actions that have been racialized. Deeply entrenched in everyday American life, this structure of feeling shapes conscious thought and action, determining individuals’ choices about where to go, who to associate with, and how to behave in relation to them: the habits and associations that comprise their ordinary existence.

The depth with which this paranoia is embedded in everyday perceptions of property and its policing is best exemplified by the popular website Nextdoor. While it ostensibly exists to enable neighbors to communicate with one another about any number of activities, social

98 Sedgwick, 131.
100 Jackson, jr., 18.
psychologist Jennifer Eberhardt points out that Nextdoor’s “crime and safety” category is mostly accounts of black and Latino men being described as suspicious or potentially criminal for performing mundane tasks in suburban spaces, which have been racialized as white. As my dissertation will demonstrate, this paranoid structure of feeling is produced, and produced as racial, by the carceral state through the production of citizenship and its citizenry. As such, racial paranoia increasingly characterizes American national consciousness. It textures everyday life in the United States and directs it toward its own reproduction, toward the expansion of the carceral apparatus that conditions it.

**Abolitionism**

As I demonstrate over the course of this dissertation, criminal legal and prison reform is historically concomitant with the US carceral state, and even well-intentioned reforms have played and continue to play an important role in the expansion and ongoing reproduction of the PIC. Consequently, this project is intended as a critique of prisons and the societies that employ them, but not with the aim of reforming them. Instead, my critique is oriented toward their abolition. “In most circles,” Angela Davis wrote in 2003, “prison abolition is simply unthinkable and implausible.” Twenty years later, this claim still obtains and most people in the United States remain incapable of imagining a world without prisons and/or the police. Those who are capable are often “dismissed as Utopians and idealists, whose ideas are at best unrealistic and

---


impractical. Or, perhaps worse, they are interpreted as “actually” wanting reform. Nonetheless, there have long been people capable of imagining the total and complete eradication of punishment and captivity, and people who have struggled to realize this political project. As I touch on in chapter two, these struggles were particularly prominent during the early 1970s.

In contrast with prison reformers who seek to “fix” and thereby preserve prisons, prison abolitionists begin from the premise that the present criminal punishment system is not broken; it works as it was designed to. The violence of incarceration and policing in general, and its racially-uneven, mass character in the US specifically, are features rather than bugs. From this abolitionist perspective, we can recognize prisons and policing as violence work. In contrast with their ideological justifications, practical activity of policing represents the social production of violence, death, and instability. The ways in which police and prison administrators maim and murder in the course of their job are, therefore, not the result of abuse, corruption, or misconduct. Instead, they are matters of course. Accordingly, the problem with the PIC is neither police brutality nor mass incarceration, but the brutality inherent to policing and the caging of human beings. Because an emphasis on crime obscures these ways in which the PIC enacts violence while, at the same time, rearticulating it as a mechanism of violence prevention, abolitionists privilege “harm” as their unit of analysis. Adopting this analytic enables us to recognize the non-identity of harm and crime: the ways in which not all harm is criminalized, and not all criminalized behavior is harmful. It is from this premise that we can begin to see crime as

---

103 Davis, Are Prisons Obsolete?, 10.

racialized and as socially produced while broadening our sense of harm and enabling us to dream more ambitiously about how to mitigate it. Accordingly, I am not interested in drawing distinctions between political and common law prisoners/criminals, nor am I interested in distinguishing between “wrongfully” or “unfairly” incarcerated people (innocent) and rightfully convicted ones (guilty). As Ruth Wilson Gilmore and abolitionist poet Jackie Wang point out, such a distinction reasserts the existence of people who deserve to be in prison and thereby reasserts the necessity of captivity. By conserving the distinction between “innocent” and “guilty,” “undeserving” and “deserving,” we reproduce a class of people on which prisons can legitimately operate. We conserve, in other words, its conditions of reproduction. Moreover, we reify a set of legitimate avenues of social contestation: options that are always the prescription of the state that legitimates them. In contrast to and at odds with these state prescriptions, an abolitionist perspective challenges us to think outside and beyond those legitimate avenues: to abolish the distinction between licit and illicit.105

In this way, prison abolition is not just a political position: it is a way of thinking, a set of values, a method of analysis that enables us to see unlike a state. Because abolitionists concern ourselves with the prevention and remediation of harm rather than crime, because we seek the eradication of harmful institutions, the interpersonal harm those institutions represent themselves as solutions to, and the conditions that cultivate and encourage those harms, the abolitionist perspective emphasizes relations, process, conditions, practice, circulations, history. Moreover, it

carries with it the responsibility to develop alternatives. In this way, writes Ruth Wilson Gilmore, “[a]bolition is not absence, it is presence…Abolition is building the future from the present, in all of the ways we can.” Or, as abolitionist theorists Fred Moten and Stefano Harney put it, prison abolition is “the abolition of a society that could have prisons…the wage…slavery, therefore not abolition as the elimination of anything but abolition as the founding of a new society.” From this perspective, prison abolition is not merely a project of tearing down prison walls and burning police precincts. Though it certainly includes those things, it also entails the generation of new ideas, practices, institutions, organizations, and tools of conflict resolution that repair harm and transform the conditions that enabled that harm in the first place. It requires us to antagonize the social conditions that make prisons seem desirable and/or necessary, and to produce social relations not predicated on the group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death. I take this political-epistemological project as necessarily including and entailing a reconsideration of literary study. How can literary studies contribute to this project? How does the abolitionist project transform literary study? How does it shift or reframe the object of study? What new terms does it introduce, and how does it radicalize or deradicalize old ones? How does it alter reading, writing, and teaching practices and methods?

I explore these questions and offer provisional answers in chapter one, which demonstrates how PIC abolition radicalizes common ideas about authorship, reading, and the study of prison writing. Developing an abolitionist method of literary study, I situate this


107 Stefano Harney and Fred Moten. The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study (Brooklyn: Autonomedia, 2013), 42.
dissertation in relation to other scholarship on prison writing. In doing so, I define the expansive field of carceral literature that this dissertation takes as its object of study, and lay out my why I have adopted the particular method of reading that I employ throughout the dissertation. Chapter two applies this methodology to Edward Bunker’s 1977 novel *The Animal Factory* and Claudia Rankine’s 2014 poem *Citizen* in order to develop the concept of carceral realism and demonstrate how it has developed from the 1970s to the present. Honing in on the historical foundations of the contemporary carceral state, and the ways in which it has adapted itself across time, chapter three flashes back to the late eighteenth century in order to examine key texts in the entangled discourses of citizenship, crime, and race. Returning to the 1970s, chapter four investigates both the role universities have played in the formation of carceral realism and the role the police have played in the institutional production of knowledge. Moreover, this chapter explores the complex relationship Chicanos and Asian Americans have to prisons and the police, and the ways in which universities thrive on this social tension. Chapter five draws this project to a conclusion by developing the concept of abolitionist speculation, or the act of imagining a world without prisons or the police and/or the conditions necessary to realize such a world, which I identify as both a generic feature of utopian literature and something that exceeds literature altogether.
Chapter One: Abolition as Method

“While it inhabits a realm of everyday common sense and enjoys a popular consensus around its seemingly isolated architecture of domination,” writes abolitionist scholar Stephen Dillon, “the prison produces discursive and ontological forces that emanate beyond its formal walls.”\textsuperscript{108} Rather than a building set off from the rest of the world, Dillon understands prisons as a mechanism that sorts prisoners from free citizens by identifying some people as somehow unfit for social life and removing them from it. As I demonstrate over the course of this dissertation, this sorting mechanism has always operated according to the logic of racial capitalism. In the US context, then, prisons embody social relationships conditioned by the racially uneven and gendered distribution of work, wealth, power, and vulnerability to premature death. Spatially rearranging human beings and unevenly punishing different groups of them, prisons, in fact, produce these social relations. They are “thus not outside of social production, but rather, foundational to it, making subjects on all sides of the prison walls.”\textsuperscript{109} Through this process of social production, prisons mediate the ordinary experiences of free world citizens as well as prisoners. This process thereby produces the very “everyday common sense” and “popular consensus” that conditions the prison’s reproduction.


\textsuperscript{109} Dillon, 205.
From this perspective, prisons represent an epistemological and aesthetic problem: an issue of how people know and how they feel, as well as what they know and what they feel. Prisons, after all, separate those the state has criminalized from those it considers law-abiding citizens by partitioning the legal from the illegal, the licit from the illicit, the legitimate from the illegitimate, the socially desirable from the undesirable. Prisons construct these categories by drawing the distinction between them, which is materialized as a physical barrier. Not only does this separation physically impede efforts at communication between those deemed criminal and those deemed law-abiding, it also frustrates efforts at making sense of those communications by alienating prisoners and free citizens from one another’s experiences. Dillon, for example, recalls his attempts to describe the experience of flying for his incarcerated comrade, C. Because they are so unfamiliar to him, C has difficulty comprehending the sensations Dillon details, and in much the same way, C has difficulty conveying the intensity of prison, the banality of violence, the ubiquity of terror. “In our correspondence,” as Dillon puts it, “our vocabularies continually fail us: the intricacies and effects of state violence, of subjection and subjectivity, of knowing and unknowing, constantly render our ability to convey our worlds to each other a failure.”

Sometimes this failure is experienced as difficulty in finding the right words to describe something, or as an elision that suggests reticence to make some experiences explicit. At the most banal level, however, this failure is due to a fundamental difference of experience. Even when Dillon and C have the right words, and they are able to speak them openly, they are not meaningful to the other person. This is because both C and Dillon are divorced from one another’s social worlds, which give their words sense and significance. Under these circumstances, how can free world people communicate with prisoners? How can those of us

---

110 Dillon, 196.
who study carceral literature effectively and ethically attend to these conditions? How can those of us interested in contesting these conditions do so? How might that struggle enrich our understanding of cultural production more generally?

Over the course of this chapter, I attempt to answer these questions by developing a method of abolitionist reading, which I then apply in subsequent chapters. Oriented and animated by PIC abolitionism, this method juxtaposes the insight of incarcerated thinkers and free world thinkers to unsettle prevailing conceptions of authorship and textual production. Consequently, abolitionist reading brings texts, their conditions of production, and the conditions under which they are read together into a single object of examination. Abolitionist reading thereby calls for a self-reflexive critique of the dominant tendency in the academic study of prison literature. By pursuing such a critique, abolitionist reading distinguishes itself from this prevailing tendency, which mystifies prison and thereby renders it a more durable and permanent feature of social life. As a consequence, abolitionist reading redraws the distinctions between prison’s inside and its outside in order to integrate captive and putatively free texts into a single cultural field. In doing so, abolitionist reading opens up the field of prison literature by reframing how free-world literature interacts with prison literature and attuning our attention to the presence of the prison in putatively free-world texts.

**Prisons and the Production of Authorship**

Although the specter of Michel Foucault haunts the institutional study of prisons, his work points readers away from itself and toward sites of knowledge production beyond the university. At the end of *Discipline & Punish’s* first chapter, for example, he attributes his ideas to political struggle. “That punishment in general and the prison in particular belong to a political technology of the body,” Foucault notes, “is a lesson that I have learnt not so much from history
as from the present.” He is referring to his involvement in the GIP: the Group d’Information sur les Prisons (Prisons Information Group), which Foucault founded in 1970 along with other prominent French intellectuals such as Daniel Defert, Gilles and Fanny Deleuze, and Helene Cixious. Their goal was to

make known what the prison is: Who goes there; how and why they go there; what happens; what life is like for the prisoners and, equally, for the supervisory staff; what the buildings, diet, and hygiene are like; how internal regulation, medical supervision, and the workshops function; how one gets out and what it is, in our society, to be one of those who has gotten out.

To achieve this goal, they surveyed prisoners throughout France regarding their experiences of incarceration and the conditions they were subject to. After all, they have the most intimate experience of it, have come to know it best, longest, most intensely, in the most detail, and across multiple scales. It is prisoners that inhabit and compose a prison, their routines of everyday life that (re)produce it as a material structure, a social space, an experience. Their very consciousness is produced in, by, and through it. Consequently, they can speak to its spatial and temporal characteristics, its class composition and its racial makeup, its social structures and the feelings (re)produced in, by, and through those structures. Indeed, prisoners possess their own theories of “prisons, the penal system, and justice,” as Foucault once told Gilles Deleuze. Accordingly,


113 Michel Foucault and Gilles Deleuze, “Intellectuals and Power” in Intolerable: Writings from Michel Foucault and the Prisons Information Group, ed. Kevin Thompson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2021, 279-303), 282. For a fuller account of how these prisoner-theories influenced Foucault and Deleuze, see Jason Demers, “Prison liberation by association: Michel Foucault and the George Jackson Atlantic,” Atlantic Studies vol. 13, no. 2 (2016); Brady Thomas Heiner, “Foucault and the Black Panthers,” City vol. 11, no. 3 (2007); Taija McDougall,
we ought “to let those who have an experience of prison speak” and provide “prisoners from different prisons the means of taking the floor.” It is prisoners who have something to offer free world people, and not the other way around.

In this light, Foucault’s hegemony in prison studies should strike us as ironic, if not surprising. As I detail more elaborately in chapter four, the institutionalization of knowledge entails the social production of what Foucault himself calls authors: those authorized to speak. “In this sense,” he writes, “the function of an author is to characterize the existence, circulation, and operation of certain discourses within a society.” For Foucault, authorship is a “function,” or structurally necessary social role, which implies the existence of a social structure within which that role is undertaken and performed. Therefore, the discourses authors characterize include not only those they produce but also those that confer the distinction of “author.” Through this conferral, certain individuals are authorized as authors: they come to be understood as producers of meaningful work, which is here opposed to the banal and insignificant texts that ordinary people produce in the course of their everyday lives. This process constructs meaning as a function of authorship and authors’ names are thereby transformed into the means by which interpretive claims are secured. They become, in fact, the grounds by which interpretive claims can be made in the first place. Texts consequently become, as Foucault puts it, “totally dominated by the sovereignty of the author.”

In modern capitalist societies, this authorial


114 Foucault and Deleuze, 66; 91.


116 Foucault, “What is an Author?,” 126.
sovereignty takes the legal form of intellectual property, which codifies and thereby makes enforceable an author’s legal dominion over a text. As a function of their legal proprietorship of the text (as commodity), authors are proprietors of its meaning as well. In this sense, authorship describes a process of appropriation: collectively produced matter and meaning are privatized as a commodity, which is possessable and transferable by an individual. In this way, authorship is no different from other forms of commodity production, which, as Marx famously observed, mystify the social relations that determine their existence and, in concealing them, condition their reproduction.

If the institutional study of prisons has authorized Foucault to speak, then perhaps it is because *Discipline & Punish* reproduces the free-world intellectual’s power over prisoners and thereby reasserts the university’s claim as the primary site of knowledge production. Though he does attribute his ideas to his experiences with the GIP, he does so only vaguely. In keeping with this ethos, Foucault relegates contemporaneous prisoners to one in-text reference and a single footnote.\(^{117}\) In fact, contemporary life in general is largely absent from his “history of the present.”\(^{118}\) Instead, Foucault emphasizes “the birth of the prison.”\(^{119}\) More specifically, he examines the knowledge that produced these forms of discipline as punishment as well as the knowledge they produced. His history is, in other words, a history of ideas, a history of knowledge. Because “power and knowledge directly imply one another,” this history is narrated from the perspective of those producing the knowledge, that is, those with power.\(^ {120}\) Using

---

\(^{117}\) Foucault, *Discipline & Punish*, 30; 268.

\(^{118}\) Foucault, *Discipline & Punish*, 31.

\(^{119}\) *Naissance de la prison*, “The birth of the prison,” is the subtitle of the book.

\(^{120}\) Foucault, *Discipline & Punish*, 27.
“power” to mean “domination” rather than merely “the capacity to affect,” Foucault examines the knowledge produced by dominators at the expense of the dominated. Consequently, the role of bottom-up struggles in shaping this knowledge and the modes of its production is obscured throughout. In his theory, then, Foucault separates prisoners from the means of knowledge production and dispossesses them of their role in that social process. A symbol and consequence of Foucault’s power over prisoners as an influential free-world intellectual, this exclusion enforces and thereby reinforces that power. In this way, his critique of prisons and penal societies ends up reproducing the discursive marginalization of prisoners that helps to sustain them.

From this perspective, we can situate *Discipline & Punish* on a plane of carceral rhetoric that “‘naturalizes’ the legal power to punish, as it ‘legalizes’ the technical power to discipline. In thus homogenizing them, [it effaces] what may be violent in one and arbitrary in the other, attenuating the effects of revolt that they both may arouse.” Dominating this plane are two tendencies: on the one hand, there is a conservative tendency that depoliticizes prison; on the other, a progressive tendency that depoliticizes prisoners. The conservative tendency is best exemplified by prison administrators’ response to a series of three riots initiated by the inmates of the St. Louis Justice Center between January and April of 2021. Though each riot was accompanied by a list of demands contesting the prisoners’ conditions, the city’s Corrections Commissioner Dale Glass told the local news that, “There is nothing we did to make them act

---

121 I am indebted to Joy James for pointing this out. See Joy James, *Resisting State Violence* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 42.

Prison rebellion is, in other words, natural, inevitable, it just happens: a formulation that disappears the conditions that produce it. In contrast, the progressive tendency is best exemplified by Michelle Alexander’s response to the banning of her book, *The New Jim Crow*, in several prisons. Speaking to *The New York Times*, she speculated that “Perhaps [prison administrators] worry the truth might actually set captives free.” While Alexander surely views prison as political, as evidenced by *The New Jim Crow* itself, she claims here that liberation is a function of reading rather than politics. This is to say two interrelated but distinct things: first, that Alexander claims that reading produces resistance to prisons; and second, that she claims reading is resistance. The first claim privileges reading (specifically, reading the work of a free-world author) as a vector of politicization by prioritizing it as both site and mode. The second claim makes reading an alternative for political action. Don’t rebel, Alexander argues, read. Whether we understand reading as the cause of prison rebellion or as a substitute for it, both interpretations lead to the same conclusion. In either case, the political capacity of prisoners is diminished. In the first instance, the capacity for prisoners (as a collective) to organize, politicize, and mobilize themselves is marginalized. In the second, prisoners are demobilized and disorganized, routed into politically passive social activity.

---


Although these conservative and progressive positions are often represented themselves as one another’s antithesis, they actually serve complementary functions. The conservative represents rebellion as “natural” (as opposed to “political”). The progressive then contests this apolitical representation by positioning free-world people as those best suited to liberate prisoners, or by otherwise disempowering prisoners from liberating themselves. Because that struggle occurs on the terrain established by the conservative, the progressive reaction serves to legitimize rather than dislodge the conservative’s terms of debate. By critiquing the conservative position according to its logic, the progressive reproduces a conservative framework and thereby institutes it as the shared ground of a commonsense, which is structured by and through the dispossession of power from incarcerated people. In this way, both tendencies serve to condition the ongoing reproduction of violence through which prisons operate. Or, as the Oakland Abolition & Solidarity collective recently tweeted, “And when by chance inside resistance breaks through the walls, figurative and physical, the ‘coverage’ is most likely reactionary, dehumanizing garbage. More violence…‘epistemic violence’ that enables brute violence.”

This link between “epistemic violence” and “brute violence” is further evidenced by considering the ways that radical imprisoned intellectuals unsettle the very terms of this carceral commonsense. “Nothing can bend consciousness more effectively than a false arrest, a no-knock invasion, careless, panic-stricken gunfire,” argues George Jackson. Or, as Jack Henry Abbott

---

125 Oakland Abolition & Solidarity, “And when by chance inside resistance breaks through the walls, figurative and physical, the ‘coverage’ is most likely reactionary, dehumanizing garbage. More violence... ‘epistemic violence’ that enables the brute violence,” Oct. 24, 2022, 6:09 PM. https://twitter.com/OaklandAboSol/status/158468360067855649

126 George Jackson, Blood in My Eye, 30. The salience of this particular formulation can be recognized by reflecting on the role that no-knock warrants played in the police murder of Breonna Taylor, and the role that critiques of them played in the public response to that murder during summer of 2020.
more abstractly formulates it, “People begin to really think and change for the better only if they are forced to experience things.” As they see it: it is not consciousness that produces social being but social being that produces consciousness. If we take Jackson and Abbott seriously as thinkers, then we must take seriously the idea that no book is going to compel its reader to rebel against the state, no book is going to convince a prisoner that their condition is intolerable: no matter how eloquently written, rigorously reasoned, or politically radically it might be. If there is nonetheless rebellion, we must follow the rebels in understanding it as something compelled by the conditions imposed on them. From this perspective, rebellion is neither natural nor something that enters the prison from its exterior. Rather, incarceration is a social condition that produces resistance to itself. Recognizing that condition as political, incarcerated people address their conditions politically. Through this process, incarcerated people make knowledge, and they do so in, by, through, and in order to contest the conditions under which that knowledge is produced.

This is not to say that free world intellectuals played no role in the formation of prison’s intellectual milieus, or that we can learn nothing from them. Indeed, prisoners themselves have long taken lessons from free world thinkers and reading itself has played a significant role in the formation of prisoners’ intellectual lives. In her article, “Rethinking Prisoners Discourses,” Megan Sweeney offers an illustrative example when she recalls the circulation of handwritten copies of The Communist Manifesto from cell to cell via clothesline during the 1960s. For a

---


number of prisoners, at least, the *Manifesto* was important enough to (re)produce and to construct a distributional apparatus by which they could share it. This labor speaks to the presence of an underground circulation of knowledge within prisons, which takes in and metabolizes the work of free-world thinkers. Part of this metabolic process includes the sharing of texts between prisoners, study and reading groups, informal conversations, and creative adaptations of free-world material. From his Utah prison cell, for example, Jack Henry Abbott was influenced by reading George Jackson, to whom Abbott’s 1981 collection of letters, *In the Belly of the Beast*, is dedicated. In turn, Jackson was initially politicized by his conversations with fellow prisoner W.L. Nolen, and his own reading of Marx, Lenin, Castro, and Ho Chi Minh. More recently, the abolitionist organization Study & Struggle distributed ‘zine versions of academic books, such as Garrett Felber’s *Those Who Know Don’t Say*, Emily Thuma’s *All Our Trials*, and Kelly Lytle-Hernandez’s *City of Inmates*. Summarizing, condensing, interpreting, supplementing, and visualizing the monographic text, these ‘zine adaptations speak to the fact prisoners don’t just passively take in knowledge from the outside world. They participate in and contribute to it as well. They analyze it, modify it, transform it, use it, teach it, propagate it, and even speak back to it. In doing so, they develop and express their intellectual and creative capacities. Because this metabolic labor is organized and performed under state surveillance, it requires not just energy and attention but for the participants to risk violence as well. From the fact that people continue to take these risks every single day, we can infer that a contingent of prisoners consider risks worth taking.

---

At first glance, however, we appear to have encountered a contradiction. On the one hand, changes in consciousness follow only from changes in experience; on the other hand, reading plays a necessary role in the development of consciousness. We can heighten this contradiction even further by considering the legacy of Jackson’s 1970 collection of letters, *Soledad Brother*, which was widely circulated amongst incarcerated and free world people alike. This text was circulated so widely, in fact, that Jackson was the most famous prisoner during his lifetime, and when he was assassinated by a San Quentin prison guard in 1971, people throughout the country's prisons and jails held protests and work stoppages to register their anger. Having read Jackson, the prisoners in Attica were prepared to understand his murder as a racist act of state repression, as confirmation of his analysis: capitalism reproduces itself through racism; U.S. prisons function to liquidate the black and brown lumpenproletariat; prisons and police are the ultimate expression of fascism, and the violence they function through is the precondition for capital accumulation. In much the same way, Jackson’s killing galvanized prisoners to his conclusions: the social reproduction of prisons must be contested; prisoners must fight back. Taking up this challenge, nearly seven hundred inmates at Attica participated in a symbolic protest and three hundred participated in a one-day labor strike. “By the first of September, then, inmates at Attica had a considerable amount of experience with collective action and protest,” write sociologists Bert Useem and Peter Kimball, and it was the experience of participating in successful and large-scale collective action that built the social infrastructure that enabled the prisoners to seize Attica and hold it for four days.\(^{130}\) While their high profile actions were conditioned by preceding actions, which laid groundwork, these initial actions were

conditioned by reading texts that were themselves forged through a synthesis of theory and practice. What, then, should take analytical priority?

Rather than trying to resolve the tension by giving either reading or collective action primacy over the other, we can refuse the separation that underpins this debate. Instead, we can understand the two as aspects of a single dialectical process. Reading shapes collective action and collective action shapes reading. They are both kinds of experience, which bear on one another in the production of consciousness at both the level of the individual and the group. They determine one another and are therefore inseparable from each other. Accordingly, one cannot be given ontological or historical priority over the other, nor can one be understood in isolation from the other. In contrast, then, with arguments that seek to give either theory or practice primacy over the other, we can understand the consciousness of prisoners as something formed through a process of study, which includes both theory and practice.

When we examine how some prisoners themselves have understood this process, we find them socializing commonplace ideas about authorship and textual production. Or, rather, we can see them demonstrating how authorship and textual production are already always social. Indeed, as the incarcerated intellectual Stephen Wilson defines it, “study is the relation to other people that happens when we’re building something of our own, or at least something that isn’t planned or provided for or in the institution.” Wilson offers this definition as a quotation, and though the line appears nowhere in their work, he attributes it to Stefano Harney and Fred Moten’s collection of essays, The Undercommons. In doing so, he situates himself within an intellectual and political genealogy of abolition by blurring the distinction between his idea and theirs.

---

Authorship is thereby collectivized: ownership is deferred and blurred, concealed and shared, and meaning emerges in and through this blurring. In this way, Wilson’s text reveals itself as a social space. “To say that it’s a social space,” Moten notes in an interview that concludes The Undercommons, “is to say that stuff is going on: people, things, are meeting there and interacting, rubbing off one another, brushing against one another—and you enter into that social space, to try to be part of it.”

As Wilson’s misattribution highlights, this social space includes him and Harney and Moten. However, it also includes Wilson’s reader and the whole publishing project in which his writing appears as an introductory essay: In the Belly, a ‘zine produced by incarcerated authors and circulated inside and outside prisons. Each issue is composed of essays, poems, dialogues, book reviews, artwork, political education and legal resources, and calls for its readers to respond to in the next issue. Rather than the individualized producer of meaning and value, Wilson makes himself into a vector of collectivization and politicization, and his essay, situated in and among other texts, which supplement his and supply it with meaning, self-consciously direct readers to the conditions that determine it, conditions that exceed the desires, intentions, and consciousness of individual people.

In this way, In the Belly functions as an internally heterogenous site of expression, dialogue, and development: a place where ideas are shared, contested, and transformed collectively through an ongoing and open-ended process of social production that interpellates its writers and readers as participants in a political struggle within which it has value and through which its content and meaning is produced. As the ‘zine’s subtitle (“an abolitionist journal”) and its contents make clear, this political struggle is one oriented toward and animated by the abolition of a society that could have prisons. Consequently, we can understand this concept of

---

132 Harney and Moten, 108.
authorship as a function of its authors's politics, as a symbol and consequence of an abolitionist mode of study, which strives to understand its conditions of production through the process of abolishing them and abolish them through coming to understand them.

It is fitting, then, that this abolitionist sense of authorship developed by incarcerated people contrasts sharply with the one described by Foucault, which he assigns a carceral function. “Speeches and books were assigned real authors,” he claims, “only when the author became subject to punishment.” In making authors responsible for a text’s meaning, he argues, capitalism makes them liable for it. They can be punished because of its meaning. By practicing a form of abolitionist study, In the Belly and its contributors develop a form of authorship and meaning production thereby at odds with the carceral literary values imposed by penal societies. This new sense of authorship rearticulates meaning as a process of social production within which different individuals participate. In this way, it refuses the choice between close and distant reading, of formalism and historicism, of comparative and single-author studies. Rather, it attunes us to the work of individual authors and insists that we can only understand a particular text by situating it within the relations and conditions that determined its existence and within which it accumulates meaning and value. Coming to understand those relationships is not, however, a substitute for understanding a particular text. Rather, they constitute one another’s conditions of possibility. In this sense, interpretation of a particular text is a process of coming to understand the social worlds that give it life and vice versa. That is to say, in other words, that the abolitionist mode of study draws our attention to the conditions under which academia produces knowledge, and the ways in which it reproduces those conditions. How has the creative

133 Foucault, “What is an Author?,” 124.
and intellectual production of incarcerated people been understood in academia? What are the
effects of that understanding? What are the conditions that determine both?

**Prison Writing and Corrective-Extractive Reading**

Because prisons are designed to immobilize and incapacitate prisoners, the conditions of
prison life include long stretches of aimless time and solitude. Though they can be torturous,
these conditions can also prove conducive for reading and reflective thought. Indeed, the
experience of incarceration has played a key role in the production of world-historical work,
including that of Boethius, Walter Raleigh, Fyodor Dostoevsky, and Ngugi wa Thion’o. Along
with these works of aesthetic significance, incarceration has also conditioned political works
from a disparate range of ideologies, including the prison notebooks of Antonio Gramsci, Ho Chi
Minh, Adolf Hitler, Mumia Abu-Jamal, Varavara Rao, and Abdullah Öcalan. “There are quite a
few guys here who write,” as Eldrige Cleaver notes in a 1968 letter from Folsom prison. “Seems
that every convict wants to.”134 If there is indeed a common hunger to write, perhaps it is
because, as anthropologist Bruce Jackson records one anonymous prisoner saying in his 1972
study, *In the Life*: “Spending your time while you’re in prison doing something to better
yourself, and keeping your mind occupied with something constructive, rather than just wasting,
wasting all these years sitting around here just doing nothing makes doing time more doable.”135
The simple act of writing itself provides an outlet for an individual’s energy and attention; it
keeps the mind active, and offers a way of passing the time.

---


135 Quoted in Bruce Jackson, *In the Life: Versions of the Criminal Experience* (New York: Holt,
Rinehart, and Winston, 1972), 298.
Understanding writing as a technology for alleviating the physical isolation and temporal dislocation that characterizes imprisonment helps to explain why the history of prison writing in the United States is practically coextensive with the modern prison, which first appeared in 1790. While longform accounts of prisons have appeared regularly since at least 1856, short form writing first appeared in 1800, when William Ketelas founded the Forlorn Hope from a New York debtors prison. Since then, nearly 500 print publications have been founded, and more recent developments in digital printing and distribution technology have enabled the proliferation of innumerable publication projects. These projects range from zines, such as In the Belly, and short essays circulated amongst a small group to blogs frequented by thousands, such as #PrisonsKill. Though these experiments in cultural production are small in scale, they nonetheless offer incarcerated authors an opportunity to develop their intellectual capacities, express themselves creatively, and contest the state-sanctioned alienation of prison life by forging and sustaining relationships across walls and through bars.

This extensive literary tradition–here and abroad–has led many literary critics to conceive of prison writing as a single genre or form. For example, in his frequently cited essay, “Toward a Prison Poetics,” literary critic Doran Larson argues “that prison writing bears not only a common subject but recurrent, internal, formal traits, and that these internal, generic traits emerge directly from prison writing’s material links with strategies of power exercised within prisons in general and to the particular conditions of each writer’s incarceration.”136 From this prominent perspective, prison writing is defined by its common aesthetic features. In this way, Larson defines prison writing so as to exclude those countless prisoners whose literary production does not fulfill these

136 Doran Larson, “Toward a Prison Poetics,” College Literature vol. 37, no. 3 (2010), 143.
generic criteria. In doing so, he incapacitates readers, blinding them to the expansive diversity of writing produced by incarcerated people. While some literary critics have attempted to repudiate some version of this position, their effort to maintain the generic integrity of prison literature leads them to make similarly problematic assertions. In his unpublished dissertation, for example, influential nonprofit director and former university administrator Daniel Porterfield argues that incarcerated authors “trust their readers to see the prison at work upon the text, that is, to see the prison in the text through rhetorical qualities (silence, disorientation, abstractedness, self-centeredness) that are neither planned nor recognized by the writers.”137 From this perspective, incarceration is a uniform experience, and texts differ in their styles of expression. In this way, Porterfield theorizes prison literature as an aesthetically heterogeneous field bound by an identical experience.

What these scholarly tendencies elide, however, is the uneven conditions of incarceration across lines of race, class, gender, history, and geography. This is to say, they overlook how different incarcerated writers experience incarceration differently, how different resources are available to different authors at different moments depending on the institution they’re confined in and even where in that institution they are confined (whether they are in solitary or not, for example), and it overlooks how different prisoners internalize, interpret, and respond to their experiences differently. Or, as Dylan Rodriguez argues in his influential critique of prison writing scholarship, “The academic and cultural fabrication of ‘prison writing’ as a literary genre is…a discursive gesture toward order and coherence where, for the writer, there is generally neither.”138

---

137 Daniel Ryan Porterfield, The Captive Voice: Writing Within Restriction, PhD diss. (City University of New York, 1995), 58.

Porterfield, for example, asks: “How does poetry reflect and respond to pervasive institutional practices such as the attack on individual identity and extensive regulation of prisoner’s lives?” Lapsing into abstraction, he replaces a particular or specific person or poem with “poetry.” Rather than a given poem that performs a determinate effect under historical conditions, the form itself performs a universal function under generic conditions. There is no consideration for how the black anarchist prisoner might articulate themselves differently from the white anarchist prisoner, or even the black communist prisoner; how the liberal Chicano prisoner might differ from the radical Native prisoner; how a male prisoner might experience incarceration differently than a female prisoner, or how the queer prisoner might face different challenges than the straight prisoner; how a prisoner of Canada might echo a prisoner of the United States, but how the experience of either might diverge from prisoners in Palestine, Egypt, or Japan. It has no means of explaining the almost total absence of published writing by Asian American prisoners. It has no way of accounting for difference and contradiction whatsoever. All it offers is the injunction: *just listen to prisoners*. What do we do, then, when prisoners contradict one another? What happens when they contradict themselves?

Though this scholarship often thinks of itself as oppositional to prisons, it is structurally inhibited from answering these questions. This is because this scholarly tendency tends toward mystification, and the reassertion of prison’s rehabilitative intention. In this way, it reproduces the prison as a site of value production, which can be extracted by free world readers, and that scholars can accumulate on the back of. Throughout an influential volume on *Theater in Prisons*, for example, scholars repeatedly describe theatrical performance as “transcending” or enabling the

---

“transcendence” of individuals from captivity.\textsuperscript{140} In his introduction to the anthology, editor Michael Balfour articulates a similar conception of art and prisons. Despite a broadly critical perspective on the material efficacy of art work (“Theatre or art in these prison camps did not save anyone from their ultimate fate”) and a generally pessimistic view of prisons in general (“In the context of prison, the humanising process will never be a fundamental priority. It exists in contradiction to the administrative task of the institution”), Balfour nonetheless locates the value of prison art in its capacity to correct the artist (“rehabilitate” and “humanize” them) and extract value from them (in this case, it can edify free-world intellectuals in the theory and practice of theater).\textsuperscript{141} Not only does this scholarship make cultural production into a substitute for being released from a cage, this framing transforms prison into something that has ultimately been good for the prisoner. Prisons work, this scholarship insists, in spite of itself.

This genre of scholarship functions as a key part of what Anoop Mirpuri has recently termed the “correction-extraction complex,” which refers to the linkages between the prison industrial complex and institutions of knowledge production such as universities. With intensifying force, these institutions are subject to neoliberalization, which includes: shrinking departmental budgets and rates of humanities enrollment; the closure of departments, colleges, and universities; the end of philosophy, history, literature, gender and sexuality, and ethnic studies majors; the adjunctification of university instruction; intensifying competition between departments; increasing reliance on wealthy donors, athletic programs, and rising rates of debt-financed tuition; an increasingly commodified sense of education amongst broad swaths of the public.


US population; a devaluing of humanities disciplines; an ascendant politics of racial revanchism; and an increasing amount of state oversight on curriculum. These conditions shape the composition of the student body, as well as that of the teaching staff, the professoriate, and the administrative and custodial staff that ensures infrastructure functions. Through their ongoing interactions, these people and things materialize a university—a process of social (re)production that includes the generation of subjects: teachers, students, peers, administrators, scholars, critics, readers, writers. As these neoliberal conditions have become increasingly bound up in regimes of captivity—in disciplinary protocols, prison education programs, campus police departments, cheap furnishings provided by prison labor, and grants from the state and federal governments—they have increasingly produced neoliberal subjects who are institutionally positioned “to relate to and experience ‘the prison’ simultaneously as a source of value, humanization, and security.” Accordingly, these subjects are trained to think of disciplinary correction as good and prisons as a site of value extraction.

Among other things, this process of subjectivation disciplines readers in a style of interpretation that serves to reproduce the corrective-extractive complex that determines its existence. Underpinned by the concept of authenticity, corrective-extractive reading imputes prison with value insofar as it provides free-world readers with a truthful glimpse at a world that they would otherwise not have access to. Its portrait of this other world is only valuable insofar as it is truthful, that is, authentic. Prison writing is thus made to bear the “disconcerting ring of authenticity, and not invention,” as Joyce Carol Oates formulates it in her introduction to a

collection of fiction by incarcerated writers.\textsuperscript{143} Or, as Mirpuri puts it, corrective-extractive reading adheres to and evangelizes “the belief that a prison text can somehow speak \textit{for itself}.”\textsuperscript{144} However, if the value of prison writing is derived from its degree of authenticity, its fidelity to an autonomous social world, then free-world readers would be the people least capable of determining a work’s correspondence with reality. According to these readings’ own logic, free world readers are categorically alienated from the social world being depicted. They would be the people least qualified to judge a text’s correspondence with reality. Nonetheless, they persistently position themselves as judge, jury, and executioner.

Rather than something readers locate in the text, then, authenticity is best understood as something a reader produces through certain reading practices. As Mirpuri underscores in his formulation, however, these reading practices interpret prison writing as speaking for itself. In this way, corrective-extractive reading represents its interpretations as non-interpretive, as a transparent account of reality. Indeed, in his description of “the captive voice,” Daniel Porterfield insists that prisoners “face the authenticating imperative,” the need to make their work believable.\textsuperscript{145} In fact, Porterfield defines the “credible prisoner personae” as a generic necessity of prison writing. Because it is this persona that affirms a work’s fidelity to reality, a text does not meet the institutionalized criteria for belonging without it. This persona requires that incarcerated authors conjure the presence of the prison, which is accomplished through description, narration, or the representation of the “imprisoned consciousness, which is one’s

\textsuperscript{143} Quoted in Mirpuri, 51.

\textsuperscript{144} Mirpuri, 43.

\textsuperscript{145} Porterfield, 28.
sensibilities or perspective as influenced by the institution.”

Accomplished by incorporating tropes already familiar to free-world readers, such as prison sexual violence (“the sine qua non of American prison stereotypes”), these gestures “create the effect of immediacy, the sense of the place, a feeling for the influence of the prison on the writer.” This is to say, in other words, that free world readers accept art from incarcerated writers only insofar as it credibly represents itself as emanating from prison. Moreover, readers only accept or believe this representation insofar as it conforms to what they already believe about prison life. They value it only insofar as it reveals some truth about incarceration and, insofar as it appears to reveal the truth of incarceration, readers mystify their interpretation of it as the mere reception of the text’s transmission.

Although Porterfield has played an important role in institutionalizing “the captive voice” as a generic trope in prison writing, he merely exemplifies a broader tendency within the study of prison literature. Writing about the American Prison Writing Archive (APWA), for example, Sean Moxley-Kelly notes that “[f]iction and poetry are not included” in the archive. If this is the case, it is because the institutional value of the APWA is that it “provides an avenue through which prisoners can become testifiers.” It is valuable insofar as it teaches readers something, and this value is indexed to its unadorned depiction of reality. Citing a personal communication

146 Porterfield, 49.

147 Porterfield, 38; 30.


149 Moxley-Kelly, 213
with the project’s organizer, Doran Larson, Moxley-Kelly affirms this claim, writing that Larson “hopes the archive, as a digital resource for exclusively firsthand accounts of life behind bars, will someday represent a key component of the body of literature attesting to the realities of American mass incarceration.”150 Once again, the value of writing by incarcerated people is located in its capacity to educate free-world readers and faithfully render reality. In effect, prison writing is treated as de facto non-fiction. In addition to reproducing this perspective, Larson’s project, which is hosted by Johns Hopkins University, helps to insist on it as the only institutionally legitimate approach to prison literature.

If this approach predominates in the institutionalized study of prison literature, perhaps it is because it is baked into its foundations. In 1978’s The Victim as Criminal and Artist: Literature from the American Prison, which stands as the very first academic study of prison literature, cultural historian H. Bruce Franklin offers two illustrative passages:

The work of today’s prisoners, though predominantly autobiographical, are rarely intended as a display of individual genius. Whereas the literary criteria dominant on campus exalt what is extraordinary or even unique, with ‘originality’ as the key criterion, most current autobiographical writing from prison intends to show the readers that the author’s individual experience is not unique or even extraordinary, but typical and representative.

[...]

We are not to look for the unique and the original, for ambiguity and countless types of irony, for architectonic structure or the self-conscious solipsism of a Nabokov or a Borges. We are to look for what is common, clear, purposeful, useful. We are not supposed to sit around admiring the authors, but to get up and put their message into action.151

150 Moxley-Kelly, 208, emphasis added.

Rather than appealing to its artistry or invention, this characterization of prison writing defines it by its political valence. In fact, for Franklin, the value of carceral literature lies in its pragmatism and its utility. For this reason, any supposed meaning of the work needs to be self-evident to be valuable. This perspective leads to an overemphasis on letters, essays, diaries: forms whose fidelity to reality is routinely presumed; as well as the realist modes of fiction, poetry, and drama. While he primarily examines poetry by incarcerated people, Franklin accurately notes that autobiography is the most common form of (published) prison writing. Though the autobiography, for him, typically serves to individuate the author; incarcerated writers employ it to collective ends through the representation of themselves as ordinary, as “typical and representative.” “Ambiguity and countless types of irony” are disappeared by this definition of carceral literature. We cannot admire these authors, because that is something reserved for some other literary field.152

In his formalization of prison literary study, then, Franklin institutes realism as the only kind of legitimate carceral literature. Indeed, this overrepresentation of carceral realism is borne out in the texts that most frequently receive scholarly attention. Critical readings, for example, are most commonly performed on works consciously composed and sold as nonfiction: essays, collections of letters, memoirs, and autobiographies. These include older texts, such as epistolary collections by Eldridge Cleaver, George Jackson, and Jack Henry Abbott, as well as essays by

152 C.f. Louis Mendoza’s introduction to the epistles of Raúl R. Salinas: “As is evidenced by Salinas’ work in this collection, it is the circumstances of his writing that matter as much, if not more, than the form, style, or ‘quality’...It can be argued, then, that the value of Salinas’ literary work lies not only in some traditional notion of ‘good writing,’ but in its value as a critical voice from within the depths of the penal system, a voice that is not much exceptional as it is representative” (11). Louis G. Mendoza, “Introduction” to raúlrsalinas and the Jail Machine: My Weapon is My Pen (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2006, 3-24).
Angela Davis and Assatta Shakur. Situated in the past and alienated from the present, these texts enable critics to highlight radical anti-prison politics while attenuating the relationship of those politics to the contemporary moment. Politically radical texts by living and still-incarcerated authors, such as Mumia Abu-Jamal and Leonard Peltier receive very little attention. While the stories of people who die in prison are rarely discussed, liberal texts such as Jimmy Santiago Baca’s *A Place to Stand*, which narrate a humanizing story of development and liberation, receive critical acclaim. Besides essays, letters, and memoirs, poetry by incarcerated and formerly-incarcerated people has also received significant critical attention. In contrast with letters, essays, and novels by incarcerated people, poems by incarcerated people are more frequently dislocated from their conditions of production.\(^{153}\) This is due, in part, to the fact that many published poems by incarcerated people emerge out of or in conjunction with creative writing workshops or nonprofit publishing ventures, which are often institutionally prohibited from pursuing anything but stridently formalist approaches to poetry.

Given the critical tendency of prison writing, we should not be surprised by the overrepresentation of realism. After all, as György Lukács pointed out as early as 1958, it is the realist mode that aims at “a truthful reflection of reality.”\(^{154}\) Realism, in other words, is the

---

\(^{153}\) C.f. Joseph Bruchach: “Some continue to view the work of writers in prison as little more than a literary curiosity, despite the fact that much of the current poetry from prisons is moving and highly crafted, despite the fact that a large part of the poetic output of American inmates makes no mention of prison and is being published because of its excellence, not its origin. The only fair way to judge the work produced by that varied community of men and women in our nation who have been legally defined as outcasts is to use the same criteria you use to judge all good writing” (294). Joseph Bruchach, “Breaking Out With the Pen” in *A Gift of Tongues*, ed. Marie Harris and Kathleen Aguero (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1987, 286-294).

literary mode that intends to accurately represent the way things “really” are, to serve as the mirror of nature. If the goal of prison-authors is to expose their readers to the experiences of incarceration and cultivate opposition to it, and to do so in a way that is unauthorized or non-defferential to prison administrators, then it makes intuitive sense why the realist mode would have appeal. As Roland Barthes underscores in his essay “The Reality Effect,” however, realism is never reality. Rather, it is a particular aesthetic mode: not an objective account of the world, but a subjective view of it. It is a way of apprehending aspects of reality and of representing that apprehension. To be sure, realism is characterized by a tendency to present its subjective character as objective. It is, in fact, “the very absence of the signified,” which

---

155 While Lukács identifies the realist mode as a symbol and consequence of the bourgeoisie social revolution of the long nineteenth century, he leaves open the possibility of critical and socialist realisms. In his protracted comparison between the two, Lukács identifies critical realism as a form of realism that strains against bourgeois modernity while representing emergent forms of life from the outside (93-97). In many instances, critical works of prison literature function in this critical realist vein. They aim to represent prison as it really is precisely in order to denaturalize it (a stark contrast from bourgeois realism’s tendency to naturalize and universalize the capitalist order). As Lukács points out, however, no particular vision of an alternative social order inheres in this critical tendency. Moreover, these critical realisms appeal to the same logic of recognition and awareness that structure bourgeois realism. Consequently, as I demonstrate over the course of this dissertation, those critical realisms are vulnerable to recuperation by the bourgeois order: as a function of their realist form. Accordingly, I stress Lukács description of realism in general precisely in order to problematize the realist mode as such. Anticipating this problematization, Lukács intends to conserve realism by introducing the concept of socialist realism. Though many of the critical realists I mention throughout this dissertation do advocate for some variation on socialism, communism, or anarchism, as Lukács points out, this is not sufficient to be a socialist realist. Socialist realism doesn’t merely take a positive attitude toward socialism. “Yet, though this new perspective [on socialism] will help the critical realist to understand his own age,” Lukács writes, “it will not enable him to conceive the future from the inside” (95). Socialist realism is, in other words, a realist view of a society that does not yet exist. The closest thing to socialist realism I can point to is a literary tendency that I call abolitionist speculation, which I discuss at greater length in chapter five. I pick back up on this thread in that discussion.
“becomes the very signifier of realism.” Or, put differently, realism is an aesthetic mode defined by its efforts to make itself appear as non-aesthetic, as nature itself, as a transparent and objective view of reality rather than an object of interpretation. Consequently, the qualities of realist art are judged on the faithfulness of its representation of reality. The greater the resemblance between the work of art and reality, the greater the aesthetic achievement. Though this is, in some sense, an obvious claim, it is worth restating because it is something realism works to obscure.

This is not to say, however, that carceral realist texts are not worth studying. Quite the contrary. The contradiction that structures them is precisely why they are worth studying. While their emphasis on realism enables readers to better apprehend the nature of prison from within it, their subjective dimension demands that they be read critically. They cannot be accepted as mere reflections of reality. They have to be interpreted. At the same time, the overrepresentation of carceral realism and the discourses surrounding it indicate that not all modes of interpretation are equally suited for this task.

**Abolitionist Reading**

Because it treats carceral realism as a transparent account of reality, the corrective-extractive practice of reading is at pains to account for the self-conscious opacity of prison writing. The formerly incarcerated poet Jimmy Santiago Baca helpfully illustrates this opacity when, in his 2001 memoir, *A Place to Stand*, he recalls the experience of learning to write. Unlike many literates, who first begin developing the skill as children and therefore have foggier

---

memories of the experience, Baca began learning to write after being incarcerated at the age of twenty-one. Coming to it so late and under such specific conditions, Baca remembers the experience with vivid detail. Of his earliest attempts to compose a letter, he writes that

I would try to write the thoughts going through my mind, but they didn’t come out right. They lacked reality. A stream of ideas flowed through me, but they lost their strength as soon as I put them down. I erased so often and so hard I made holes in the paper. After hours of plodding word by word to write a clear sentence, I would read it and it didn’t even come close to what I’d meant to say.  

As banal a task as writing a letter might be to some, Baca depicts it as a strange thing that poses challenging interpretive questions. Like every other literary form, the epistle can support stylistic innovation, profundity of thought, ambiguity of articulation, and intensity of affection. However, letters are more commonly sent and received as mundane texts, which reward a directness of sentiment and an economy of style. This is merely to say that letters are not typically assumed, expected, or required to have aesthetic flourish or technical complexity in order to convey their meaning. Rather, the epistle is a genre in which the writer is, more often than not, best served by articulating themselves as plainly and directly as possible. Though he is working in a genre that simply asks him to write down his thoughts, Baca nonetheless struggles to translate his interiority onto the page. Taming his stream of consciousness into a coherent expression proves challenging, if not impossible, and words and phrases lose their affective intensity as they are externalized. Baca’s subjectivity is refracted by rather than reflected in language, demonstrating that even texts are alienated from their authors. Not even a letter can be taken as a direct reproduction of experience; it is a transformation, a transfiguration, a translation, an expression of that experience. Accordingly, even the most mundane and seemingly-straightforward texts

---

require interpretation. If this is acutely true of prison writing, it is only because it is true of any writing. Prison merely magnifies the alienation.

Contesting the social reproduction of prisons therefore entails the formulation and practice of interpretative methods at odds with this process: strategies and tactics intended to antagonize the reproduction of the corrective-extractive complex and the broader PIC it serves as an organ of. Echoing the authors of In the Belly, Mirpuri calls this creative and critical position abolition. “Abolition as an interpretative practice,” Mirpuri writes, “takes as its object an epistemology that reproduces a barrier between prisoners and the social world, into which capital floods its will toward accumulation.”\(^{158}\) Abolitionist reading, in other words, effaces the distinction between prisons and the free-world in order to better understand how the former constitutes and structures the latter. It does so in order to unsettle the epistemological conditions of the PIC’s reproduction and thereby resolve the problems motivating it. Accordingly, abolitionist reading demands not only a shift in what scholars of prison writing study but also a shift in how that object is studied: how texts are read, written about, and taught.

That shift does not, however, necessitate a total dispensation of preceding scholarship on prison literature. Rather, it allows us to reexamine that scholarship and draw out abolitionist tendencies that are already present but have been overlooked or deemphasized. In fact, it is only by returning to earlier scholarship that we can develop a concept of prison writing capacious enough for abolitionist reading. H. Bruce Franklin, for example, distinguishes himself from many of the scholars who would build upon his work, insisting that he does not mean to suggest that contemporary American prison literature can be considered a literary genre. It consists of novels, plays, poetry, essays, letters, songs, autobiographies, etc. Yet despite the wide range of generic forms, there are certain unifying and predominant formal

\(^{158}\) Mirpuri, 44.
characteristics, determined not only by the background of the writers but also by their intentions. Though these intentions are by no means all identical and are often, in fact, mutually contradictory, they mostly function in the same arena of struggle.¹⁵⁹

On the one hand, incarcerated authors share a social condition that inevitably expresses itself in the material form and ideological and affective content. This produces repetitions and resemblances between works, if not an identity, and the work can therefore indicate something about that condition to its readers. On the other hand, those forms and that content cannot be reduced to that condition. They also reflect the social position, experiences, geography, interests, desires, and hopes particular to individuals, and which are therefore not uniform between prisoners or across populations. Disagreements, divergences, developments, and contradictions amongst, between, across, and within the work of various authors have to be acknowledged, because it is dissensus as much as consensus that gives texts their meaning. Franklin imagines, then, a field of literature defined not by common aesthetic features or even a shared social condition but as a set of overlapping struggles which bear resemblances to one another. These resemblances are not, however, self-evident. Rather, they must be drawn out of texts by situating them within particular relations.

Though Franklin’s work has formed the institutional basis of prison writing—something I will return to in chapter four—it is structured by a contradiction that contains the promise of its own abolition. That is to say, he offers a definition of prison writing as a field of texts that cannot be organized under a single rubric, as an array of texts that do not all share a common feature. Rather, prison writing is irreducibly heterogenous, and it is defined through its straining against efforts to enclose it. In this way, he institutionalized prison literature as literature that strains against or seeks to escape institutionalization. This abolitionist account of prison writing, then,

¹⁵⁹ Franklin, *The Victim*, 235.
is one in which prison writing pours out of its confines and constraints: materially, ideologically, generically, formally.

On this point, Franklin prefigures the more recent work of Nicole Fleetwood and her concept of the carceral aesthetic. This term “refers to ways of envisioning and crafting art and culture that reflect the conditions of imprisonment.”\(^{160}\) Fleetwood develops this term to conceptualize “forms of art-making that emerge as a result of the carceral state,” and she applies it to work by incarcerated and non-incarcerated individuals who critically engage carcerality through creative means.\(^{161}\) An abolitionist scholar herself, Fleetwood puts a finer point on Franklin’s earlier conception. Fleetwood allows us to understand the carceral state as something that all Americans have an experience of because it is something that structures all of our lives. This perspective enables us to understand work by incarcerated people and free world authors as engaged in a shared struggle that exceeds the prison walls, and we can, therefore, identify the presence of prisons and the police in free-world texts. In this way, carceral aesthetics redraws the familiar distinctions between various literary fields and literary canons, and lays claim to all cultural depictions of prisons and the prison-industrial complex. This is not to suggest, however, that there are no distinctions between work produced by incarcerated writers and that produced by free-world people. The experiences, perspectives, and working conditions are, of course, different. Rather, it is to understand those differences as precisely that: differences in interest, ideology, style, mode, social condition. They are technical, geographic, historic, political, aesthetic differences rather than ontological ones. In the face of these differences, which are


\(^{161}\) Fleetwood, 38.
significant to be sure, abolitionist reading analyzes resemblances between authors: their similarities and their differences at one and the same time. Accordingly, this dissertation cuts across genres, gender, race, ideology, and literary history in order to demonstrate the resemblance between texts that are typically differentiated so as to obscure their commonalities. In doing so, it aims to account for the differences between and within texts while, at the same time, identifying a form of consciousness that runs consistently through them.

In much the same way, abolitionist reading traverses the borders segregating intellectual disciplines in order to understand how prisons work and cultivate intolerance of them. Accordingly, abolitionist reading draws upon critical legal studies, critical ethnic studies, black studies, Native studies, history, philosophy, sociology, anthropology, geography, and economics, as well as work produced outside of the academy, including the work of organizers, activists, and incarcerated people themselves. To paraphrase philosopher Gilles Deleuze and psychoanalyst Felix Guattari, abolitionist reading makes use of everything that comes within range, everything that can be appropriated to elucidate how prisons structure everyday life. In order to draw out the material conditions that determine the form and function of a text, as well as its contradictions, both internally and with other texts, abolitionist reading intends to situate literary texts in the social fields that give those texts meaning. Or, in other words, abolitionist reading examines texts as processes composed of processes: of production, reading, and cultural legitimation. In this way, abolitionist reading treats texts’ conditions of production and circulation as constitutive elements of the text, as elements that produce the meaning of a particular text and things to which the texts themselves gesture.

By way of conclusion, then, I would like to develop this concept of abolitionist reading by demonstrating what it looks like in practice. I do so by considering my correspondence with my close friend, J. Currently three years into a fourteen-year sentence in Texas, J has been in and out of prisons and jails for much of his adult life. I have known him since we were both teenagers, and over this time, I have witnessed the effects of incarceration firsthand: the changes wrought in his personality, the ways incarceration has alienated J from his three young children and other family members, and the ways it has attenuated our relationship. Moreover, I have also witnessed how prison exacerbated, rather than mitigated, many of the problems with mental health, substance abuse, and poverty that eventually led J to prison in the first place. Reflections on these experiences color our correspondence with one another, and through this dialogue I have come to understand firsthand how prison structures the lives of those outside as well as those inside.

While communicating with any incarcerated person can be a challenging, frustrating process, it is especially so when trying to connect with Texas’ prisoners. Like prisoners in 34 other states, Texas inmates can be written to via JPay: a messaging platform that connects incarcerated and free people. Unlike prisoners in many of those other states, however, Texas prisoners cannot write back. If they want to communicate something, they have to handwrite a letter or speak to someone on the phone. In much the same way that JPay charges people to send messages, phone calls cost money and only outgoing calls are allowed. While most of these calls are serviced by Global Tel Link (GTL), which claims to serve 90% of prisoners, phone calls in Texas are serviced by Preferred Communications of Texas.\(^\text{163}\) Since 2021, Preferred

\(^{163}\) According to their website, GTL services 1.8 million of the 2 million people incarcerated in state and federal prisons. GTL, “About Us,” https://www.gtl.net/about-us/.
Communications has been a wholly-owned subsidiary of Securus Technologies—a Delaware-incorporated subsidiary of Beverly Hills-based hedge fund Platinum Equity—which, together with GTL, enjoys a telecommunications oligopoly in US prisons and jails. Though they offer a relatively low rate of $0.06 per minute, these prices are still steep for incarcerated people.\(^{164}\)

Although Texas compels prisoners to work as a condition of their incarceration, most of the work is performed in order to reproduce the prison. “Most inmates work in prison support jobs,” according to the Texas Department of Corrections, “such as cooking, cleaning, laundry, and maintenance.”\(^{165}\) This labor ensures the ongoing functioning of the prison, and, because it is unpaid, it depresses the cost of maintaining prisons. Many other prisoners perform work for Texas Correctional Industries (TCI). Opened in 1968, TCI is a for-profit department within the Texas Department of Criminal Justice that uses prison labor to manufacture chemicals, personal protective equipment, and furniture for municipalities and state agencies. While prisoners who work for TCI are paid nothing for their labor, Title 4, section G, article 497.006 of the Texas Government Code, allows incarcerated people to sell their labor power to private contractors. Because the amount they can be paid depends on the location of the prison and the type of work engaged, and the list of contractors who employ prison labor is not public, it is difficult to say how much prisoners can earn selling their labor.\(^{166}\) For argument’s sake, however, we can simply


\(^{165}\) Texas Department of Corrections and Justice, “F.A.Q,” [https://www.tdcj.texas.gov/faq/cid.html#work](https://www.tdcj.texas.gov/faq/cid.html#work).

\(^{166}\) In Texas, the wages available to incarcerated people is determined by the Prison Industry Enhancement Certification Program (PIECP), which was created by the Justice System Improvement Act of 1979 and authorized to continue indefinitely by the Crime Control Act of 1990. PIECP administers the private sale of incarcerated labor: regulating what businesses can employ incarcerated labor, what products can be produced by incarcerated labor, the conditions under which incarcerated people can labor, and the wages for which they must do so. According
take the federal minimum wage of $7.25/hr as our benchmark. Per Texas law, the state can garnish up to 80% of a prisoner’s wages for taxes, room and board, family support, restitution, and a crime victim’s fund.¹⁶⁷ If we take $7.25/hr as our example wage, then this leaves prisoners with as little as (or as much as, from another perspective) $1.21 for an hour of work. This means that an incarcerated person would have to work at least two hours just to cover the $2.00 monthly service fee charged by Preferred Communications of Texas. Each additional hour of work would just about cover the $1.20 required to make a 20-minute phone call. Though letter writing does require postage, the cost of physical stamps ($0.25 each, or three for $1) means that physical mail is the most accessible way of communicating for many people incarcerated in Texas.

Written by hand, processed by censors, and physically transported across the state, J’s letters are slow to arrive and their genesis is expressed in every aspect of their being. J writes to me about everyday life inside: his relationships with other prisoners, their relationships with guards, how he spends his time, what he’s reading and his difficulty in acquiring books, his hopes and goals for his life after prison. He writes to me about his earlier periods of incarceration and the differences between various institutions. He reminisces about our long relationship and reflects on how prisons and jails have alienated us from one another. Even in those passages where J recalls the free-world, the letters inevitably turn back to incarceration, which saturates

---

the form of the letters as well as their content. “Man, I’ve been nervous to send this off,” J writes in one letter. “Considered rewriting it a couple of times, but fuck it.” In addition to expressing anxiety regarding the reception of its content, this line from J also draws my attention to the material complications that rewriting entails. Unlike published work or even messages sent via JPay, which allows users to easily revise and reiterate texts to their satisfaction before sending them off, physical letters from prisoners are more intensely haunted by their conditions of production. If paper is difficult to access, or the change is small, rewriting often means striking out lines or scribbling out words rather than restarting the entire page. If thoughts come late, revisions are sometimes made as marginal notes and annotations, or, as J does in some of his letters, as supplemental comments made on scraps of paper and inserted into the letter. In this way, his letters express their process of production: the consideration, reflection, time, and revision that goes into making any text: the iterative dimension of communication, which authorized publications are structured by the disavowal of.

The conditions of production include state surveillance, which is announced by any means of communication between incarcerated and free people. After accepting a GTL-serviced call, for example, listeners will hear an automated message that informs them that “this call is from a corrections facility and is subject to monitoring.” Likewise, writers using JPay will note the red text just above the send button that reads: “Please note, emails me be monitored. Carefully consider the contents of your email.” What these communications are being monitored for exactly, though, remains vague and nebulous at best, completely opaque at worst. Accordingly, information obtained through this monitoring has been used to prosecute, extend sentences, punish prisoners with transfers or solitary confinement, redact passages of

---

communications, or even withhold correspondence altogether. Indeed, my letters from J arrive with their backs torn open and crudely taped shut. Before I can even read them, I know that some anonymous bureaucrat has already done so. It is only after reflecting on this experience that I fully grasp what Mikhail Bakhtin meant when we explained that every instance of communication presupposes a speaker, an addressee, and a super addressee. The subordinating presence of the state structures our conversation in ways we can scarcely be aware of.

In addition to the censorious effect of this surveillance, communication with incarcerated people is similarly frustrated by the physical partition of prison walls. The content of J’s letters bear this out. In one he writes,

Shea, I see things you wouldn’t believe. At times I’ve felt like I was in the plot of some cheesy action movie, + others, well those have been truly horrifying. It takes a lot to scare me, man, and I’m telling you, I’ve seen this place do awful things to people, and I’m not talking about people being stabbed to death. The problem is these things are extremely complicated and test even my memory.169

While a corrective-extractive reading would strain to derive meaning or value from this message, an abolitionist reading notes the fissures and gaps. There is an acknowledgment, on J’s part, that he cannot, for many reasons, meaningfully convey his experiences. They are quite literally unspeakable. Nonetheless, he wants to communicate the ways in which unspeakable experiences characterize incarceration. Alluding to the ways in which the ordinary functioning of the prison breaks people down—does “awful things to people”—J insists that this process goes beyond “people being stabbed to death.” It is not merely discontinuities with the prescribed order of things that afflict prisoners but the order of things itself. It is the very fact of imprisonment that devastates lives, and this devastation is not something that produces value or significance. In

169 J., letter to author, March 26, 2022.
fact, it steals value from people’s lives, cuts them off their community, subordinates them to unspeakable violence. If J’s statement is valuable, it is not because it edifies me or humanizes him. Rather, it attunes me to the vast apparatus of domination that sutures the state to the economy. It reminds me of the ways in which this apparatus is organized towards the dehumanization of J, and it demonstrates how that dehumanizing process ripples outward from the prison in order to stymie the flourishing of life elsewhere.
Chapter Two: 
Carceral Realism

This chapter argues that the carceral state and prison industrial complex has produced a historical mode of consciousness that I call carceral realism, which refers to the widespread sense that not only is incarceration the only realistic response to social disorder, but also that theoretical and practical alternatives to it are repressed. I borrow this formulation from Mark Fisher’s description of capitalist realism or, “the widespread sense that not only is capitalism the only viable political and economic system, but also that it is not impossible even to imagine a coherent alternative to it.”  

I offer carceral realism as a complement to capitalist realism, which Fisher characterizes as a uniquely neoliberal mode of consciousness. Though he notes that neoliberalism represents not a “withering away of the state” but a “stripping back of the state to its core military and police functions,” Fisher quickly pivots away from policing and imprisonment to focus on how capitalist realism shapes our shared conditions of work, their psychological effect on us, and our participation in mass culture. However, by foregrounding the dialectical relationship between this commonsense and the state’s carceral capacities, we can see how the one produces the other in a single circuit of social reproduction. We can see, in other words, how the historical development of the US carceral apparatus has produced neoliberal


subjects who are conditioned to reproduce the carceral state through reflexive and routine appeals to punishment.

This mode of consciousness is embedded in the cultural productions that express and thereby help to (re)compose it. In this sense, the “realism” of “carceral realism” refers to the realist mode of representation: the essay, the autobiography, the epistle, the documentary, the testimony, the realist novel, “reality TV,” and realist films. As I noted in chapter one, this realist mode is overemphasized in the literary representations of prison. In fact, the scholarly consensus around carceral literature is that readers won’t accept it if it does not appear sufficiently realistic: a readerly demand that writers respond to by rendering prison as immensely realistic: serious, sensible, necessary, inevitable, good. As I demonstrate in this chapter, this realist imperative is not only reflected in cultural productions by incarcerated people. Rather, the demand is made of incarcerated people because it is what is demanded of all cultural representations of prisons, policing, and law enforcement. However, as I also pointed out in chapter one, the realist literary mode is precisely that: a representation of subjectivity that posits itself as an objective view of the world. In this way, carceral realist literature offers readers a window into the carceral realist form of subjectivity.

When we examine carceral realism from an abolitionist perspective, we find authors theorizing prison as a social force that pervasively structures the society that employs it. This social force incubates violence, which reproduces itself through the racially-uneven production of death and the liquidation of the lumpenproletariat. This force habituates individuals to routines, reflexes, and impulses that facilitate the ongoing production of death: the hardening of racial lines, for example, or the violent policing of them. These habits and their production are experienced as a racial paranoia: a structure of feeling that orients, motivates, and animates the
defense of private property and the hoarding of resources. These paranoid habits materially transform the world so that it better conforms to its perspective, reifying this form of consciousness and thereby conditioning its reproduction. This is to say, in other words, that carceral realism refers to the naturalization of prison through the application of state violence and the internalization of the state’s prescribed codes of conduct. What’s more, we find these authors representing their condition as one that increasingly characterizes life in the free world.

In an effort to elaborate this concept, this chapter is organized into three sections. In the first section, I sketch a brief history of the modern carceral state, which emerges across the long 1960s before achieving hegemony in the early 1980s. I begin my history in the 1960s because this early period of development represents a moment in which the existence of prisons and jails was being popularly contested in the United States and, indeed, globally. As I outline this historical development, I hone in on the 1970s as a period in which the matter and meaning of incarceration was being fought over and I identify cultural production as a key site of struggle. The second section zooms in on this inflection point by performing a close reading of Edward Bunker’s 1977 roman a clef, *The Animal Factory*, which strikes me as the carceral realist novel par excellence. Though Dennis Massey canonized the work as representative of the modern prison novel, it has received little scholarly attention. I speculate that this is, in part, because it is riven with contradictions: within itself, and between itself and other works of carceral realism, including Bunker’s own essays and autobiography. Rather than try to provide an exhaustive account of the novel, my goal is to tease out these contradictions: to demonstrate Bunker’s points of similarity and difference from other work that makes equally legitimate claims to authenticity. In doing so, I hope to demonstrate the internal instability of carceral realism as both a mode of consciousness and a genre of literature. Moreover, I hope to situate Bunker’s novel within a
social world that collectively articulates a critical account of prison, which blurs the distinction between prison and the free-world. In my third and concluding section, I affirm this account of the prison as a social force by turning to a more recent work of poetry by a free-world author, Claudia Rankine’s 2014 *Citizen*. Rather than contemporary works by incarcerated authors, I turn to Rankine’s text precisely because it appears, at first, to be unrelated to prisons. However, by juxtaposing it with my reading of Bunker’s novel, I draw out these aspects of the poem so as to better demonstrate the stakes for readers. Moreover, this movement to a contemporary free-world writer highlights the ordinariness of carceral realist consciousness in contemporary life, and demonstrates the value of a more capacious understanding of carceral literature than has typically been employed by scholars.

A Brief History of Carceral Realism

Though he lost the 1964 presidential election in a landslide, Barry Goldwater nonetheless set the terms of political order for the next sixty years. Addressing his “fellow Americans” during a speech accepting his party’s nomination at the 1964 Republican National Convention, he noted that “the tide has been running against freedom.”172 He argued that this threat to freedom was embodied by street crime, black liberation struggles, and communism, which came to form a single racialized, politicized specter in Goldwater’s telling. “Security from domestic violence, no less than from foreign aggression,” Goldwater said, “is the most elementary and fundamental purpose of any government, and a government that cannot fulfill that purpose is one

---

that cannot long command the loyalty of its citizens.”

Blaming the post-war welfare state and Democratic politicians for allowing these ominous forces to metastasize, Goldwater critiqued President Lyndon Johnson’s recent declaration of a War on Poverty. In a moment of proto-neoliberalism, Goldwater insisted that what was needed instead was the ideological, legal, and material fortification of private property, which, for Goldwater, represented “the only durable foundation for constitutional government in a free society.”

In an effort to stave off future electoral defeat, Johnson ceded this ideological ground to his opponent, and in 1965 he declared a war on crime, noting that he “will not be satisfied until every woman and child in this Nation can walk any street…without fear of being harmed.”

With the passage of the Safe Streets Act of 1968, Johnson secured $400 million in public funds that could be used to modernize and expand local police infrastructure. These funds were administered by the newly created Law Enforcement Assistance Administration (LEAA), which helped local police departments coordinate with the federal government. “The result,” argues historian Elizabeth Hinton, “was a significant expansion of America’s carceral state: the police, sheriffs, and marshals responsible for law enforcement; the judges, prosecutors, and defense lawyers that facilitate the judicial process; and the prison officials and probation and parole officers charged with handling convicted felons.” Indeed, by the time it was disbanded by the


175 Quoted in Michael W. Flamm, Law and Order: Street Crime, Civil Unrest, and the Crisis of Liberalism in the 1960s (New York: Columbia UP, 2005), 51.

Reagan administration in 1981, the LEAA had distributed nearly $10 billion in public money and produced the largest law enforcement apparatus on the planet.\textsuperscript{177}

While the Regan administration used inefficiency, bureaucracy, and cost as its pretenses for closing the LEAA, the 1980s saw a rapid ballooning of federal police budgets and carceral infrastructure. The FBI budget, for example, grew from $86 million in 1981 to $181 million in 1991.\textsuperscript{178} What’s more, the Regan administration replaced the LEAA with various crime control boards, which oversaw the administration of state funding and allowed the federal government tighter control over state law.\textsuperscript{179} This reconfiguration of the state was aided by a reframing of the war on crime as a war on drugs, which had already been transformed into an existential threat to bourgeoisie life by Richard Nixon’s earlier war on drugs. By the Nixon administration's own account, this war was waged in order to repress the New Left and various liberation movements, and it served to criminalize those political tendencies and marginalize them in mainstream politics. As counsel to President Nixon John Ehrlichmann told a reporter for \textit{Harper’s Magazine} in 1991:

\begin{quote}
The Nixon campaign in 1968, and the Nixon White House after that, had two enemies: the antiwar left and black people. You understand what I’m saying? We knew we couldn’t make it illegal to be either against the war or black, but by getting the public to associate the hippies with marijuana and blacks with heroin, and then criminalizing both heavily, we could disrupt those communities. We could arrest their leaders, raid their homes, break up their meetings, and vilify them night after night on the evening news.\textsuperscript{180}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{177} Hinton, 2.

\textsuperscript{178} Hinton, 318.

\textsuperscript{179} Hinton, 318-321.

Building upon this ideological groundwork and the material infrastructure it conditioned, Reagan and his successors were able to expand the purvey of local and federal police in the name of ferreting out drug traffickers and narco-terrorists, which gave them pretense to harass, violate, and incarcerate black and brown people. This period saw the expansion of institutions like the Drug Enforcement Agency and the passage of legislation such as the Military Cooperation with Civilian Law Enforcement Act, which facilitated cooperation, coordination, and the sharing of resources between local police forces and the military.\(^{181}\) This phase in the development of the carceral state is best exemplified by the Strom Thurmond-sponsored Comprehensive Crime Control Act of 1984, which reinstated the federal death penalty; abolished the federal parole system; authorized the indefinite extension of pretrial detention; added a five-year minimum sentence to those convicted of a crime involving a firearm; and expanded the power of the police to seize civil assets. The consequences of this act was a flooding of prisons and jails, and by 1987, the prison population had grown to 581,000 people.\(^{182}\)

Though it was communities of color and poor people of every color that were disproportionately affected by this carceral expansion, the Clinton administration would subsequently position itself to the right of Republicans by casting Reagan’s successor, George H.W. Bush, as being soft on crime. This softness, Bill Clinton argued in a 1992 campaign speech, made “the poor…the minorities” especially vulnerable to violent crime, which was an

---

\(^{181}\) Hinton, 311.

infringement on their civil rights.183 “You can’t have civil rights without order and safety,” he told one Houston crowd, reasserting the idea that what police and prisons produce is “order and safety.”184 It was, from this perspective, communities of color who were most in need of the police and prisons. They were vulnerable to social predation. Obscured by Clinton, however, were the ways in which that vulnerability was produced by earlier forms of austerity, privatization, and deregulation. In this way, Clinton exploited the vulnerabilities created by earlier phases of neoliberalization by using them as the pretense for carceral expansion, thereby naturalizing these social problems and justifying the perpetuation and mystification of their causes.

Once elected, Clinton passed the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act of 1994, which added sixty new death penalty offenses to federal law while expanding the use of mandatory minimums and “truth in sentencing” reforms. The former took discretionary power away from prosecutors by obligating them to hand down minimum sentences, while the latter meant that prisoners had to serve out at least 85% of their sentence before they were eligible for parole. While it eliminated higher education for people incarcerated by the federal bureau of prisons, the Act funneled $9.7 billion of public money into state prison administrations. What’s more, the Act allocated $30 billion for local police departments and enabled the hiring of 100,000 new police officers. The effect was an increase in the number of people being channeled into prisons and jails, the length of time people were spending in prisons and jails, and the


amount of money being sunk into prison administration. This carceral growth was primarily fed by black and brown people, and poor people of every color, and its development was matched with an underdevelopment of working class and racialized communities.

The senate draft of the ‘94 bill was written by Joe Biden, who would go on to be elected president in 2020. “We should all agree,” he insisted during his 2022 State of the Union Address, “The answer is not to Defund the police. The answer is to FUND the police with the resources and training they need to protect our communities.”

Carrying on the intertwined legacies of Barry Goldwater and Bill Clinton, Biden presupposes that police and prisons produce safety and stability, and any failure to do so represents a breakdown or corruption of an otherwise functioning, good, and necessary system. Any problems they may have can be rectified by modernizing them, expanding them, ceding ever-increasing sums of public money to them. “We should all agree” with this carceral commonsense, Biden insists, presupposing a collective, national subject who shares this worldview. However, this consensus is revealed to be little more than rhetorical mystification whenever its ideologues find it more useful to trade on the repressive function of policing and imprisonment. Between 2011 and 2017, for example, Biden’s vice president Kamala Harris served as Attorney General of California—the most populous state in the country. During that time, she helped add Section 270.1 to California’s State Penal Code, which would allow local prosecutors to pursue criminal charges against any parent whose child missed 10% of the school year. Because “a child going without an education is tantamount to a crime,” as she justified an earlier iteration of this law, the proposed solution is the arrest and

---

imprisonment of the parents, their extraction from their community, the separation of them from their children.\textsuperscript{186} This destabilization of family life was disproportionately applied to students whose lives had already been destabilized by the force of law: students with an incarcerated parent, single-family homes, working class students. The law is purposefully wielded as a threat, which is backed up by the force of the state, and, when it is executed, it harms the very people it purports to help.\textsuperscript{187}

What I have tried to illustrate above is the dialectical development between the carceral state and carceral realism, which is a form of subjectivity that understands prisons and police to be the only realistic response to social disorder and therefore a necessary and inevitable feature of social life. Representing the carceral apparatus as the sole guarantor of security, safety, and stability for both the collective (the nation) and the individual (the citizen), this worldview has underpinned every expansion of the carceral state. As it has expanded, more and more people have come to have financial, ideological, and affective investments in its continued existence. In these ways, the ongoing reproduction of the carceral state increasingly suffuses it throughout the social body. Through this process, prisons and the police are rendered more and more durable, and they increasingly determine social life toward the reproduction of carceral realist consciousness. In other words: carceral realism is both an expression of the carceral state and its condition of possibility.


\textsuperscript{187} For a fuller examination of how Harris’ policies affected ordinary Californians—and how it was primarily applied to working-class communities of color—see Molly Redden, “The Human Cost of Kamala Harris’ War on Truancy,” HuffPost, 27 March, 2019, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/kamala-harris-truancy-arrests-2020-progressive-prosecutor_n_5c995789e4b0f7bfa1b57d2e.
If I have emphasized the role of Democratic or Liberal politicians in this historical development it is not because conservative, reactionary, or right-wing politics have played no role in the expansion of the carceral state. To be sure, Republican and conservative politicians and policy makers have played an important role in this historical process. In addition to Ronald Reagan and George H.W. Bush’s use of the US military as a global police force and their militarization of local police, President George W. Bush’s “War on Terror” has served as the ideological pretense for an extraordinary expansion of the state’s surveillance power and the legal justification for the abridgements of constitutionally protected civil rights. Following 9/11, the United and Strengthening America by Providing Appropriate Tools Required to Intercept and Obstruct Terrorism (US PATRIOT) Act was passed in October, 2001. Title One of the act enabled a rapid militarization of local and state police forces, in the name of “Enhancing Domestic Security Against Terrorism.” Building upon this imperative, Title Two expanded the surveillance power of the U.S. to unprecedented levels, while Title Seven enabled greater cooperation between local and federal police agencies. Seizing on anti-terrorist fear, the US PATRIOT Act also included provisions to fortify America from immigrants. Title Four waived any caps on the number of border patrol officers, and it provided $50,000,000 in funding to effectively triple the number of personnel. The following year, the Homeland Security Act of

188 A growing sense of this expanding apparatus, and the paranoia it induces, were reflected in cultural productions during this time, especially in films such as Steven Spielberg’s *Minority Report* (2002), Richard Kelly’s *Southland Tales* (2006), Alfonso Cuarón’s *Children of Men*, and Richard Linklater’s adaptation of Philip K. Dick’s novel, *A Scanner Darkly* (2006).

2002 created the Department of Homeland Security, under which Immigrations and Customs Enforcement (ICE) was subordinate. Over the past two decades, ICE has been given the purview to operate with impunity one hundred miles inland from all US borders, creating a vast space where federal police agents can enter private residences and seize people from their communities. Two out of every three people living in this country live within this zone.

Likewise, the US PATRIOT Act gave the attorney general the power to indefinitely detain any non-citizen they deemed a threat to national security. This lead to the creation of Quantanumo Bay: a secretive penal colony that the US operates in Cuba in order to torture prisoners outside the ambit of US law. Though the US commits these acts where its authority is not recognized precisely in order to evade legal oversight, President Bush’s Vice President Richard Chenney repeatedly insisted that anything the President does is legal by virtue of their being president. At Chenney’s direction, for example, Deputy Assistant Attorney General John Yoo drafted the Memorandum Regarding Military Interrogation of Alien Unlawful Combatants Held Outside the United States. In these “Torture Memo,” as they have come to be known, Yoo defended the executive authority to torture anyone the President identifies as a threat. All together, the policies and practices of the Bush administration created an environment in which Latinx and Arab people were assumed to be immigrants, immigrants were treated as terrorists, and terrorists were subject to extraordinary violence, isolation, austerity, and death. In this way, “terrorism” and “terrorist” were refashioned into metonyms for civil society’s exterior. Collapsing crime, immigration, rebellion, and violent insurgency into a single category, this rhetoric of terrorism rendered all challenges to the prevailing political order were seen as politically illegitimate and, therefore, the legitimate targets of violence that US state cannot (legitimately) use on its own citizens. Various levels of law enforcement began coordinating and cooperating, the police
became increasingly militarized, policing power was diffused through public space and social life. Surveillance was ubiquitous and the US government’s intrusion into individual’s private lives was taken as a necessary and desirable fact of life. Affronts to police were seen as rebellions with the possibility of social order. Those considered terrorists could be subject to a meat grinder.\textsuperscript{190}

That said, the Bush administration’s contributions to the development of the carceral state are well known. In fact, they are often taken to represent the whole expansion of the state’s surveillance apparatus rather than a particular acute moment in its history. Consequently, Republicans are often taken as the principal actors in the shaping of the contemporary world: as barbaric villains beleaguering the well-intentioned, but disempowered Democrats. Or, as political scientist Naomi Murakawa points out in her study of “How Liberals Built Prison America,” the popular discourse around crime and incarceration is often framed as an “assumed competition of Democratic civil rights versus Republican law-and-order.”\textsuperscript{191} This framing defines Democratic policy in opposition to that of repressive Republicans. Accordingly, Murakawa argues, “civil rights” and “law and order” are constructed as opposites rather than as mutually constitutive discursive formations. Consequently, the role that appeals to civil rights

\footnotesize

\textsuperscript{190} In the present moment, the salience of the War on Terror’s framework for understanding social disorder is worth considering. In the early 2010s, the mainstream language of opposition to white supremacy began to adopt the language of terrorism. “White supremacists are the real terrorists,” was a frequent refrain. Accordingly, when a white nationalist murdered nine black churchgoers in 2015 in Charleston, North Carolina, his actions were called terrorism. Wanting to appear to militate against white nationalism, the Georgia legislature passed domestic terrorism statutes months later. Most recently, these statues have been used to prosecute 42 people involved in efforts to prevent the bulldozing of a forest and the erection of a police training facility in Dekalb County, Georgia. Many of these people have been denied bail, and will be held indefinitely.

\textsuperscript{191} Naomi Murakawa, \textit{The First Civil Right} (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2016), 3.
play in the legitimation and application of law and order is obscured, and law and order’s role in outlining and materializing civil rights (or the lack thereof) is mystified. Likewise, the role that Democratic politicians and policies have played in the racialization of civil rights through the application of law and order has similarly disappeared, as has their role in the expanding and intensifying exploitations of capitalism. If the history I have narrated above emphasizes this Democratic role, it is precisely because that role has so often been minimized and misunderstood both popularly and in scholarship. Indeed, the expansion of the US carceral state has been a thoroughly bipartisan affair, and this nominal competition between Republicans and Democrats plays an important discursive function in the mystification of this consensus.

Supplementing this bipartisan political project, the culture industry has mass produced art and entertainment designed to conform to and expand it. “The new emphasis on the police is also reflected in the popular culture of the United States,” as the Center for Research on Criminal Justice (CRCJ) wrote in 1975. “Today there are so many television shows dealing with the police that it is hard to keep up with them, and movies with some kind of police theme dominate the neighborhood theaters.”192 While the novelty of this emphasis on the police is overstated, the CRJR rightfully identifies an intensification of this emphasis.193 During this period, an incredible


193 Consider, for example, that the Hays Code, which regulated the film industry, formally prohibited films sympathetic to criminals between 1934 and 1968, while the Comics Code Authority, which regulated the comic book industry from 1954 onward, formally prohibited depictions that would arouse either sympathy for criminals or distrust of “Policemen, judges, government officials, and respected institutions.” The Comics Code Authority even forbade publication of stories in which criminals triumphed over the police. For more on the Comics Code Authority, see David Hadju, The Ten-Cent Plague (New York: Macmillan, 2009), 291-292.
number of shows began airing that centered on the heroics of the police: *Columbo, Police Story, Barney Miller, S.W.A.T.*, *Starsky and Hutch*. This trend continued into the ‘80s, with shows such as *Hill Street Blues, Miami Vice, Cagney and Lacey, 21 Jump Street*, and the “reality program” *Cops*. *Cops* would run continuously from 1989 to 2020, when production was halted in 2020 in response to the rebellions that erupted following George Floyd’s murder by the police. Production was resumed, however, and the 34th season premiered on September 20, 2022. In addition to *Cops*, other high profile shows that premiered in the late-'80s/early-'90s continue to air regularly. *Law and Order*, for example, premiered in 1990 and multiple series in the franchise have aired simultaneously since 1999. It is as if “All The TV Shows Are About Cops,” as Hanif Abdurraqib put it in the title of his recent poem about the ritualization of police violence. This is to say nothing of the countless films and comic books that similarly romanticize and mythologize police officers.

Rather than adopting the depiction of the police offered by the *Andy Griffith Show*, which represented policing as mundane, unevental, and staffed by very few personnel, these shows and films emulated Jack Webb’s *Dragnet*, which began as a radio program in 1949 before being adapted for television in 1951. Running from 1951-59, and then again from 1967-70, *Dragnet*

---


195 It is worth pointing out that a tradition of police comedies does endure, and these works rarely demonstrate a commitment to realism. Instead, they serve to ingratiate the police to the public, which comes to see them as lovable, charming, and harmless. When these comedies do pivot to more “serious” addresses, however, they tend to adopt more realist aesthetics. Ironically, their function as producers of consent to be policed is clearest when they do so. For example, in response to mounting criticism that the show’s light-hearted, multiracial, politically progressive police department did not reflect attitudes, practices, or experiences of NYPD officers, *Brooklyn Nine-Nine*’s fourth season featured an episode where one of the lead characters is racially profiled and feel betrayed by his fellow officer. Recalling a similar exchange between *Family Matters*’s Carl Winslow and another Chicago Police Department officer from the 1994 episode
claimed its stories were, as its opening credits put it, “true–only the names have been changed.”
Set in Los Angeles and produced in close collaboration with the LAPD, the show offered
viewers a dramatic, realist portrayal of the police as well-intentioned public servants who work
tirelessly to uphold the law and, in so doing, produce public health and safety. It was, in other
words, propaganda that accumulated ideological, affective, epistemological force by producing
authenticity as a commodity.\textsuperscript{196} This trade in propaganda would be taken to its apex in \textit{The Wire},
which ran from 2002 to 2008. Widely regarded as one of the greatest television shows ever
made, the show depicts the police as desperately trying to safeguard society and achieving great
gains \textit{despite} a lack of resources and public concern for their mission. \textit{The Wire} insists, in other
words, that if the police make mistakes or fail to produce safety it is because they need more
resources and a more sympathetic public in order to confront increasingly violent criminals.
They confess that they are being assigned too large role in the fabrication of society. Like
\textit{Dragnet}, the show has been praised largely for its realism.\textsuperscript{197}

\begin{quote}
“Good Cop, Bad Cop,” the episode of \textit{Brooklyn Nine-Nine} stroke a somber chord in order to
narrativize a tension within the NYPD: there are bad NYPD officers, but most of them are not;
anyways, the police are good and have an internal process to deal with the issue. The following
week, the antics continued, and the viewer is reassured that they have thought long enough about
violent, racist, abusive police officers. But, having thought about it, viewers can assuage the guilt
they feel from looking away. \textit{Brooklyn Nine-Nine}, season 4, episode 16, “Moo-Moo.” \textit{Family
Matters}, season 5, episode 15, “Good Cop, Bad Cop,” 0:14:45-0:19:09.
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{196} For example, consider the copy featured on a 2002 DVD compilation of \textit{Dragnet} episodes
published by the Platinum Disc Corporation as part of its “TV Classics” line. It begins by noting
that “Dragnet was probably the most successful police series in the history of television. By
providing the prototype of the realistic action series, it marked a major turning point for a
medium that had, for its first few years, been dominated by comedy and vaudeville. Dragnet’s
hallmark was its appearance of realism…” The copy goes on to highlight the show’s aesthetic
features, which conjure its sense of authenticity, as well as the ways it would go on to inform and
influence subsequent objects of popular culture.

\textsuperscript{197} For a fuller account of this discourse, and the show’s use of this aesthetic, see Ryan Twomey,
\textit{Examining \textit{The Wire}: Authenticity and Curated Realism} (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020).
In addition to having former police officer Ed Burns on its writing and production staff, *The Wire* was created, and primarily written, by David Simon—a journalist who had spent considerable time embedded with the Baltimore Police Department’s homicide unit. Simon narrates those experiences in his 1991 book, *Homicide: A Year on the Killing Streets*, which had previously been adapted for television as the popular and critically acclaimed *Homicide: Life on the Street*. “Television has given us the myth of the raging pursuit,” as Simon puts it in the book’s opening passage, “but in truth there is no such thing…And there are no fist fights or running gun battles…”198 Intending to correct this perceived error in cultural depictions of policing, Simon offers a more intensely realist account of policing. He depicts it as a profoundly mundane task: slow, repetitive, and filled with paperwork, bosses, and the other drudgery characteristic of waged labor. Policing does not produce the results or the resolutions typically depicted in popular culture. Narrated as a series of day by day developments, *Homicide* follows a number of detectives over the course of a year and catalogs the granular details of their everyday lives. These details lend the work a concreteness that conjures a powerful sense of reality, which is compounded by Simon’s use of dialogue. Because it is made up of recorded speech, this dialogue features language specific to policing as a profession and the speakers interact as longtime co-workers often do when addressing one another. That is to say, in other words, that they don’t elaborate or explicate statements, concepts, or terms for the benefit of a reader. In these ways, Simon creates the sense that his readers are really there rather than reading artifice. He produces the reality for his readers largely ignorant of the banalities and specificities of policing, and thereby produces his authority on policing. Simon should be listened to, in other

words, because he really knows policing. When he claims that defunding the police is “shit,”
then, we are expected to listen and defer to him as the authority.199

While Simon’s realist aesthetics would carry over into the Homicide TV show as well as
The Wire, they bespeak a longer trend toward realism in literary depictions of policing and
prisons. As early as the 1920s, authors such as Dashiell Hammett were drawing upon their
experiences as public and private police officers and incorporating them into their fiction. More
recently, authors such as James Ellroy have cultivated a public image of being intimate with the
LAPD, which is then reaffirmed in the form of the fiction. Ellroy, for example, writes in great
depth and in great detail about policing in the 1940’s-’60s, which gives his novels a sense of
historical realism. They effectively conjure a feeling of really being there. In part, these reality
effects are produced by the postmodern form of Ellroy’s novels, which feature chapters written
as communiques, dossiers, government files, surveillance footage, news reports, legal
proceedings: genres that readers typically encounter as non-fiction, as truthful, as
authoritative.200 In this way, Ellroy participates in a long tradition of crime/police fiction that
trades on authenticity and realism—qualities that the literary marketplace is hungry for. “Violent
crime and the people who commit it continue to fascinate readers,” reads the subheading of a
recent Publisher’s Weekly article, which notes that 1.8 million print copies of “true crime” books

199 David Simon, “Self-appointed arbiters of who gets to speak: As someone who has been
writing/filming for the delegitimization of the drug war & resulting mass incarceration for more
than two decades, if I thought Defund The Police was a viable political slogan, I’d let it go. But
no, it's shit,” 19 Nov., 2020, 3:20 PM,
https://twitter.com/AoDespair/status/1329534943903543296

53 (2002).
were sold in 2018 alone.\textsuperscript{201} This speaks to an immense bloc of people whose diet of cultural consumption is dominated by spectacles of crime, which represents police as producers of public safety, which is embodied by middle-class white girls and young women, who are under threat from depraved criminals who commit heinous acts of violence. The danger is everywhere, these podcasts, documentaries, and books insist. It is ordinary, it is banal, so you must be ever vigilant.

At their most critical, these “true crime” texts represent the police as incapable of defending “society” from these criminal threats. They do not have the resources, personnel, or power to do their job. The ramparts, we are repeatedly told, must continue to be fortified.

In the 1970s, this general category of realist police/crime fiction was dominated by Joseph Wambaugh—a novelist and journalist who was himself a former police officer. Perhaps his most famous work is the 1971 novel, \textit{The New Centurions}, which explicitly invokes Roman centurions to frame its depiction of the police. They exist, in other words, to ultimately defend the people. Set in 1960 and tracing the lead up to the 1965 Watts Riot, the novel follows three officers: a Chicano officer, a middle-class white officer, and a liberal racist. Through these contrasting perspectives, Wambaugh takes a complex, if not critical, position. The police, as he depicts them, are made up of individuals who are well-intentioned but flawed. They err, because they are human. “Do you like cops?” asks a \textit{New York Times} review of the novel quoted on the back cover of the 1974 Dell Paperback edition. “Read \textit{The New Centurions}. Do you hate cops? Read \textit{The New Centurions}. It performs an essential function of the novel–It takes us into the


112
hearts and minds, the nerves and guts of other human beings.” 202 By trading on his insider status and authority, which are conjured by a realist aesthetic, Wambaugh can credibly acknowledge that police sometimes make mistakes. In this way, he seems to be revealing a truth that police themselves typically conceal. Through this concession, he appeals to anti-police sentiment and seems to affirm the perspective of those distrustful of the police. In fact, Wambaugh’s perceived honesty—his willingness to concede to certain critiques of the police—was precisely the thing that made his work compelling to otherwise critical readers. At the same time, however, he appeals to pro-police sentiment by insisting that the police nonetheless serve an important and necessary function in the maintenance of order. 203 He reasserts their power even as he critiques it. Because he is seen as honest, his ultimately police-preservationist position makes itself seem the more “realistic” one.

Although the sheer quantity of depictions of incarceration still pales in comparison to depictions of policing, the latter’s growth in prominence and popularity has been paralleled by the former. Indeed, much of the representations of incarceration are “reality” programs, which claim to depict the objective truth of their subject. Much of the fictional programs about prison function in the same aesthetic register. Oz, for example, accumulated prestige on the basis of its realism. Rather than serving a critical function by exploring and analyzing the experience of incarceration, however, these programs often merely stoke fear about prison. Though they apprehend it as a violent place, they identify the prisoners themselves as its cause. It is a natural


203 For a fuller account of the role that detective fiction more generally has played in popularizing the idea that police work is ultimately scientific (objective), see Ronald R. Thomas, Detective Fiction and the Rise of Forensic Science (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1999).
phenomenon. In this way, these programs represent prison as something viewers should strive to avoid while, at the same time, reproducing the perceived necessity of prison—even if it is flawed. I explore this dynamic at greater length in chapter three, but suffice it to say that cultural depictions of prisons, as well as policing, have tended toward carceral realism with increasing intensity.

As a consequence of this cultural and political expansion of prisons and policing, cages have increasingly become “catch-all solutions to social and political problems.”204 Indeed, at the time of this writing there are approximately 2,850 local jails, 1,566 state prisons, 102 federal prisons, 1,510 so-called “juvenile correctional facilities,” and 186 immigration detention centers in this country. This is in addition to the 82 jails in Indian country, and the countless military prisons operated by the US abroad. This gulag archipelago is home to approximately 2,000,000 people.205 The literary critic Doran Larson often refers to this prison system as “fourth city,” because, with a population nearly that of Chicago’s, it constitutes the country’s fourth largest city.206 This carceral growth has come at the expense of other state capacities, such as when Alabama appropriated $400 million of its federally apportioned COVID-relief funds to fund prison construction, or when Texas appropriated $6.6 million of its COVID-relief to fund border construction, or when California dispersed COVID-relief funds to municipal governments like Los Angeles that appropriated 50% of its funds for the LAPD, which already has an operating

204 Gilmore and Gilmore, 142.


budget of nearly $2 billion.\textsuperscript{207} Rather than incentivizing teachers to enter or stay in the profession, or somehow improving the conditions of their job, Oklahoma Governor Kevin Stitt responded to his state’s staffing shortfall with an executive order allowing school districts to call in police officers to serve as substitute teachers.\textsuperscript{208} Many of them performed their new role in their police uniform. Meanwhile, Florida Governor Ronald DeSantis similarly proposed a number of financial incentives for former police officers to assume teaching positions.\textsuperscript{209} Consistently, then, public funds are shifted from the production of public health and safety to the expansion of incarceration, and the effects of those shifts are stabilized by expanding the presence of the police in everyday life.

As these funds continually get shifted away from public administration and resource distribution, prisons, jails, and surveillance are made more appealing for capitalists, because they are made durable as sites of capital accumulation. The state’s investments draw in private investments which draws in even more state investment, and so on and so forth. By the same token, the abandonment by capitalists has to be stabilized by the state. Perhaps the best example of this, as Judah Schept has recently argued in \textit{Coal, Cages, Crises}, is rural Appalachia’s shift


from a coal economy to a prison economy over the last twenty years. As the U.S. economy has shifted away from coal power over the last fifty years, capitalists have divested from mining. Consequently, communities organized primarily around that single industry have been abandoned. The state must intervene in the social fissures cracked open by capital. However, the only form of intervention offered over the last two decades has come in the form of prisons and jails, which makes these communities increasingly reliant on their flourishing. In this way, the state is producing communities whose ongoing existence is conditioned by the maintenance and expansion of prisons, jails, and all the suppliers, distributors, servicers, contractors, manufacturers, legislators, non-profits, and colleges linked to them.

Although liberal historians have argued that this expanding carceral infrastructure is a failure of rhetorical framing, others have described it as a provisionally successful campaign. Michael Flamm, for example, argues that Lyndon Johnson’s great error was in conflating law enforcement (the ongoing maintenance of social order) with warfare (a project that ostensibly has an end point). What’s more, the 1965 riot in Watts “complicated the White House’s efforts to separate street crime and civil disorder.”210 From this perspective, police became militarized in the 1980s through a quirk of history and a rhetorical misstep in the 1960s. However, as historians such as Nikhil Pal Singh have demonstrated, there has never been a moment in the history of law-enforcement where police and soldiers have been clearly distinguished from one another. Likewise, as sociologists, anthropologists, and historians such as Khalil Gibran Muhammad, Luanna Ross, and Kelly Lytle-Hernandez have demonstrated, there has never been a moment in the history of policing and imprisonment where crime has not been racialized. While I will

210 Flamm, 52.
examine these histories more fully in chapter four, it is sufficient here to say that I follow these scholars in understanding the war on crime not as the beginning of anything but as a key moment of reformation within a historical process of development that extends from before the founding of the United States and continues up to the present.

The 1960s and ‘70s do, however, represent a particularly fecund moment in the formation of carceral realism. This is precisely because it was a period of emergence: a moment in which this carceral common sense was being intensely struggled over; a moment in which the state has to invent new terms, new arguments, new justifications, new functions in order to adapt to changing social conditions. Campaigns to free Eldridge Cleaver, free Huey Newton, free George Jackson, free Angela Davis drew mass support and brought millions of ordinary people into contact with prisons and anti-prison political activity. Millions more witnessed the Chicago police department brutalizing anti-war demonstrators outside the 1968 Democratic National Convention. When it erupted in 1971, the world’s eyes were on Attica. As a consequence, writes cultural historian Lee Bernstein, “[t]he cultural meaning of prisons was up for grabs during the period, with sharply contested ideas about their function.”211 Indeed, in her 1973 book on “the prison business,” journalist Jessica Mitford was already asking whether prisons should be reformed or abolished.212 “A wild thought?” asked the Norwegian sociologist Thomas Mathiesen in his 1973 monograph, The Politics of Abolition. “Most likely. But the times need wild

211 Lee Bernstein, America is the Prison (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 5.

thoughts.” In the late 1960s, Mathiesen had been involved in the founding of several interrelated Scandinavian organizations: KRUM, in Sweden; KRIM in Denmark; and KROM in Norway. These organizations brought together academics, prisoners, prison administrators, politicians, and ordinary free-world people through popular publications, academic publications, conferences, and demonstrations. While this work would prove influential on Angela Davis’s 2003 book, *Are Prisons Obsolete?*, these currents were already flowing through the United States contemporaneously. “We believe that a society that must be held together by constant force or the threat of force is an oppressive society, and we do not believe that oppression is inevitable,” wrote the CRCJ in their 1975 study of the police. In their 1976 “handbook for abolitionists,” *Instead of Prisons*, criminologists Fay Knopp and Jon Regier declared that “Imprisonment is morally reprehensible and indefensible and must be abolished.”

Rather than a moment in which reform was undertaken in order to stabilize prison’s reproduction, liberal histories of this period typically describe it as one of failed reform. In his history of “the prison reform movement,” for example, Larry Sullivan argues that “In the middle of the 1950s, the ideology, if not the reality, of rehabilitation was firmly rooted in the practices of therapeutic treatment…By the end of the 1960s, however, political, social, and racial events had called into question the whole idea of rehabilitation.” Likewise, in their history of U.S. prison

---


214 Center for Research on Criminal Justice, 11.


riots from 1971 to 1986, sociologists Bert Useem and Peter Kimball identify an intensification of prison violence, and they argue that it was caused by two complementary social shifts that had occurred since the 1950s: an expansion of the rights and civil protections that incarcerated people believed they were entitled to, and a liberalization of prison administration. “Prison reforms had long sought to make the ‘rehabilitation’ of inmates the primary goal of imprisonment,” they write. “Now they were joined by lawmakers and prison officials around the country.”217 These well-intentioned reforms had the unintended consequence of producing resistance to incarceration, which threw the entire carceral apparatus into crisis. In response to this crisis, the carceral state expanded and became more violent. Sullivan echoes them, writing that “Convict solidarity actions, along with both radical and moderate penological theories, would help kill the medical model of treatment and usher in a new age of repression.”218 From this perspective, resistance to prisons, specifically collective action, represents a threat to the state and is, therefore, the cause of intensifying violence. This resistance from inside the prison is allied with reformist efforts outside the prison: radical and moderate, as Sullivan is careful to note. While it acknowledges the reality of repression, this perspective views it as necessary. Further, it views prisoners as responsible for it. They are perceived as the cause of their own immiseration, and even mild efforts to ameliorate their conditions are viewed with suspicion.

While I intend to contrast my position with theirs, I have no interest in defending the reform efforts that prison preservationists criticize. As Angela Davis writes in Are Prisons Obsolete?, the history of prisons is a history of reform.219 Modern prisons were themselves

217 Useem and Kimball, 10.

218 Sullivan, 95.

219 Davis, Are Prisons Obsolete?, 40.
founded as a reform of capital punishment and, indeed, every few decades brings with it efforts to reform prisons. Each effort has only served to render it a more permanent feature of US social life, and each effort has left the social conditions that produce harm intact. I elaborate this history in more detail in chapter three, but it suffices to point out the ways in which reform is an engine of prison expansion can be seen by simply considering the ways Useem and Kimball themselves advocate for reform. They write that “If one accepts our thesis that the cause of prison riots is the disorganization of the state, then it follows that maintaining a strong, coherent prison administration is the crucial ingredient in avoiding disturbances.” Reform, of a certain type, is here represented as the solution to the problems within prisons. The failure of (certain kinds of) reform is rearticulated as a justification for (certain kinds of) reform. The ideological function of these texts is especially salient given that Useem and Kimball’s text was published in 1991, while Sullivan’s was published in 1990. This is to suggest that their vociferous arguments in favor of modernization reassert the discursive and imaginative predominance of carceral realism. In doing so, they laid the ideological ground for the Clinton administration’s ‘94 expansion of the carceral state in the wake of 1992 L.A. Riots.

To complicate matters even further, some of the reforms being criticized by these historians are indeed worth criticizing. Indeterminate sentencing, for example, was introduced in the 1960s to give parole boards more discretion, and the idea was that prisoners who were able to more quickly rehabilitate themselves would be able to go free sooner than if they had longer, determinate sentences. In reality, indeterminate sentences were used to indefinitely expand what would have otherwise been short sentences. George Jackson, for example, was given a one year-to-life sentence for participating in an armed robbery that netted just $70, and he would spend

\[\text{220 Useem and Kimball, 277.}\]
the following eleven years in California prisons, eight of which were spent in solitary confinement. This is to say that this reform did, in fact, harm prisoners and prisoners did, in fact, riot against them—a point I reiterate below in my reading of Edward Bunker’s *The Animal Factory*.

Rather than arguing for or against reform, then, I take up an abolitionist position that distinguishes between reformist reforms and non-reformist reforms. This distinction was developed by the Marxist philosopher André Gorz in the wake of May ‘68, and it was quickly taken up by prison abolitionists. The latter, writes Mathiessen, refers to “goals which are subordinated to the facilities and presuppositions of the system and a policy presented by the adversary,” while the former describes reforms “not geared to whatever is possible within the framework of a given system, but to that which ‘should be realizable’ in a view of a human demands and needs.”[^221] Or, as Ruth Wilson Gilmore has more recently and more straightforwardly put it: non-reformist reforms are “changes that, at the end of the day, unravel rather than widen the net of social control through criminalization.”[^222] In contrast with reformist reforms that increase funding for police and prisons, outfit them with increasingly-pervasive surveillance technology, or render them more permanent features of the social landscape, non-reformist reforms scale back the state’s carceral infrastructure, reduce the carceral state’s power, or otherwise erode its permanence. In other words, non-reformist reforms are changes that threaten or undermine the state’s repressive capacities rather than improve or expand them.

[^221]: Mathiessen, 231.

This is not to say, however, that reforms deliberately, self-evidently, or discretely fall into one of these categories or the other. Likewise, reformist and non-reformist reforms are not characterized by the people who articulate them; it isn’t as though, for example, every position advanced by incarcerated people is necessarily non-reformist. Indeed, as Lee Bernstein notes, it was the prisoners at Attica who demanded that prison education be modernized, which is to say, shored up and expanded.²²³ A poetry writing workshop was quickly put together by local poet and professor Celes Tisdale, who traveled to Attica weekly for three years between 1972 and 1975. The work that emerged from the class was funny, inventive, moving, and challenging. The students spoke highly of the experience, and Tisdale spoke highly of his students, those “humanity-scarred men who must express themselves or perish from anonymity.”²²⁴ Challenging this anonymity, Tisdale collected his students’ work and published it in 1974 as *Betcha Ain’t: Poems From Attica*.²²⁵ Faced with dwindling funding and dwindling interest among prisoners, Tisdale ended the workshop in 1975, shortly after the book’s publication. Though it ended on bittersweet notes, according to the journal Tisdale kept at the time, both he and the students considered the experiment a success. “[T]hey touched me through their poems and taught me new meanings of freedom and dignity,” as Tisdale writes in his introduction to *Betcha Ain’t*.²²⁶

---

²²³ Bernstein, 75.


²²⁵ Long out of print, *Betcha Ain’t* has been recently republished by Duke University Press under the new title *When the Smoke Cleared*. All bibliographic references to *Betcha Ain’t* are to this new title.

While Tisdale claims that he was the first person to teach a poetry workshop in an American prison, he would hardly be the last. Nor would the poetry workshop be the only innovative educational opportunity offered by the state. In his history of prison-education reforms during the long 1970s, Lee Bernstein writes that “[b]etween 1965 and 1973, the number of college-level programs in U.S. prisons increased more than fifteenfold to 182…In addition, the National Endowment for the Arts funded the publication of prison works, while other organizations began major initiatives to create freestanding programs behind walls.”

Rearticulating the idea that the function of prison is rehabilitation, these reforms helped to funnel even more resources into prisons and jails. It was in 1971, for example, that PEN America founded its Prison Writing Program, which included writing contests, fellowship programs, and mentorships with free-world writers. This program and the others like it enabled incarcerated writers to develop their technical skills and it helped them find publishing opportunities. They were professionalized, and they were trained to sell themselves. Writing about the effect of these new creative and educational opportunities, the free-world poet Richard Shelton opened his introduction to the 1984 poetry anthology, *Light From Another Country*, by claiming that “the last ten years have ushered us into the Golden Age of penology, that changes recently effected in American prisons have been so dramatic as to establish a more humane and intelligent attitude toward incarceration, and that this anthology and others like it which have been published in recent years are results of improved conditions and goals.”

From this perspective, prison’s capacity to produce poetry is proof that it can work and it should be made to do so.

---

227 Bernstein, 76-77.

228 Richard Shelton, “Introduction” to *The Light from Another Country* (New York: Greenfield Press, 1984), vii. It is worth pointing out that the title of this anthology rearticulates the distinction between prisoner and free-world citizen as a distinction between two nations.
Indeed, these new educational opportunities did enable countless prisoners to study, socialize, and develop important skills that helped them survive in prison and make a life outside of it. In this way, these programs antagonized the prison’s conditions of reproduction. At the same time, however, they directed resources into prison, increasing the number of people and institutions who are invested in the reproduction of prisons and thereby rendering the prison more permanent within the social landscape. These programs served, in other words, to expand the nonprofit industrial complex (NPIC), which the abolitionist collective INCITE! defines as “a system of relationships between: the State; owning classes, foundations, and non-profit/NGO social service & social justice organizations that results in the surveillance, control, derailment, and everyday management of political movements.”229 In this way, these programs served to reproduce the prison and render it a more durable aspect of social life by making more people increasingly dependent on it.

While “these programs sought to provide non-violent outlets for radical ideologies circulating in American prisons,” they largely functioned to circulate those ideologies more broadly.230 This is evident in the changes undergone by the style and content of carceral literature during this period. In the nineteenth century, according to cultural historian H. Bruce Franklin, prison writing was typically of two kinds: those that shore up the prison’s legitimacy by attesting to the efficacy of its rehabilitative function; and those works of cheap entertainment, which function primarily to recount the author’s salacious acts for readers’ consumption. As prisoners and imprisonment were increasingly politicized across the long 1960s, prison writing was


230 Bernstein, 77.
similarly affected. “With this shift,” wrote Franklin in 1978, “literature by convicts became increasingly a form of protest literature against the brutality of prisons and sometimes against the prison system itself.”

Indeed, critiques of prison life were abundant in the carceral literature of this period. While some of these critiques were straightforward, such as when George Jackson wrote that “The government of the U.S.A. and all that it stands for, all that it represents, must be destroyed,” others were more ambiguous and ambivalent. In his 1973 play *Short Eyes*, for example, Miguel Piñero dramatizes the murder of a pedophile by other prisoners. Through the interactions between characters, Piñero asks the reader to consider the conditions that lead them all together, the relations between them, and how the state determines both. “What have we done?” one prisoner laments to himself during the play’s epilogue, collectivizing responsibility for what has transpired—a sharp contrast with the state’s individuation and privatization of guilt.

Other incarcerated writers developed even more ambivalent critiques, such as when Etheridge Knight describes, in his poem “On The Yard,” how “A slim/ young fascist” asks why he ain’t “doing something.” When the narrator insists that studying is *doing* something (as in, doing something to ameliorate the conditions of confinement), the “beautiful fascist/ didn’t buy/ it—nor/ did I/ completely.” While he identifies prison as a site of fascism, Knight also expresses pessimism about the liberatory potential of individual self-development. In this way, he expresses a critical attitude towards prison and, at the same time, a cynicism about the

---

231 Franklin, *The Victim*, 135.


possibilities for liberation that have been prescribed to him. He lingers on the possibility that reading and writing are not liberation, and he clings to the possibility that they might be.

Although these critical attitudes were common amongst incarcerated authors during this period, they were not necessarily that common amongst incarcerated people more generally. In her 1978 essay, “Women in Prison,” for example, Assata Shakur offers a critique of incarceration as a substitute for socially useful infrastructure, such as housing, healthcare, and drug rehabilitation. Writing from Rikers Island, she arrives at her critique by surveying the ways in which the women she is caged with understand their situation. “Feminism,” she observes, “the women’s liberation movement and the gay liberation movement are worlds away from women at Riker’s… The black liberation struggle is equally removed from the lives of women at Rikers.”

In this way, the average prisoner is no different from the average free-world citizen insofar as their political affiliations are attenuated and contradictory. Like many Americans, the incarcerated women “do not examine the cause or source of oppression. There is no sense of class struggle.” Though they appear to have “no sense,” “no definition” of communism, “they consider it a bad thing.” Through the living of their ordinary lives, in other words, they have acquired a political perspective that conceals its politics. Instead, it appears as non-political, as objective, as natural. Shakur goes on to write that “Police are hated. Yet, during cop and robber

---


236 Shakur, 12. While Shakur distinguishes this situation from that of men’s prisons, which are, for her, characterized by the presence of “revolutionary rhetoric” and “study groups,” there is no evidence to suggest that the average prisoner in a men’s facility is any more militant or political than the average prisoner in a women’s facility (12).

237 Shakur, 12.
movies, some cheer loudly for the cops.” This is to say that within prisons, and amongst prisoners, there is a dissonance between their thoughts and feelings, their descriptions and their analysis, a contradiction within and between themselves. They themselves are fully capable of expressing an unconscious desire for and commitment to the reproduction of the very institution immiserating them. Even among those who best know the brutality of the police, there is a reflexive enjoyment, an acceptance of the legitimacy of the police, a reassertion of their role in stabilizing a social order.

By drawing our attention to these contradictions, and the role of culture in mediating them, Shakur underscores the contradictory nature of reality: the ways in which the individuals, groups, and institutions contradict themselves and one another for various reasons, across time and geography; the ways in which thought and action contradict one another; the ways in which ideology and affect contradict one another. Because realism represents a subjective view of reality as an objective one, this inconsistency in reality is something toward which realism inexorably moves and something it can never arrive at. As it more closely approximates this subjective dimension of reality, for instance, realism increasingly takes on a sense of objectivity. Inversely and ironically, then, realist works can strengthen their claims of objectivity only by becoming more intensely subjective: more concrete, more detailed, more specific; its perspective more deeply embedded in everyday life; its depictions hewing ever closer to the expectations and preconceptions of its reader. In this way, carceral realism is structured by a contradiction wherein the more realistic a work, the more it undermines the reality of prisons. By attending to the contingency comprising experience, it interrupts its own sense of necessity. In order to heighten

---

238 Shakur, 12.
and deepen the contradictions within carceral realism, I turn now to Edward Bunker’s 1977 novel, *The Animal Factory*.

**The Production of Carceral Consciousness**

Novelist William Styron begins his introduction to Edward Bunker’s 2000 autobiography, *Education of a Felon*, by describing Bunker as “one of a small handful of American writers who have created authentic literature out of their experience.” On this account, Bunker is worth reading because he has transformed his experiences of incarceration into “authentic literature”: something that grasps an objective truth even as it depicts events that may have never actually occurred. Accordingly, Bunker represents a particularly generative site for thinking about prisons and literature—not because Styron’s claim is necessarily true but because he locates the value of Bunker’s work in its fidelity to reality. In this way, Styron’s claim is a synecdoche for a broader critical discourse on Bunker and his work. For example, in a blurb featured prominently on Bunker’s publisher’s website and in their posthumous release of his juvenile novel, *Stark*, novelist James Ellroy describes Bunker’s books as “criminal classics: novels about criminals, written by an ex-criminal, from the unregenerately criminal viewpoint.” The *L.A. Times* similarly emphasized the objectivity of Bunker’s work in their

---


2005 eulogy, describing his “realistic novels about crime.”\textsuperscript{241} Five years earlier, \textit{N.Y. Times} book critic Michael Sia had prefigured these descriptions when he revisited Bunker’s 1977 novel, \textit{The Animal Factory}, and insisted that the “gritty prison novel…rings with an unsurprising authenticity.”\textsuperscript{242} A contemporaneous review of \textit{The Animal Factory} by an anonymous critic at \textit{The New Yorker} prefigures these more recent claims, noting that the novel “overwhelms not only by its authenticity but also by its literary art.”\textsuperscript{243} Though it is misattributed to \textit{The New York Times}, this line appears on the back cover of Dell Book’s 1979 mass market paperback edition of the novel. On the first page of that very same edition, a summary of the book’s plot is prefaced with a blurb from a \textit{Booklist} review, which hailed the novel as an “authentic portrayal of prison life.” This language of authenticity, in other words, comes to structure \textit{The Animal Factory} both as commodity and literary text.

Despite this reception in the mass media, and Bunker’s prominence in studies of carceral literature, \textit{The Animal Factory} has received nearly no scholarly attention: an oversight made more glaring by the fact \textit{The Animal Factory} is Bunker’s only novel actually set in prison. While critics such as H. Bruce Franklin, Auli Ek, and Howard Cunnell make mention of the novel, their


observations are limited to brief, summary comments or relegated to foot- and endnotes. This scholarly tendency is best represented by Dennis Massey’s *Doing Time in American Prisons*, which offers one of only two critical examinations of the novel and stands as the only literary scholarship on it. Situating *The Animal Factory* in relation to Bunker’s biography as well as his other work, Massey reads the novel as *the* representative novel of prison life during the 1970s. He locates *The Animal Factory* within a literary genre of prison novels by demonstrating the novel’s tropologic similarity to other work, such as Malcolm Braly’s *On the Yard*, and he traces how the novel depicts the changing conditions of incarceration. Evaluating the novel on the basis of its realism, Massey deems Bunker’s “more optimistic” ending a failure. He contrasts it unfavorably, for example, with the ending Bunker’s 1981 novel *Little Boy Blue*, noting that the former “contradicts expectations” while the latter features a “more realistic conclusion.”

Realism, in other words, is the index of *The Animal Factory*’s value, and its degree of realism is

---


245 Massey, 180.

246 Massey, 180.
determined by its conformity to readers’ expectations. It delivers on and confounds these expectations, delivering an *unbelievable truth*. It thereby exemplifies the contradiction at the heart of carceral realism.

Drawing on his experience in San Quentin between 1970 and 1977, Bunker’s novel crystallizes a key moment in the prison’s history and, indeed, in the more general history of incarceration in the United States. Recalling this period in his 2000 memoir, *Education of a Felon*, Bunker writes that while San Quentin had always been the site of “turbulent events,” “nothing…was both so wild and so hilarious as the time of which I write.”247 As I argue throughout this dissertation, this period was characterized by changes in the global economy and the US state’s role in managing it, which entailed a reconfiguration of the state’s carceral capacities. Echoing the poet Richard Shelton, Bunker posits that prisons used to prioritize punishment but now prioritize rehabilitation. He writes that, “From the early forties through the fifties, San Quentin went from being one of America’s most notoriously brutal prisons to being a leader in progressive penology and rehabilitation.”248 In a contemporaneous study on *The Politics of Punishment*, the sociologist Erik Olin Wright offers a critical rejoinder to this framing. Rather than becoming more violent (as liberal historians posit) or becoming less violent (as contemporaneous reformers posited), the only thing that changed during this period was the rhetoric around prisons, policing, and criminals. Drawing on his own experiences in prisons and conversations with prisoners and prison staff, Olin Wright concludes that “Euphemistic language and changes in official rationale for different practices do not necessarily reflect substantive

---


change in the practices themselves. The California ‘correctional officer’ is still a guard; the ‘adjustment center’ is still the hole; the ‘inmate’ is still a prisoner; and above all, the ‘correctional facility’ is still a prison.” Changes in terms are worth very little, Olin Wright argues, as long as the social relations their uses remained unchanged. While much of the language was changing during the late-1960’s/early-1970’s, those changes are often mistaken as changes in the nature or condition of imprisonment. Yet, San Quentin was and is an uncommonly violent prison and it did serve as an avant-garde role in the state’s strategies for managing violence, which were undergoing adaptations during this period. Accordingly, it served as the laboratory for administrative tactics that would be adopted by other departments of correction, as well as the Federal Bureau of Prisons. Even if its author insufficiently apprehends the changes in incarceration underway during this period, The Animal Factory nonetheless crystallizes and exemplifies them.

Written and set during the incipient phase of neoliberalization, The Animal Factory lays out the various features of life in San Quentin: its social structure, its values, its ethos, its genres of people, the habits that characterize them, and the processes that form them. The novel figures this social world as a “closed society that reflects a free society as a funhouse mirror reflects the human form,” which is to say that the inside of prisons reproduces its outside with various aspects intensified, shrunk, warped, and distorted. Rather than introducing social features that are not already present in the society that builds, fills, and manages them, prisons accentuate aspects of a social formation, drawing them out, foregrounding them, or otherwise rendering

---


them more acute. These aspects are thereby made more visible and more recognizable in the broader social formation. The novel, in other words, draws a structural resemblance between prisons and the so-called free world. On its account, the two social formations are conjoined and thereby mutually constitute one another.

*The Animal Factory* explores this dynamic by alternating between two perspectives on and in it: that of the young, middle-class, white Ron Decker, who is entering prison for the first time; and the poor, white, prison veteran Earl Copen, who “sometimes felt as if he’d been born there.” Prison life was natural to him. Bunker underlines the extent to which Earl has been institutionalized in the novel’s final pages, which see Earl and Ron attempting to escape. While Ron makes it out hidden in a garbage van, Earl stays behind to help ensure that at least one of them makes it out alive. “Aw, fuck it,” he thinks to himself, “I run something around here. I’d probably starve to death out there.” Fully habituated to the codes and protocols governing San Quentin, Earl forms and experiences what theoretical criminologists Joshua Page and Philip Goodman call a carceral habitus, or “a unique set of dispositions that shape conscious and preconscious practice within and beyond carceral institutions.” Addressing the criminological value of fiction, the pair contends that *The Animal Factory* theorizes this carceral subjectivity and the processes that produce it. However, they leave the elaboration of this content for other

---


scholars. Taking up this investigation, we can see that Bunker illuminates the process of
consciousness-production for his readers by moving between the carceral habitus of Earl and the
alienated perspective of Ron, and by demonstrating how Ron’s perspective changes over time.

As Massey points out, this oscillation and narrative development enables Bunker to highlight
“the disparity between appearance and reality in the criminal justice system.” However, this
movement between Earl and Ron’s subjectivity has a more radial function. It allows Bunker to
demonstrate how these various perspectives speak to and inform one another in a process
whereby a free-world person is transformed into a prisoner.

Early in the novel, Bunker frames this process of becoming naturalized to prison as a
common one. Becoming “indistinguishable from the teeming four thousand” on the prison yard,
he writes, Earl and Ron’s have their first conversation. “Once,” Bunker writes, “Ron used the
‘Convict’ is the term that solid dudes prefer’.” Conveying a speaker’s knowledge of social
relations, their capacity to circulate within them, and their affect toward the addressee, Earl
identifies some of the important information conveyed by slight differences in language. While it
may again strike readers as obvious that different words have different uses, the stakes are much
higher for Earl and Ron in discerning these ordinary differences than they are for the average

---

254 Massey, 158.


free-world person. These slight differences in language are matters of living and dying. In San Quentin, accidentally calling the wrong person a “weak, sniveling punk” would mean a violent reprisal and surviving requires knowing what words to use, when, and with whom. Learning San Quentin's world, then, is to learn San Quentin’s language. These details add a sense of realism to Bunker’s novel, and we can understand the scene as a moment where Bunker produces his novel’s authenticity for readers. However, we can also interpret this moment as a reminder to pay close attention to Bunker’s granular, particular choices of language, because none of it is self-evidently meaningful. We have to learn the novel’s world to learn its words.

Staying with this passage, for example, we can see that although Ron understands this correction of language as “the first tiny lesson, gently given, the forerunner of many,” the novel actually gives priority to work and labor. Narrating their conversation as a flowing recollection of jumbled details and thoughts, Bunker punctuates this stream of consciousness with two exchanges of dialogue. Earl’s correction of Ron’s language is second. The first erupts out of a conversation about Ron’s work assignment earning two cents an hour. “If it’s worth a pack of Camels, go to sick call on Monday,” Earl tells Ron, directing him to a convict clerk named

---

257 There is much to be said about the particular difference between “inmate” and “convict”: how, for example, is the language Earl uses to draw the distinction—“weak, sniveling” on the one hand and “solid dudes” on the other—related to the sexual hierarchy of the prison? Indeed, what does this distinction have to tell us about the formation of masculinity in prison? Unfortunately, any adequate investigation into the complex politics of sex and gender in prison falls outside the scope of this project. Fortunately, others have already done some of this work. See Elk, Cullen, and Irwin and Owen for how masculinity functions in Bunker’s work. For more general studies of gender and incarceration, see Stanley and Smith.

McGee who could help him out of his work assignment. “Actually, for a carton a month you never have to work. But it’s best to get something. Where you work is half the secret of doing easy time.”259 Earl had been accumulating these secrets for the last twelve years by working as a clerk for the 4:00-to-Midnight lieutenant. This job provided him with considerable privileges, and because of it, he had significantly more freedom of mobility than the average convict. What’s more, he carried influence with prison administrators, and he had a strong understanding of the circulations of power within the prison. Over this time, Earl had “learned that some convicts are more equal than others”: a social inequality expressed by the racialized conditions of work and relationships of labor. 260 For example, clerking jobs, which were the least labor-intensive and offered a prisoner the opportunity to cultivate influence, were exclusively filled by white prisoners, while labor intensive janitorial positions were filled exclusively by black inmates.261

Echoing Bunker’s description of the prison yard as “an anthill” from an Arizona prison, Jimmy Santiago Baca offers a critical rejoinder on this point with his 1979 poem “There are Black.”262 There he describes prison as “the little antpile” where convicts march in straight lines and guards fly “on badged wings, permits to sting.”263 He writes that in prison:


263 Jimmy Santiago Baca, “There are Black,” *Immigrants in Our Own Land & Selected Early Poems* (New York: New Directions, 1990), 45.
There are black guards slamming cell gates on black men,
And brown guards saying hello to brown men
with numbers on their backs,
    And white guards laughing with white cons,
    And red guards, few, say nothing
to red inmates as they walk by to chow and cells.\textsuperscript{264}

Although all prisoners share the condition of being incarcerated, that condition is not experienced uniformly across lines of race. The black guards slam shut the cells while the white guards laugh with the inmates. These banal differences constitute the most elementary manifestation of more significant differences in group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death, which is more viscerally expressed by the “buckets of blood” that are regularly hauled out of cells and the suicides that are described here as a matter of course.\textsuperscript{265} The inmates who survive this state-administered violence “become cobras sucking life out of their brothers,” and “they fight for rings and money and drugs, in this pit of pain their teeth bare fangs, to fight for what morsels they can…”\textsuperscript{266} The racially-uneven application of state power, in other words, produces a racially uneven terrain on which social life is made.\textsuperscript{267} The repeated materialization of the logics governing state-power reifies them, and these material conditions habituate individuals through a process that conditions its own reproduction. Having internalized the state’s protocols of racial hoarding, prisoners themselves then reenact them.

\textsuperscript{264} Baca, “There are Black,” 45.

\textsuperscript{265} Baca, “There are Black,” 45.

\textsuperscript{266} Baca, “There are Black,” 45.

\textsuperscript{267} Jack Henry Abbot puts it even more succinctly: “Now the prisons are made easy, because the pigs, I think, realize the value of keeping prisoners suspicious of one another and disunited” (129).
Although Bunker’s novel depicts this racialized configuration of social life, neither the characters nor the narrator indicates an understanding of it as an embodiment or consequence of racism. I contend that this is a function of Earl’s whiteness, which he expresses by casting his experience of work as a universal one. Although the novel elides Earl’s racialization, Bunker highlights the limits of individual perspectives in a 1972 essay for *Harper’s Magazine* entitled “War Behind Bars.” In a prefatory note, Bunker writes that “I’m white and I’m a convict, and this story is written from that view.”

Though the note was ostensibly written to anticipate free-world readers who may accuse him of bias towards prisoners, it also helps to explain the discrepancy between Bunker’s description of events and his conclusions about them. In this putatively nonfiction text, the guards are marginal figures depicted from below. Bunker describes looking up at them and seeing them look down on the prisoners through the scope of a rifle. What’s more, despite their failure to do anything but inflame tensions between racialized groups by meting out violence, Bunker continues to insist that prison administrators are more or less well-intentioned. He maintains this position even when he describes the state’s retaliation against black and Chicano prisoners for the offense of organizing an end to interracial violence. While he remains critical of the system of incarceration, he stops short of criticizing the agents, institutions, and policies that embody, enforce, and reproduce that system. He balances a general critique of incarceration on the one hand with a disavowal of the political nature of incarceration on the other. This is not to say that Bunker’s critique is somehow insincere; it is to say, rather,

---

that the racialized nature of his experiences leads him to understand those experiences in a particular way and to represent them in a particular light.

If we consider Bunker’s own analysis of race and racism in more depth, the contours of his perspective and its relations to other perspectives come into greater focus. In “War Behind Walls,” for example, he describes a historically new kind of black prisoner. This new kind of prisoner was not merely political, as black prisoners in the past may have been. Instead, this new prisoner had “no desire—no motivation—for anything except revenge and license for whatever they desire.”269 For these prisoners, radical politics is merely a vehicle for the actualization and justification of their most violent and immature whims. “Such personalities are often found in prison, where the flower of black racism is blossoming,” Bunker writes in a subsection entitled “A Religious Doctrine of Hate.”270 For him, earlier generations of political black prisoners, such as Malcolm X and Eldridge Cleaver, conserved the possibility of racial reconciliation. “Nothing is left but hate” for this emergent black radical prisoner.271

Conceptualizing racism as the mere surplus of racialized “hate,” Bunker equivocates between different kinds of the same essential thing. He posits black racism as simply the mirror image of white racism: produced by the same cause, equally as reprehensible, misguided for identical reasons, explainable by the same mechanisms, leading to the same ends. On this

account, racism is any action caused by any conscious animosity toward a “race,” which is taken as a natural and self-evident biological grouping. The reality of race is assumed, in other words, while concepts such as power, hierarchy, and any sense of materiality are absent from its definition. While he does not overlook history, the account he provides reduces historical forces to psychological deficiency. “Everyone understands that blacks have been brutalized by generations of institutionalized racism,” Bunker acknowledges, “and recently by inertia and indifference. What the sympathetic fail to grasp is that sometimes the psychological truncation is so great that it cannot be repaired.”

In the first sentence, Bunker conceives of the radical black prisoner as the historical product of social forces (“generations of institutionalized racism”). In the second, Bunker dehistoricizes and depoliticizes the radical black prisoner by making their behavior a function of their individual psyche (“psychological truncation”). What’s more, he describes it as something that cannot be positively changed (“cannot be repaired”). Bunker displaces the violence that produces the radical black prisoner, while the violence of the radical black prisoner is naturalized and rendered politically illegitimate. Once again, he stakes out a position that is critical but not political.

It is this perspective that leads Bunker to disavow his fellow prisoner, George Jackson. After a failed escape attempt that left four dead and Angela Davis a fugitive, Jackson was transferred to San Quentin in 1970. While there he was given a cell near Bunker’s, who reflects on Jackson at length in his autobiography. Referring to a guard that Jackson was accused of

---

killing, Bunker describes Jackson as “a man who killed people for no reason except that they were white.” Though there were no witnesses to the event, Bunker takes the facticity of the state’s prosecution as an article of faith and reproduces its perspective. Not only does he assume Jackson’s guilt, he attributes those actions to the race of the guard. In this way, Bunker imitates the state by mystifying Jackson’s actions and in so doing he obscures the fact that, as he himself puts it, “In Soledad a rifleman in a gun tower…killed three black convicts.” Even though he narrates Jackson’s violence as retaliatory, Bunker nonetheless concludes that his actions can only be attributed to anti-white animus.

This characterization of Jackson is hard to square with Soledad Brother, the 1970 epistolary collection that first drew Jackson national attention. In a letter to Angela Davis, for example, Jackson writes that “the blanket indictment of the white race has done nothing but perplex us, inhibit us. The theory that all whites are the immediate enemy and all blacks our brothers (making them loyal) is silly and indicative of a lazy mind (to be generous, since it could be a fascist plot).” From this perspective, the antagonism is not between people of color and white people but between peoples of color and a state organized by, among other things, antiblackness. Anyone of any color can rebel against the state, in much the same way that people of color can work to uphold that state. Racism becomes a matter of practice and state power, rather

---


274 Bunker, Education of a Felon, 265.

than identity or affect. While Bunker claimed to have read *Soledad Brother*, and to have found it politically agreeable if rhetorically inferior to Eldridge Cleaver’s earlier *Soul on Ice*, he nonetheless disavows Jackson as politically illegitimate.\(^{276}\) He projects his own understanding of race and racism onto Jackson, and, in doing so, participates in the state’s persecution of Jackson: the political project of delegitimizing and sanitizing the intellectual output of someone who really did pose a threat to the US state.

Although Bunker attenuates his relationship to Jackson in this way, it is Jackson’s analysis of racism as a function of state power that illuminates one of *The Animal Factory*’s key scenes. Early in the novel, word circulates about a strike, and the organizers call “on all convicts to either stay in their cells in the morning or not leave the big yard at work call.”\(^{277}\) The demands were simple: an end to indeterminate sentencing; the raising of the maximum wage, which was set at twelve cents an hour; and the release of all political prisoners and non-white people to “various People’s Republics.”\(^{278}\) In other words, the strikers’ demands insist on the relationship between punishment (indeterminate sentencing), work (their wage), and race (third world solidarity). Likewise, the strikers drew revolutionary lines of political affinity across designations of race, calling on “all convicts” to participate. One individual striker even tells

\(^{276}\) Bunker claims that *Soledad Brother* was “very successful without saying anything new. Eldridge Cleaver had covered the same terrain in *Soul on Ice* better. Both books took a Marxist position on America, calling for armed revolution and a communist state” (*Education*, 272).


others to “Get on over here. We all together.”\textsuperscript{279} While their picket line is comprised mostly of black prisoners, “a few whites were there.”\textsuperscript{280} Conversely, counter-revolutionary lines of disaffiliation are drawn along lines of race. As one anonymous convict tells Ron: “I’d go over there if it wasn’t all spooks. My fuckin’ partners would turn on me if I did.”\textsuperscript{281} These revolutionary lines are broken when a Chicano prisoner is killed trying to pass the picket line: a repudiation of scab labor, which is interpreted as race war. Violence breaks out and a cadre of guards decked out in riot gear immediately spill into the yard, segregating the space into various racial territories. Bunker writes that

\begin{quote}
The tear-gas grenades flew over the men, landing under the shed beyond the fringe of the crowd. The tear gas drove convicts crashing into others, sending a reverberation through the crowd and jamming bodies together again. The route of escape was through the gate. They couldn’t go down the road because the visored tactical squad was waiting with clubs and mace, so they surged down the stairs, some falling until another body stopped them.

They were herded like cattle into the thinning fog. All was gray under the lightless sky; the walls looked soft in the fog, lined by faceless silhouettes with rifles. The lower yard was big, and the convicts spread out like water on a plain. Everyone searched for a friend, sensing that this was a dangerous situation, for no guards were on the ground and those on the walls were too far away to see what was going on. It was a chance to settle old grudges. The law of brutality was replaced by no law whatsoever.\textsuperscript{282}
\end{quote}

Knowing that a strike is imminent, in other words, the guards lie in wait, ready to pounce. When violence does arise, they appear to exacerbate rather than obviate it. With rifles and submachine guns and tear gas and mace and truncheons, the guards lead the inmates through an austere

\textsuperscript{279} Bunker, \textit{The Animal Factory}, 83.

\textsuperscript{280} Bunker, \textit{The Animal Factory}, 83.

\textsuperscript{281} Bunker, \textit{The Animal Factory}, 83.

\textsuperscript{282} Bunker, \textit{The Animal Factory}, 88-89.
labyrinth of concrete that bottlenecks at various points, producing a crush of bodies slamming against one another. This controlled chaos inflames tensions between racial groups, and it creates conditions for those antagonisms to reproduce themselves through the enactment of inter-racial violence among prisoners. Incarcerated people are pitted against one another as an imposition of the state. Through this imposition, a class war between prisoners and prison administrators is transfigured into a race war between prisoners.

As the scene plays out, the novel oscillates between Ron’s perspective and Earl’s, and over the course of the violence, readers can see Ron’s consciousness conform to Earl’s. The veteran Earl thinks to himself about “how the officials had turned a strike against them into a race riot by the simple expedient of separating the two groups and letting nature run its course.” While the novel employs the term “nature,” it does not describe any phenomena that occurs irrespective of human activity. Rather, it describes actions that are (re)produced through a set of social conditions, which are imposed by the state. On the one hand, then, the use of “nature” signifies the ways in which the violence of the prison is naturalized to Earl’s carceral habitus; on the other hand, it attunes us to the novel’s demonstration of the ways in which that violence is naturalized through its repeated enactment and internalization. Building upon that insight, we can compare Ron’s perspective from the beginning of the scene and his perspective following it. At first Ron looks up the prison wall to see a single guard. “Did the officials know that was happening?” the narrator asks, adopting Ron’s perspective. “What would they do?”


After the conflagration subsided, Ron felt “certain the officials had deliberately turned a strike into a racial confrontation.”\textsuperscript{285} It is, in other words, the experience of state violence and its effects that shifts Ron’s consciousness. It is the experience of violence that naturalizes the prison’s arrangement of social life and its terms of order.

If the prison strike is a key moment in the formation of Ron’s consciousness, it is also a moment where the novel maps its analysis of prison life onto social life outside of prison. While Earl believes that a “strike was futile, yet at least it showed that the men had not surrendered. It would bring a lockdown for everyone while the leaders were rounded up, clubbed, and segregated.”\textsuperscript{286} Indeed, as the novel depicts the aftermath of the strike:

A hundred men were rounded up, three quarters of them black. Some went to the adjustment center, others to ‘B’ section segregation. The two hundred prisoners already in ‘B’ section heard the beatings and went berserk, smashing toilets by lighting fires underneath the porcelain and kicking it; the toilets collapsed. They hurled the chunks through the bars. They burned mattresses, tore bunks from bolts on the walls.\textsuperscript{287}

Seen from the outside, solitary is a particularly violent experience. Individuals are taken from their routines, isolated from others with whom they have meaningful social relations, and subject to intense austerity as well as direct, physical violence. The experience is intolerable, as Bunker depicts, and it drives prisoners mad. Bunker goes on to explore this experience in more detail when, later in the novel, Ron and Earl are sentenced to several weeks in solitary—a “bare cell”


\textsuperscript{286} Bunker, \textit{The Animal Factory}, 66.

\textsuperscript{287} Bunker, \textit{The Animal Factory}, 97.
as the narrator calls it, a “strip cell” as the guard does. While Ron is sent to “a…modern cell”—“instead of a toilet there was a hole in the floor beside the mattress”—Earl is sent to a somehow even more austere cell. There, he turns his mind’s eye inward, probing his thoughts and feelings, scanning his own attitude toward the awful situation. On the surface was a sheen of calm, even of indifference, but he could sense that deep within was a volcano of despair waiting to erupt. Indeed, that had been the real motive for his quick cursing of the guard minutes ago. Because he couldn’t handle despair. It would become nihilistic rage; it always happened when he was trapped, and he had never been so completely trapped as now.

As the novel reiterates here, the experience of solitary confinement is both physically and psychologically torturous. Echoing the descriptions offered by other authors incarcerated during this period, Bunker depicts it as a space of intense confinement, where individuals are alienated from others, their sense of time, and even their sense of self. The space is cold and colorless, and it lacks even those minimal comforts offered by a typical prison cell: a cellmate, the noise of human activity, the sight of the yard. Moreover, those in solitary confinement are forced to eat and relieve themselves in the same small space: a vector for disease and despair. Ultimately, solitary confinement functions to break down prisoners who have not yet been broken down by general prison life. They are treated like shit, and made to live in and near shit, made to understand themselves as shit: a noun that I intentionally employ to convey the vulgarity and

291 See George Jackson, Soledad, 21; Baca, A Place to Stand, 122; Abbott, 45; and Leonard Peltier, Prison Writings: My List is My Sun Dance (New York: St. Martin’s, 1999), 203.
obscenity that inheres in this space. While Ron and Earl are sent here after defending themselves, the novel notes that solitary is most commonly applied to black, political prisoners. Ron, for instance, is kept “on the floor where militant revolutionaries were usually kept, nearly all of them black…”292 From this observation we can glean the fact that this prison most intensely brutalizes those prisoners who offer the most resistance to brutality: a political commitment that the prison racializes as black, and which is most acutely embodied in the political struggles of black prisoners.

*The Animal Factory* hereby suggests that we understand solitary as the ultimate expression of prison administration in much the same way that Jackson describes prison as the ultimate expression of law: a cage within the cage, which functions in relation to prison the way prison functions in relation to the so-called free world.293 This punishment takes the form of austerity and direct violence, and such an intensification is intended to change individuals’ very being, to remold them into model prisoners in the way that prison ostensibly functions to mold prisoners into model citizens. The violence targets those responsible for challenging the prison’s codes of conduct: the terms of social order imposed by the prison. Any efforts to challenge those social relations—to build lines of political affinity across lines of race, for example, or to contest the conditions of work—are met with an intensification of punishment.


However, the novel does not merely employ solitary confinement as a metaphor for prisons in general. It goes further in its analysis of prison’s relationship to the so-called free world, illustrating how prison continues to shape various aspects of individuals’ lives after their release: the kinds of jobs they are expected to have, the kinds of places they are free to go, how they are free to behave. Recalling the difficulty of making a life after prison and thereby staying out of it, the long-term prisoner Paul tells Ron that:

“Maybe one in ten thousand gets out and makes it, gets back in, makes the—” he gestured with two fingers on each hand to indicate quotation marks—“middle class.’ But society never forgives and forgets the rest of us. It will let us stay free if we accept being pieces of shit. It’ll let you shine shoes or wash cars or fry hamburgers. That’s for white ex-cons. Think what it is to be black and an ex-convict, and probably uneducated.”

The experience of incarceration persists after the literal confinement has ended, and formerly incarcerated people are stigmatized by bourgeois society. They are relegated to blue-collar jobs, or manual labor, and they are asked to internalize their low position in social hierarchy. In other words, incarceration determines an individual’s conditions of work—the kind of work they will be able to do, the kind of work they will be offered, the kind of work they will be expected to accept, as well as the kind of work conditions they’ll be expected to tolerate. Moreover, those options, conditions, and expectations aren’t uniform across lines of race. “Think what it is to be black and an ex-convict,” Paul says, presupposing a consensus that black individuals are, in fact, more vulnerable to predation than their white counterparts. By reflecting on the ways in which prisons and criminalization shape the world outside the prison, Bunker transfigures prison from a

---

building where prisoners are warehouse to a force that organizes social hierarchies and
configurations of labor outside such a building.

Writing in the mid-1970s, Bunker recognized the ways in which that social force was
shifting the free-world, even if he could not predict quite how it would change. Paul goes on to
note, for example, that “A hundred years ago you could go away [after you got out]. Now the
computers keep you from starting over…The employers all want a computer printout these days.
You can’t hide your yesterdays.” 295 Regardless of the reason, you could more easily leave your
past behind to start a new one elsewhere because it was simply more difficult to confirm or
disconfirm someone’s identity. Less personal information was collected on individuals in the
preceding decades, and law enforcement agencies weren’t able to share it amongst themselves as
easily as they can now. Likewise, employers required less documentation to employ you and
electronic record-keeping and banking were still uncommon. Documents were more likely paper
and therefore easier to forge. Accordingly, it was easier to find work without disclosing your
identity or having it checked, and it was easier to evade those checks. “By the turn of the century
things were changing,” writes James Kilgore in his recent study of e-carceration, which describes
the widespread use of electronic monitoring as a so-called alternative to incarceration. 296

Between 1975 and 2000, for instance, developments in this technology enabled the state
to track parolees with greater and greater precision. As the use of these technologies has grown,


296 Kilgore, 9.
the companies who manufacture and administer them have grown increasingly profitable. As they have done so, the state has increasingly turned to these companies as a way of expanding its carceral apparatus without the use of prisons. In part, that electronic expansion of the PIC has included expansions of pre-incarceration surveillance, which have come to constitute a significant portion of the US’s economy and, indeed, a massive component of American social life. Police departments, for example, are increasingly turning to private technologies to expand their presence in public life. Among the most popular of these is Amazon’s Ring doorbell. Amazon sold 400,000 units of their doorbell camera in 2019 alone, and they have formed nearly 2,000 partnerships with local law enforcement agencies to share their data. As a result, many departments are able to access Ring footage without even consulting homeowners. Though it is (nominally) operated by a private rather than public corporation, this network forms “the largest civil surveillance network the US has ever seen,” and they were described internally by an Amazon software engineer as “simply not compatible with a free society.” This is because this network exists to track and surveil people without their knowledge or consent. It does so in order to cast an anticipatory net, which catches criminals before they have committed a crime.

While citizens in the free-world have become increasingly surveilled over the last fifty years, an early stage in this process of modernization was witnessed by prisoners themselves. In her

---

297 For a longer account of how electronic monitoring and post-incarceration surveillance developed into an important site of capital accumulation, see Kilgore 44-48.

poem “Ultra Modern Concentration Camps,” for example, an incarcerated woman called Miss Black writes that:

Whitey say monsters are…
Vampires, Wolfmen and Frankensteinswho lurk around to kill!
But I say whitey is the monster!
The monster builds more and more jails
Now he’s built one big slaughter house to put
his victims in
He fronts it off with the ultra modern decor
“The super hip air in a vent”
and of course, a bug here and there, “more better
to hear you, my dear”
Hall to hall monitors that say, “I can see clearly now.”

Casting the state as the producer of death, Miss Black directs us to the prison’s technologies of surveillance as a materialization of that monstrousness. These technologies are represented as modern, which is here evaluated as bad, as the harbinger of more effective punishment. Originally published in 1976, the poem is collected in *Lyrics of Locked Up Ladies*. This anthology is edited by poet Walter Bradford, and its contents are drawn from the creative writing workshop that he operated at Cook County Jail in Chicago. In his introduction to the collection, Bradford recollects his experiences there and echoes Miss Black. He insists that “no mistake should be made about the structure. It is completely modern. Perhaps the most modern facility in the country” This modernity is characterized by alienation, which continues to push incarcerated people further and further from the outside world. Even the tiny beams of the outside that are glimpsed in face-to-face visits from outsiders or the presence of a guard have

---


been replaced by technologies that make the outside seem farther away and authority seem more omnipresent: “Little boxes with eyes that relay to those whose job it is to watch the screens each move a prisoner makes.” The result is the ongoing perfection of the panopticon, which has increasingly suffused the so-called free world.

Across his writing, Bunker illustrates the effect of an unfree society on the consciousness of individuals subject to it. “Paranoia was too common in this milieu,” as he puts it in his memoir. This specific term, “paranoia,” recurs throughout his oeuvre. In one easily overlooked line from The Animal Factory, for example, Bunker narrates Ron’s attempts to communicate his experiences to his girlfriend: “He described San Quentin’s hideous look, but he could not tell her of the wholesale violence and paranoia…” Indeed, this term recurs throughout the novel: San Quentin has “a paranoia-laden atmosphere” ; Ron laughs “at his own paranoia”; “the convict code had a streak of paranoia”; “I’m paranoid,” Earl says; Ron “understood black suspicion, but paranoia was a disease,” while Earl thinks “Paranoia is a necessary trait for a criminal”; and after a race war nearly breaks out, things return to their “normal degree of paranoia.” For Bunker, this paranoia is racialized. “In San Quentin,” he writes in “War Behind Walls,” “there is so much racial paranoia that provocation is unnecessary to incite the violence.” Produced through violence, this racial paranoia completely saturates prison life and thereby structures carceral consciousness. Whether from administrators or their peers, prisoners are trained to expect

---

301 Bradford, vi.
302 Bunker, Education of a Felon, 269.
304 Bunker, The Animal Factory, 65; 124; 131; 145; 150; 156; 243.
violence around every corner. The state uses this violence to enforce the racially-uneven access to resources characteristic of prisoners, and prisoners themselves internalize it by policing the lines of race that segregate them into smaller groups. This expectation of violence thereby helps keep prisoners in line.

By the end of the novel, the neophyte Ron has been habituated to this racial paranoia and his subjection to the prison is nearly complete. When he was first sentenced, the judge told him that he would reconsider Ron’s sentence after one year. As the novel approaches its conclusion, Ron is faced with the judge once again and asked to give an account of his experiences. He tells the judge:

When you sent me to prison, I was afraid of it. But I didn’t expect prison to change me…not for good, not for bad. But after a year I have changed and the change is for the worse…at least by society’s standards. Trying to make a decent human out of someone by sending them to prison is like trying to make a Moslem by putting someone in a Trappist monastery. A year ago the idea of someone physically, hurting someone seriously, was abhorrent to me—but after a year in a world where nobody ever says it’s wrong to kill, where the law of the jungle prevails, I find myself able to contemplate doing violence with equanimity. People have been killing each other for cons. When I was selling marijuana, I pretty much had the values of society, right and wrong, good and evil. Now, after a year—I’m being honest—when I read about a policeman being killed I’m on the side of the outlaw. That’s where my sympathies are turning. Not completely yet, but with seeming inevitability.

What I’m trying to say is simply that sending me back isn’t going to do anything. Prison is a factory that turns out human animals. The chances are that whatever you get out of prison will be worse than what you send in.  

While there are several aspects of Ron’s account that we might problematize—the distinctions he draws between the policeman and the outlaw, for instance, or the assumptions he makes about prison’s intended rehabilitative function—what’s important to note is Ron’s recognition that he

---

has undergone a shift in consciousness. State violence effectuated this shift, and it has naturalized seeing and committing racial violence. This experience just is what it means to be incarcerated: to be violated to such a degree that violation comes to seem natural. Evoking the title, Ron describes prison as a factory for producing animals: humans violable as non-humans because they are rendered more “natural,” which is to say, located in the state of nature rather than civil society. Located outside of civil society, they are categorically opposed to the law-abiding citizen. As a result of his sincere depiction of prison life, the judge finds Ron unfit “to live in society” and sends him back to the cage.307

The Animal Factory does not, however, represent Ron’s prisonization as inevitable, nor does it romanticize it. If, as I argued above, the novel’s final lines evidence the completeness of Earl’s carceral consciousness, the same scene of escape represents Ron’s refusal of this process. It serves as a moment in which the prison is represented as something that prisoners themselves ought to, can, and do break out of. Although Dennis Massey argues that “If there is a weakness to The Animal Factory, it is that Bunker resolves [Ron’s] dilemma too easily by allowing him escape from San Quentin,” I contend that The Animal Factory’s ambiguous conclusion preserves the possibility of Ron’s freedom, preserves the possibility that prison can, in fact, be escaped from.308 Rather than veering into sensationalism “in order to entertain his readers,” as Massey claims, this moment demonstrates the inevitable response to domination: resistance.309 In much

308 Massey, 180.
309 Massey, 180.
the same way that Ron refuses to subordinate himself to prison and its codes of conduct, the novel refuses to subordinate itself to genre expectations. It becomes an unbelievable text by virtue of its most realistic elements: its depiction of human’s will to be free, and their ongoing struggles to do so. In this moment, *The Animal Factory* heightens and deepens the contradictions that structure it, breaking radically with carceral realism by becoming excessively realistic.

Accordingly, this surplus of realism, which climaxes and concludes the novel, exemplifies a literary and cognitive mode that I explore in more depth in chapter five: abolitionist speculation, or, the capacity to imagine and compose life outside and beyond prisons and penal societies.

**What’s it like to be an American?**

Praised for its authenticity, *The Animal Factory* ends on an antagonistic note, affirming prisoners’ right to refuse the prison and its impositions: the racially-uneven punishment that subjects experience as paranoia. Moreover, the novel extends its analysis of prisons outward, making connections between free-world individuals and prisoners. Indeed, as the US’s carceral infrastructure has expanded over the last fifty years, governments from the federal to the municipal have continued to increase funding to prison administration and law-enforcement agencies. The result has been an ever-increasing number of people who draw their wages directly from prisons or indirectly from businesses that rely on contracts with prisons or law-enforcement agencies for their revenue. Prisons and policing, in other words, have become an increasingly reliable site of capital accumulation. Moreover, as the neoliberal economy has grown increasingly unstable, prisons and police increasingly serve a stabilizing function, and
surveillance technology has more intensely saturated social life. The consequence has been an expansion of the presence of prisons, the police, and the repressive array of the state in the everyday lives of everyone everywhere. Or, as Jack Henry Abbott prophesied forty years ago: “After us, comes you.”

An abolitionist reading of the novel leads us to conclude that, as it encroaches more deeply into every facet of social life, the expanding carceral infrastructure increasingly habituates free world individuals to the logic of prisons: racial paranoia and the hoarding of resources; the self-perfection of individuals as subjects of neoliberalism. This conclusion is borne out in Claudia Rankine’s award-winning 2014 book-length poem, Citizen, which affirms the presence of carceral consciousness in the everyday lives of free-world people. Though there have been a number of recent, award winning books by incarcerated writers, and high-profile books about the effects of incarceration on non-incarcerated people, I turn to Rankine’s poem precisely because it seems at first not to be about incarceration. Rather, as its title suggests, it’s about the social production of citizenship: the habits of body and mind through which a free-world individual identifies themselves or is identified as an American. Begun in the wake of Trayvon Martin’s murder and published in the wake of Michael Brown’s, Rankine’s poem cannot help but touch upon the racialization of American belonging. Over the course of the

Abbott, 21.

For recent examples of work by incarcerated authors, see Reginald Dwayne Betts, Felon (New York: W.W. Norton, 2019); or Albert Woodfox, Solitary (New York: Grove Press, 2019). For recent narratives about incarceration by non-incarcerated authors, see Jesmyn Ward, Sing, Unburied, Sing (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2017); or Tayari Jones, An American Marriage (New York: Algonquin Books, 2019).
book-length poem, most of which is transcribed from firsthand experiences, Rankine articulates a concept of citizenship that mirrors the reflexes and habits inculcated by prison administrations. In this way, she bears out what Bunker can only gesture at, illustrating how, as it has grown, the carceral state increasingly structures social life in the so-called free world so as to better resemble a prison.

Building upon and drawing together other scholars’ work on Rankine, we can read Rankine’s poem as being primarily concerned with the everyday production of citizenship through the enactment of racialized surveillance. If we do, we find her rehearsing scenes that would fit neatly in The Animal Factory. In one, she writes:

You and your partner go to see the film The House We Live in. You ask a friend to pick up your child from school. On your way home your phone rings. Your neighbor tells you he is standing at this window watching a menacing black guy casing both your homes. The guy is walking back and forth talking to himself and seems disturbed.

You tell your neighbor that your friend, whom he has met, is babysitting. He says, no, it’s not him. He’s met your friend and this isn’t that nice young man. Anyway, he wants you to know, he’s called the police.

Your partner calls your friend and asks him if there’s a guy walking back and forth in front of your home. Your friend says that if anyone were outside he would see him because he is standing outside. You hear the sirens through the speakerphone.

Your friend is speaking to your neighbor when you arrive home. The four police cars are gone. Your neighbor has apologized to your friend and is now apologizing to you. Feeling somewhat responsible for the actions of your neighbor, you clumsily tell your friend that the next time he wants to talk on the phone he should just go in the backyard. He looks at you a long minute

---

before saying he can speak on the phone wherever he wants. Yes, of course, you say. Yes, of course.\footnote{Claudia Rankine, Citizen: An American Lyric (Minneapolis: Graywolf Press, 2014), 20.}

Represented as a mundane experience, Rankine’s narration allows us to identify a number of key things. Although she never racializes her neighbor, we can presume that he is white, because of the way that Rankine draws his character through the performance of racial paranoia. He is white because he does whiteness, in other words, deputizing himself with the authority to police. Rankine’s neighbor mistakes a number of mundane behaviors as a threat, underscoring how viewing ordinary acts through a racialist lens gives them not only more significance but colors them in ways that make them menacing or scary. What’s more, we see here how the fear is articulated as a fear that property will be transgressed and property value threatened. This fear animates a rather mundane act, which as Rankine notes elsewhere in the text, could potentially subject the narrator’s friend to violence: calling the police. The poem’s narrator, “you,” reproduces this racialized impulse to punish as a reflex, which speaks to how these values have been internalized by “you” as well and reproduced out of habit. While scholars such as Karen Simecek have explored Rankine’s use of the second-person in more depth, suffice it to say that it functions here to weave the reader into this experience, to implicate them in this mode of consciousness, to interpellate them into citizenship.\footnote{For a fuller account on Rankine’s relationship to second person address, see Karen Simecek, “Cultivating Intimacy: The Use of the Second Person in Lyric Poetry,” Philosophy and Literature, vol. 43, no. 2 (2019).} The reader themselves, “us,” “we,” are
capable of reproducing these attitudes as a reflex, a preconscious impulse, a second-nature. Readers are implicated in the carceral state in and through their ordinary lives.

The scene described by Rankine reverberates with other free world incidents that circulate within the mass media, and it offers us a way of understanding them. In one high-profile incident in 2020, a woman named Amy Cooper unleashed her dog in Central Park in a violation of park ordinances. A passing bird watcher, Christian Cooper (no relation), noted the violation, and asked the woman to comply with the law. Instead, she called the police, telling dispatchers that “an African-American man is threatening my life.” Here, Amy Cooper draws upon and participates in a long history of white women mobilizing state-sanctioned violence by playing upon anti-black fears and composing white supremacist imperatives of the inviolability of white women. She wields the police like a threat so as to maintain her relatively exclusive and free access to a resource (space)—a freedom whose legitimacy a black interlocutor threatens simply by questioning. She thereby attempts to affirm her power’s legitimacy by enforcing it, demonstrating her capacity to deploy violence and accumulate social capital (sympathy, credibility). While her claims were fortunately belied by cell phone footage of the event, Amy Cooper’s behavior alone speaks to a carceral consciousness that self-consciously employs racialized punishment as a reflex, in much the same way that Rankine’s neighbor and narrator do. In this way, Rankine’s poem, like Bunker’s novel, attunes us to our own ordinary lives: the ways we act, and the behaviors we encounter, and, should we learn to recognize it, how those

---

practices, habits, impulses, reflexes, and thoughts are structured by and toward the social
reproduction of surveillance, the prison-industrial complex, racial capitalism, and the carceral
state.
Chapter Three:  
The Long 1790s

Although the modern prison didn’t emerge on the historical scene until 1790, it had fully saturated the United States and the American consciousness by 1850. As Caleb Smith observes in his cultural history, *The Prison and the American Imagination*, references to, images of, and metaphors for incarceration were commonplace in the nineteenth century. They appear in the gothic fiction of Edgar Allen Poe, Herman Melville’s allegories of modernization and capitalism, and Nathaniel Hawthorne’s romances of America’s historical past, as well as the poetry of Emily Dickinson and Walt Whitman. “In the same period,” Smith writes, “in the essays of Henry David Thoreau and Ralph Waldo Emerson, the vision of an entire society modeled on the prison became the background against which new conceptions of individual freedom would emerge.”

This is to say, in other words, that nineteenth century America’s conception of itself and its citizens was structured by the proliferation of prisons.

Indeed, Alexis de Toucqueville’s famous *Democracy in America* and its influential account of American life was itself shaped by prisons. At the behest of the French monarchy, Tocqueville and Gustave de Beaumont were sent on a diplomatic mission in 1831. Their goal was to tour and study the American penal system and its possible applications in France. In their published account *On The Penitentiary System*, they concluded that, “[w]hilst society in the United States gives the examples of the most extended liberty, the prisons of the same country

---

offer the spectacle of the most complete despotism.”

Rather than grasping this as a contradiction, however, the pair understood this despotism and liberty as consistent with one another. “The citizens subject to the law are protected by it,” they go on to write, ”they only cease to be free when they become wicked.”

On their account, freedom from the state is essential to American identity: if you are a citizen, you are free; if you are unfree, you are not a citizen. From this perspective, the state doesn’t just treat non-citizens as unfree, it also ejects people from citizenship by treating them as unfree. Through the deprivation of their freedom, the state transforms this putatively free individual into someone considered categorically unfree and, therefore, someone whose freedoms can be legitimately deprived. The deprivation produces its own legitimacy through force. Through this circular logic, Beaumont and Tocqueville legitimize a zone of despotism within the US while, at the same time, representing its citizens as supremely free to determine the course of their own lives. “If there is any country in the world where one may hope to assess the true value of the dogma of popular sovereignty,” as Tocqueville would go on to put it in Democracy in America, “to study its application to the affairs of society and judge its benefits and dangers, that country is surely America.”

While Richard Avramenko and Robert Gingerich have recently argued that the prison represents one such danger for Tocqueville, they nonetheless read Democracy in America as “the barest sketches of an ambiguous political terror.”

In contrast with the fleshly historicity of The Penitentiary System,

---


318 Tocqueville and Beaumont, 47.


which emphasizes the despotic features of American life, Toucqueville’s more widely read, solo-authored work privileges its democratic features. In this way, Democracy in America offers an account of American citizenship defined by a disavowed contradiction: American citizenship is characterized by a form of freedom secured through a form of unfreedom that any American might one day be targeted by—a fact that Americans must overlook. Since this contradictory conception of American democracy first appeared in English in 1838, it has played an outsized role in shaping self-perception of the US state and its citizens. Limning these perceptions, the prison gives American self-consciousness its form and content even as it mystifies its relationship to those things.

In this way, Democracy in America speaks to a cultural history of American nation-making in which the role of the prison in the production and definition of American citizenship is contradictorily justified and disavowed. Tracing this cultural history from the late eighteenth century to the present, this chapter offers a genealogy of carceral realism. What this chapter lays out, in other words, is the ideological, affective, and material groundwork that determined carceral realism’s historical emergence in the 1960s. It identifies structural characteristics of the modern prison that appear in its earliest theorizations and that reappear across reform efforts. To that end, this chapter begins in 1776 and explores the emergence of American national identity and its literary expressions. Focalized through a reading of J. Hector St. John de Crevecoeur’s 1782 novel, Letters from an American Farmer, which rehearses an influential account of American national identity. In the midst of the novel’s many contradictions, we find it producing American identity as a racial one. In the second part, I turn to Benjamin Rush’s role in the founding of the modern prison, and I explore his vision of the modern prison, its role in producing subjects, and its relationship to cultural forms. Starting from this vision, I trace out the
continual failure of efforts to put it into practice. The third and concluding section moves to the mid-nineteenth century in order to examine Austin Reed’s memoir, *The Life and Adventures of a Haunted Convict*. Written in 1858 but unpublished until 2016, Reed’s text illuminates the ways in which contemporary aspects of incarceration have longer histories than is often thought while, at the same time, speaking to the role that realist literary forms continue to play in the social reproduction of prisons.

**What is an American?**

While a putatively homogenous nation plays a crucial role in the logic of texts such as Thomas Paine’s *Common Sense*, *The Declaration of Independence*, and the US Constitution, cultural historian Caroll Smith-Rosenberg points out that the composition of that group was not self-evident. “Citizens for that republic had to be imagined,” she writes.\(^{321}\) In addition to the form self-government would take, the rights and responsibilities assigned to citizens and the criteria for becoming a citizen were hotly contested. Like the nation itself, these values had to be formulated and struggled over in and through texts, and “[n]o European American institution played a more essential role in constituting the new nation and its new citizens than its press.”\(^{322}\) Indeed, the press was the only common feature of all thirteen founding colonies, and many of the republic’s founders were themselves pressmen. Nearly all of them contributed to newspapers and magazines, and it was there that many would-be Americans first learned of liberal philosophy and the tyranny of monarchies.\(^{323}\) It was there that many Americans encountered *Common Sense*


\(^{322}\) Smith-Rosenberg, 23.

\(^{323}\) Smith-Rosenberg, 23.
and the *Declaration of Independence* for the first time, and it was there that the content of the Constitution was debated. When the debate was settled and the Constitution ratified, it included an amendment that explicitly enumerated the freedom of the press. If the republic’s founders were so conscious about protecting the press from the state, perhaps it was because they intimately understood the role of texts, media, and culture in the production and regulation of citizens.

In part, this textual production of citizens required the erasure of differences between Americans and an apartheid between Americans and non-Americans. As Smith-Rosenberg points out, race served a crucial role in this process by providing something around which American settlers could organize themselves while occluding the cultural, ideological, and class contradictions between them. In one illuminating passage of *Common Sense*, for example, Paine describes the English as a “barbarous and hellish power, which hath stirred up the Indians and Negroes to destroy us.” Counterposing “us” to “Indians and Negroes,” Paine implies that readers ought to understand “Americans” as European. Indeed, Paine writes elsewhere in the pamphlet that “we claim brotherhood with every European Christian.” Again, lines of affiliation are drawn among Europeans and lines of disaffiliation are drawn between European, African, and Native Americans. Perhaps more importantly, however, Paine imputes whiteness, blackness, and indigeneity with affective values. In the negative definition, black and native people are figured as the objects of fear. In his positive definition, Paine marks white people as

---

324 Smith-Rosenberg, 21.


326 Paine, 85, emphasis added.
the objects of brotherhood. The former is made the object of hate, while the latter is made the object of love.

Prefiguring the ways in which anti-black and anti-native anxiety would affectively structure contemporary American consciousness, Paine produces American identity by organizing it through white solidarity and anti-black, anti-indigenous enmity. Manifest in chattel slavery and materialized by anti-indigenous wars of genocide, these affective relations map the racialized relations of domination that characterized the late eighteenth century. Coalescing a putatively universal American identity, which represents itself as supremely free and home to the liberated people of the world, these textual productions exacerbate what Smith-Rosenberg identifies as a “tendency to exclusion, violence, xenophobia, and paranoia all national identities harbor within themselves.” In the face of existential contradictions, in other words, American identity structures itself in, through, and around racial paranoia—not as a contingent feature, but as an essential one.328

327 Smith-Rosenberg, 21-22, emphasis added.

328 As early as 1963, Richard Hofstadter identified this “paranoid style in American politics” in his speech of the same name. Distinguishing the “paranoid spokesman in politics” from the “clinical paranoid,” Hofstadter notes that they both tend to be overheated, oversuspicious, overaggressive, grandiose, and apocalyptic in expression, the clinical paranoid sees the hostile and conspiratorial world in which he feels himself to be living as directed specifically against him; whereas the spokesman of the paranoid style finds it directed against a nation, a culture, a way of life whose fate affects himself alone but millions of others. (4)

Hofstadter identifies the 1960s as a moment in which this paranoid style was becoming more prominent and commonplace in public life, but he traces its present manifestation back through the nineteenth century to a Massachusetts sermon given in 1798. This paranoid style is, in other words, coterminal with the nation itself. In fact, this paranoia, which functions to secure the borders of a social formation, are a recurring feature of all collectives organized through inclusion/exclusion. Prefiguring Smith-Rosenberg’s claim regarding the endemicity of paranoia to nation-formation, Hofstadter writes that “Americans have no monopoly of the gift for
Though Paine exemplifies the racial paranoia at the heart of American nation-making, we can identify similar, if not identical, articulations of American identity in many other contemporaneous texts, such as Thomas Jefferson’s *Notes and the State of Virginia*, William Hill Brown’s *The Power of Sympathy*, and later, James Fenimore Cooper’s *The Pioneers*.329 Nowhere paranoid improvisation” (7). While this influential essay affirms my claim that paranoia and American nation-formation are concomitant, I diverge from Hofstadter in two key ways: first, in the role I give paranoia in the formation of American national identity; two, the role I give the state in producing and reproducing this paranoid style. Rather than an aberrant form of American life, as Hofstadter describes it, my claim is that paranoia persists (and now dominates) as American national consciousness’s structure of feeling precisely because it is embedded in canonical texts such as Paine’s, which are often represented as documents of universalist liberty. As Hofstadter points out, the paranoid style is characterized by the presence of an enemy who is somehow superior to the paranoiac and inferior to them. The enemy is a threat, but a threat against which violence can be legitimately deployed (30-35). The enemy can be condemned as brutal, and, because they are brutal, brutality in opposing them is justified. In contrast with Hofstadter, however, I contend that we see this logic structuring liberal works, such as Paine’s. Moreover, my contention goes beyond Hofstadter’s analysis to claim that the objects of this paranoia are highly racialized. The social and legal incorporation of black people into America is taken as a symptom of creeping socialism, while even social democratic policy is criticized for the perceived non-whiteness of its beneficiaries. In this way, paranoia rolls American identity, white identity, and capitalist social reproduction into a single subjectivity. I further distinguish myself from Hofstadter by demonstrating how this unification of America, whiteness, and capitalism is reflected in and conditioned by a state apparatus that models paranoid surveillance and anticipation, that trains citizens to reproduce this anticipation of invasion, and that materializes it as a set of social infrastructure. Richard Hofstadter, “The Paranoid Style in American Politics” in *The Paranoid Style in American Politics* (1965. Reis., Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979).

329 For example, Jefferson writes in regards to his desire to emancipate enslaved people: “Why not retain and incorporate the blacks into the state, and thus save the expence of supplying, by importation of white settlers, the vacancies they will leave? Deep rooted prejudices entertained by the whites; ten thousand recollections, by the blacks, of injuries they have sustained; new provocations; the real distinctions that nature has made; and many other circumstances will divide us into parties, and produce convulsions which will probably never end but in the extermination of the one or the other race” (145). Or, consider the narrative role played by chapter 36 of Brown’s novel. There, a passing “female slave” inspires Harrington’s reflections on democracy. He takes pleasure in the thought of abolishing slavery, which raises the question: if it is so pleasurable to think about freeing enslaved people, why doesn’t Harrington emancipate his slaves? It is precisely because, within the diegesis, “the female slave” serves as the material basis on which Harrington’s life is built. He can only take pleasure in the thought of freeing her, because his pleasure is extracted from her. Even his musings on democracy and freedom are
is this dynamic better crystallized, however, than in J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur’s 1782 novel, *Letters from an American Farmer.* As the title suggests, the novel is a work of conceived on the basis of her unfreedom. The latter conditions the former. However, Brown’s novel also functions as an allegory of America’s formation. From this allegorical view, Harrington’s sympathy for “the female slave” narrates the American citizen-subject as a profound lover of freedom. In this way, Brown narrates an America that sees itself as both the liberator of servants and in need of servants at one and the same time. Consequently, he reinscribes the logic of slavery, which must keep enslaved people where they are and condemn the force and coercion required to do so. Though Brown would not use this term, and it is operative in his work at an abstract level, I contend that this enslaver logic, which anticipates ubiquitous threats to itself, is merely racial paranoia by another name. Unlike Brown’s 1789 novel, which doesn’t obscure America’s cultural and social heritage from England, Cooper’s 1823 novel narrates a romance, which serves to allegorize the legitimation of America’s claims to the land. After all, the book opens with unfinished argument between Judge Temple (representative of the state) and Natty Bumpo (the novel’s representative of settler assimilation to nativity) about who has a claim to the land, and it dramatically turns on Temple and Chingachgook’s struggle over newcomer Oliver. At novel’s end, Oliver is revealed to be indigenous and he marries Temple’s daughter: giving future descendants a claim on nativity. Chingachgook dies and Natty Bumpo disappears into the wilderness. What Cooper narrates, in other words, is a romantic account of settlers replacing Natives and usurping their claims on the land. I contend that the settler anxiety about ideologically justifying and mystifying genocide, and in about legitimating claims to the land, which Cooper expresses, is racial paranoia by another name. Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1785. Reis., New York: Penguin Books, 1999). William Hill Brown, *The Power of Sympathy* (1789), Project Gutenberg, 27 Oct., 2022, [https://www.gutenberg.org/files/69250/69250-h/69250-h.htm](https://www.gutenberg.org/files/69250/69250-h/69250-h.htm). James Fenimore Cooper, *The Pioneers* (1823), Project Gutenberg, Aug., 2000, [https://www.gutenberg.org/files/2275/2275-h/2275-h.htm](https://www.gutenberg.org/files/2275/2275-h/2275-h.htm).

---

330 Critics have historically resisted treating *Letters* as a novel and, in his 2013 introduction the text, Dennis D. Moore makes the claim that “practically all commentators refrain from labeling the collection…a novel” (xvi). The only citation is to a single dissenting article from Edward Larkin whose account of the novel complements my own. As Larkin points out, *Letters* features the hallmarks of the novel form: fiction, characters, relationships, dialogue, travel, irony, development, contradiction, heteroglossia. Moreover, as Moore points out in his introduction, Crèvecoeur was aware of and writing in dialogue with the novel form, which was continuing its steady emergence over the long nineteenth century. This is reflected in his disavowal of authorship, which I discuss more at length below: a generic trait emanating from the foundations of the form, such as *Robinson Crusoe* and *Gulliver’s Travels*, which famously attribute authorship to the novel’s protagonist. However, Crèvecoeur’s text also reflects the ways in which this literary tradition had not yet taken its contemporary shape. Composed of letters that Créveceur had written individually and then re-edited into a cohesive text, the heterogenous form and uneven tone of the novel’s chapters enable readers to take it as a non-novel. As Larkin points out, this has led readers, teachers, editors, and critics to excerpt the novel and interpret
epistolary fiction, which purports to describe the “American modes of farming, our manners, and peculiar customs.”

Published in the wake of US independence but set in the lead up to it, the novel outlines American identity and situates it prior to the formation of the United States. In this way, the novel functions much like Paine’s pamphlet: composing American national identity through the presupposition of its existence; prefiguring American identity and thereby writing it into existence. Written primarily for a European audience, the novel was relatively obscure in the United States until the 1830s. Despite its initial unpopularity in the United States, however, the novel still reflects many prevailing attitudes of its day. Crèvecoeur was, after all, a correspondent of Thomas Paine, Benjamin Franklin, and Thomas Jefferson, and it bears their influence even if its own immediate influence was relatively minor.

The novel is worth examining, then, for the way it represents the various competing, contradictory intellectual tendencies of its day. Moreover, it is worth considering for its contemporary influence. Today, the novel’s third

---


169
chapter, “What is an American?” remains one of the most widely anthologized texts in the American literary canon. For instance, high school students, undergraduates, and graduate students regularly encounter the novel’s third chapter “What is an American?” in the *Norton Anthology of American Literature*, which has featured this single, excerpted chapter since its first edition was published in 1979. A review of these anthologies, argues literary critic David Carlson, “reveals that many editors have left their readers with a distorted image of the text. Contrary to the impression that most well-known excerpts [sic] often create, Crèveœur’s book does not leave its readers essentially optimistic about the future of the nation.”\(^{333}\) Indeed, the novel offers an ambiguous, ambivalent vision of America’s present and its future.

In sharp contrast with Paine, for example, Crèveœur’s titular Farmer James articulates a distaste for conflict and an unwillingness to war with former countrymen. We find similar ambivalences and ambiguities in Farmer James accounts of slavery and settler colonialism, as well as in his depiction of governance. Crèveœur writes at length, for instance, about the repressive nature of cities and the lawlessness of its frontier—situating the archetypal American between these two poles of excess. As Smith-Rosenberg points out, these complications were characteristic of novels during this period, and they are precisely why novels such as Crèveœur’s offer a perspicacious view of their historical present. “Their failed closures, silences, and ellipses,” she writes, “resinscribed the contradictions of their times in far more accessible forms than magazines did.”\(^{334}\) Unlike a pamphlet, which strives to make a consistent argument, novels are more readily able to render contradiction and complication as a function of


\(^{334}\) Smith-Rosenberg, 40.
their literary form. Accordingly, novels are able to represent the dynamism, ambiguity, and ambivalence that characterize an internally heterogeneous social formation. It is, in fact, this capacity that distinguishes novels from other kinds of text.\textsuperscript{335} It is for this reason, argues the literary critic Susan Manning, that the novel “holds the germinating seed of America’s literary utterance.”\textsuperscript{336} Our contemporary ideas of citizenship, America, and American identity are already contained within it. They are, in fact, created by and through it.

Surveying the customs, attitudes, institutions, economies, and landscape over twelve “letters,” Crèvecœur offers a picture of American life attentive to the local particularities that differentiated kinds of Americans from one another. While life in Massachusetts was structured by whaling, for example, life in the Carolinas was structured by the plantation. From these economic differences came cultural differences—differences in custom, habit, dress, sense of the world—and Crèvecœur keenly observed how related but distinct forms of life emerged in these different geographies. Despite these differences, however, Crèvecœur posits the existence of a unified American people bound by shared communication, trade, ideology, ethic, and equality before the law.\textsuperscript{337} From his perspective, being an American is a matter of beliefs and practices: a form of life to which any person may aspire; and, as Crèvecœur goes on to write, it is a form of life that all (European) people ought join in. In “What is an American?,” for example, Farmer

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{335} For a fuller account of the novel’s heterogloss, polyphonic nature, see Mikhal Bakhtin, \textit{The Dialogic Imagination}, trans. Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 301-331. For the best account of Bakhtin’s conception of novels as having “novelness” (the degree to which the work features polyphony, heteroglossia, and dialogism) in varying intensities, see Michael Holquist, Dialogism: Bakhtin and His World (London: Routledge, 1990) 67-74.

\textsuperscript{336} Manning, xxxiii; xv.

\textsuperscript{337} Crèvecœur, 41.
\end{flushright}
James posits that “[h]e is an American who, leaving behind him all his antient prejudices and manners, receives new ones from the new mode of life he has embraced, the new government he obeys, and the new rank he holds. He becomes an American by being received in the broad lap of our great *alma mater.*” In contrast with this conception of American citizenship as universally attainable, however, Crèvecoeur goes on to describe Americans as “a new race of men.” With this use of “race,” Crèvecoeur speaks to a discourse that was undergoing significant fluctuations during this period. As Nicholas Hudson points out in his genealogy of “race” and “nation” in the eighteenth century, these terms had not yet settled into their contemporary meanings. Differences that had once been considered “national” were being subordinated to differences that were perceived as “racial”–a presumptively objective (because scientific) discourse that was being imported from scientific classifications of animals. National differences increasingly came to be seen as social rather than biological, and they served to distinguish different forms of life within a broader racial group, which was biologically, if not culturally, homogenous. However, as Hudson points out, “‘race’ and ‘nation’ derive from the same concept of ‘lineage’ or ‘stock.’” That is to say, that the modern concept of race (a biologically unified social group) was already embedded in the pre-modern term “nation,” and the logic of national differences (understood as biological difference) conditioned the possibility for race to supersede it. Moreover, this biological conception of national difference endures in contemporary usage. Consider, for example, people’s descriptions of themselves as, say, half-

338 Crèvecoeur, 44.

339 Crèvecoeur, 44.

Canadian, as though Canadian national identity is hereditary. This racial logic, which is operative before modern usages of “race,” explains how national differences don’t merely distinguish ethnic groups from one another; they serve as the basis for organizing those groups into a hierarchy, which is reflected in Crèvecoeur’s marginalization of the Irish.\(^{341}\) This logic of national difference is identical to the ways in which racial difference forms the basis for racial hierarchies. Writing at a time when “race” was ascendant, “nation” had not yet become subordinate to it, and the biological discourse underpinning both was even slipperier than it is today, Crèvecoeur betrays the mutual constitution of race and nation by talking about the one in terms of the other. Farmer James, for example, declares that Americans are “neither an European, nor the descendent of an European: hence the strange mixture of blood, which you will find in no other country.”\(^{342}\) This mixture, Crèvecoeur writes in the preceding pages, includes English, Scotch, Irish, French, Dutch, German, and Swedish people—a “promiscuous

\(^{341}\) Comparing them unfavorably to Scottish immigrants, Farmer James tells us that “The Irish do not prosper so well” (61). In contrast to the industriousness of the Scotch, James goes on to say, the Irish are overly-litigious drunkards with a propensity for violence (61). The Irish are, in other words, perceived as less hard-working than other Europeans and therefore less civilized. Citing folk knowledge, James observes that this lack of civility/work ethic may have been impressed on the Irish by England’s allocation of land in Ireland. What’s more, he says, there are “every where to be found a great many exceptions” (61). Nonetheless, the Irish serve James as the would-be Americans who represent the limits of American inclusion. They serve as an example of America’s openness to Europeans while, at the same time, demonstrating that American identity is a performance of moral values that not all Europeans can live up to. In this way, Crèvecoeur exploits the cultural malformations wrought by British colonialism in order to (re)produce the Irish as: ethnically violable/exploitable by other Europeans; but racially assimilable to European lines of descent. This representation of the Irish in Crèvecoeur’s work is important to note because, as I go on to write in this chapter, this mediating role of the Irish—not quite black but not yet white—is an important one in racialization of crime in the United States and in the application of punishment across race. While a full account of this meso role exceeds the scope of this project, it is important to note within this broader context of early American ideas of race, ethnicity, and nationality.

\(^{342}\) Crèvecoeur, 44.
breed” from which arises “that race, now called Americans.”

We can conclude, therefore, that Crèvecœur understands Americans as a biological community whose members share common lines of European descent. By using this rhetoric, Crèvecœur explicitly identifies certain bodies as capable of becoming American and implicitly identifies certain bodies as incapable: a capacity, or lack thereof, that he locates in their blood.

If Crèvecœur provides a biological answer to the question “What is an American?”, he provides a class answer, as well. Though he mentions the existence of merchants and lawyers, and depicts the distinct lifestyle of whalers, frontiersmen, and planters in great detail, Crèvecœur selects a farmer as his representative American. This is precisely because, as Farmer James remarks in the novel’s first chapter, Americans “are a race of cultivators.” Although it is the case that the United States was mostly rural and its agricultural sector dominated the economy up until the 1860s, Crèvecœur’s choice of archetypal American afforded him more than just representational accuracy. Making Farmer James the model American also affords Crèvecœur the opportunity to imbue the idealized American with Enlightenment values regarding land and labor. “The American ought to…love this country much better than that wherein either her or his forefathers were born,” Farmer James says, because “[h]ere the rewards of his industry follow, with equal steps, the progress of his labour.” In contrast with a European social order, which he characterizes as still semi-feudal, Farmer James describes American life as one where labor

343 Crèvecœur, 42.
344 Crèvecœur, 15.
346 Crèvecœur, 44.
and reward are equanimous. He imagines, then, an American subject who retains the product of his labor. Through this labor Americans perform civility. In describing Indians, for example, James casts the activity of indigenous people as something besides cultivation. Because they don’t farm, James concludes, Native children “live in sloth and inactivity” and they mature into a “mongrel breed, half civilized, half savage.”\textsuperscript{347} It is, for James, toil and productivity that civilizes an individual. By representing Americans as a race of toilers, he is able to represent them as the apex of civilization.

Because it serves as an index of civility, farming functions in the novel as the precondition for freedom. As James explains in his second letter, “On the Situation, Feelings, and Pleasures, of an American Farmer,” “What should we American farmers be without the distinct possession of that soil?...On it is founded our rank, our freedom, our power, as citizens; our importance, as inhabitants, of such a district.”\textsuperscript{348} Or, as James narrates later in the novel, becoming American is the movement from servant “to the rank of master; from being the slave of some despotic prince, to become a freeman, invested with lands.”\textsuperscript{349} Because it enables James to work, live, feed his family, and produce a surplus of goods to trade, in other words, possessing land provides him with social and political freedoms as well. After all, not being a tenant means being free from a landlord and all the petty dictates that relationship entails. It means not having to maintain rent payments or service debt, which gives you greater control over how you employ your labor power without having to share the yield of that employment. This gives you greater

\textsuperscript{347} Crèvecœur, 52.

\textsuperscript{348} Crèvecœur, 27.

\textsuperscript{349} Crèvecœur 58-59.
control over how you spend your time, which, in turn, makes you less vulnerable to political domination. Reflecting a settler colonial tendency to represent indigenous genocide in the past pluperfect tense, Farmer James rhetorically clears the land by insisting that North America is completely uninhabited.\textsuperscript{350} In doing so, he is able to imagine the freedom of land-ownership as accessible to anyone who wants it. If there is, as Farmer James says, “room for everybody in America” it is only because, as Farmer James claims, “thousands of acres [of “uncultivated lands”] present themselves, which he may purchase cheap.”\textsuperscript{351} In this way, Farmer James represents freedom as a condition uniquely characteristic of Americans; freedom as a function of land-ownership and toil; and land-ownership as attainable by any (European) person who may desire it.

As I pointed out above, however, Crèvecœur contradicts James’ characterization and explanation of American life in the novel’s depictions of chattel slavery and indigenous people’s ongoing existence. Moreover, these depictions are themselves riddled with ambivalences and contradictions. As we might expect, for example, Farmer James describes chattel slavery as “that shocking insult offered to humanity.”\textsuperscript{352} Just a few pages later, however, he contrasts Northern slavery with Southern slavery. “We have slaves likewise in our northern provinces,” James declares. “I hope the time draws near when they will all be emancipated: but how different their lot, how different their situation, in every possible respect!”\textsuperscript{353} While James begins this passage

\textsuperscript{350} C.f. Crèvecœur: “Forty years ago this smiling country was thus inhabited. It is now purged” (47).

\textsuperscript{351} Crèvecœur, 56.

\textsuperscript{352} Crèvecœur, 137.

\textsuperscript{353} Crèvecœur, 156.
with the hope that all slaves will soon be emancipated, he follows this claim with a description that not only makes this emancipation seem unnecessary, but undesirable. He describes a condition in which enslaved people themselves do not even seek this. “They enjoy as much liberty as their masters,” Crevecoeur writes, “they are as well clad and as well fed; in health and sickness they are tenderly taken care of; they live under the same roof, and are, truly speaking, a part of our families.”

They are treated with respect, and are expected to do no more work than their white counterparts. What’s more, not only does their condition enable enslaved people to enjoy the benefits of Northern society, but they are free from any of the responsibilities that would otherwise come with it. In the closing lines of the passage, James even goes so far as to say that slaves are sad to be emancipated.

As Jeff Osborne argues, this passage suggests that “it is not so much a question of slaveholding that separates James from the community of southern planters, but rather a question of proper management technique.”

Or, to put it differently, Farmer James criticizes overly-harsh slave-keeping techniques rather than the unequal social relationship of slavery. In this way, Letters From an American Farmer reflects contemporaneous debates regarding slavery and its role in the future of America. Echoing peers who were critical of slavery while themselves holding slaves, such as Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Rush, Crèvecoeur seems to lament the institution of slavery and the ways in which its practice contradicts the putatively universal declarations of freedom on which American national identity formulates itself. Rather than resolving those contradictions, however, Crèvecoeur

---

354 Crèvecoeur, 156.

355 Crèvecoeur, 157

heightens them: founding American identity on emancipatory labor while disavowing the unfree laborers whose blood lubricates the gears of its economy; lamenting not slavery but its perceived necessity for US social life.

We find similar involutions in the novel’s concluding chapters, which purport to be written on the eve of American independence. While he detests governments and therefore sympathizes with the revolutionaries, Farmer James cannot bring himself to wage war against people he still considered countrymen, so he considers whether or not to flee outside the ambit of the colonial settlements. In making such a consideration, he describes the benefits offered by indigenous people as including

the most perfect freedom, the ease of living, the absence of those cares and corroding solicitudes which so often prevail with us; the peculiar goodness of the soil they cultivated, for they did not trust altogether to hunting; all these, and many more motives, which I have forgot, made them prefer that life, of which we entertain such dreadful opinions.\textsuperscript{357}

In contrast with Benjamin Franklin’s image of the “noble savage,” Farmer James views indigenous societies as complex, dynamic, and historical. They offer many of the benefits of European civilization and few of the drawbacks. It is for this reason, James remarks, that many settlers join these societies while indigenous people resist and reject their incorporation into settler society. In this way, James figures indigenous life as similar to American: remarkably free and prosperous, and open to all who share its values and participate in its practices. However, in contrast with his account of American society, which all his readers ought to join, James seeks to be in an indigenous society without being of it. While he states that is goal is “becoming truly

\textsuperscript{357} Crèvecœur, 202.
inhabitants of their village, we shall immediately occupy that rank, within the pale of their society,” he goes on to note that he hopes that his family can “live in great peace and harmony with them without descending to every article” of what he describes as “savage customs.” This “identification with native habits and people,” as Thomas Hallock writes in regards to this passage, proves crucial to the ideological reproduction of settler colonialism for the ways in which it provides “authors with a medium that was flexible enough to establish a republican citizenry as indigenous to the continent.” By depicting indigenous people in this way, in other words, Crevecoeur represents indigenous life as a model for American life while rendering it something that settlers can dominate without being beholden to. In fact, their capacity to dominate is derived from a supposed nativity, which is secured through genocide.

In the context of these descriptions of chattel slavery and indigenous life, then, we find Crevecoeur articulating a form of American identity characterized by freedom, which is derived from toil on the land. However, as I have illustrated above, the labor that performs much of this toil is occluded while the source of the land is disavowed. Despite these contradictions, however, Farmer James declares that “We are the most perfect society now existing in the world. Here man is free as he ought to be; nor is this pleasing equality so transitory that many other are.” In many ways, this is indeed how James depicts America. On his account, for example, Americans

358 Crèvecœur, 208-209.


360 Crèvecœur, 41.
know “no strangers,” and “few crimes.” They behold “hardly any poor” and hear “seldom…of punishments and executions.” In many other ways, however, James depicts a society founded on genocide and reproduced through slavery (including their punishment and executions, which James famously records at the end of letter nine). In this way, *Letters of American Farmer* participates in a rich literary tradition that imagines America as utopia while, at the same time, obscuring the slaves, immigrants, dispossessed, and captives that structure such a society.

Expressing this American literary tradition, Crèvecoeur imagines a supremely free community of white people whose freedom is precisely the freedom to plunder, enslave, extract, dominate. Moreover, he yokes this freedom to a petit bourgeois form of consciousness: not yet capitalist, no longer proletarian. This early American petit bourgeois, as Crevecoeur describes him, was an independent laborer who fetishizes labor for its own sake, idealizes individualism and a vulgar anti-statism, and repudiates the industrialization even as it holds fast to the ideological conditions of industrialization. In this way, Crevecoeur articulates an American identity founded on a

---

361 Crèvecoeur, 55; 45.

362 Crèvecoeur, 56.

363 This tradition runs from John Winthrop’s 1630 Sermon, “A Model of Christian Charity,” which famously imagines America as the font of moral perfection, through to Willa Cather’s 1913 novel, *O, Pioneers!* It includes the pastoral and georgic traditions in American literature, which run through the work of Thomas Jefferson, James Fenimore Cooper, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Walt Whitman, Henry David Thoreau, John Muir, and Theodore Roosevelt, and it appears in more recent work, such as the short fiction of Maile Meloy. This naturalist/conservationist tendency in American literature romanticizes the land and, at the same time, takes the splendor of the land as a synecdoche for the splendor of America: its openness, its wildness, and the freedom these things are intended to represent.

364 On this point, Crèvecoeur exemplifies what Ikyo Day, in her discussion of *Walden*, calls romantic anticapitalism: “the misperception of the appearance of capitalist relations for their
disavowal of capitalism’s excesses, depredations, exploitations, dispossessions and an idealization of its benefits. Due to economic reconfigurations, the ideal of the self-sufficient farmer no longer functions in the contemporary era. Rather, that image has been replaced with the image of the self-sufficient (and, therefore, self-liberating) entrepreneur. From this angle, however, we can recognize how the image of the self-fashioning, self-proprietor that Crèvecoeur describes continues to function in contemporary life under different economic conditions.

Although today’s readers well understand Crèvecoeur’s letters as fiction, it is clear that there was some confusion among its contemporary readers. In a 1782 review, Gentleman’s Magazine felt convinced that the author “was a witness to the dismal fact he relates.” When it covered the novel, Monthly Review classified it as non-fiction, claiming that “Were it possible to entertain any doubts of the authenticity of this publication, its internal evidence would alone be sufficient to remove them.” Just one year later, the Critical Review published a note informing its readers that, when they first reviewed the book in the previous year, they understood it to be

---


“partly narrative, and partly declamatory.”

They now suspect the book to be “the work of some insidious Frenchman,” but “[they] cannot take upon [themselves] to determine” the truth of the matter.

As earlier critics and biographers have noted, the titular Farmer James is “part fantasy” as well as “part reality.” Tending to take the novel’s fictional dimension for granted, contemporary critics typically interpret the novel through this lens. “Since the 1960s,” James Bishop summarizes, “most scholars have viewed James as a kind of straight man to Crèvecoeur’s more cynical or ironic position.” However, as Susan Manning points out in her introduction to the novel, the text “affirms its literary models and denies them in the same breath; like Franklin’s Autobiography, it claims both to be self-authorized, recognizing no authority outside the self, and advertises its conformity to the best stylistic models.” This is to say that the novel doesn’t expect its reader to encounter it as fiction. Rather, the novel negotiates its own status as non-fiction by repeatedly asserting its facticity. Specifically, it asserts this facticity through its paratextual elements, which are typically taken as external to the novel. In this way, Letters blurs

---


368 “Remarks…,” 142.


371 Manning, xxv.
the distinction between text and context. For example, the text opens with an “advertisement,” which describes the novel as the “genuine production of the American Farmer whose name they bear.” In fact, it is precisely because “they contain much authentic information” that they have been published. With this in mind, readers are primed to encounter the text as non-fictional. Through these means, the text produces its own authenticity through the production of reality itself: creating rather than representing an “eye-witness” account of “the transformations which have deformed the face of America.” Rather than interpreting it as transparently fictional, then, we ought to interpret the novel as striving to convince its reader that its imagined America is identical to the real thing. Rather than merely litigating “how true” Letters From an American Farmer is, however, we can begin to recognize the truth it produces. Though the novel emerges in a turbulent time of acute contradictions, and it does attempt to grapple with them, it represents an early and important chain in the linkage between literary realism and the production of American consciousness. What Crévecoeur produces (in spite of himself, at times) are citizen-readers: would-be Americans interpellated as white, bourgeois aspirants. Given the ethnic, geographic, cultural, economic, and ideological heterogeneity that he himself highlights, however, what was American going to do about the contradictions between its reality and Crévecoeur’s representation of it?

\footnote{Crèvecoeur, 3.}

\footnote{Crèvecoeur, 3.}

\footnote{Crèvecoeur, 3.}

\footnote{Crèvecoeur, 3.}
The Making of Americans

During his first trip to the United States, British novelist Charles Dickens made a point to visit “Philadelphia and Its Solitary Prison”–touring Eastern State Penitentiary and speaking with its prisoners. Describing the experience in his 1842 *American Notes for General Circulation*, he observed the ways in which prisoners seemed broken down by their experiences. Recalling how one prisoner asked his visitors “whether there was no hope of his dismal sentence being commuted,” for example, Dickens observes: “I never saw or heard of any kind of misery that impressed me more than the wretchedness of this man.”375 If this scene moved Dickens so powerfully, it was because he found in prison a space where human beings were subject to physical and mental anguish that he felt no human ought to experience–either as the do-er or the done-to. Although he is “persuaded that those who devised this system of prison discipline, and those benevolent gentlemen who carry it into execution, do not know what it is that they are doing” he nonetheless maintained a believe that, “[i]n its intention,” prison is “kind, humane, and meant for reformation.”376 He insists, in other words, that the prison is noble in *intention*, in *spirit*.

Indeed, the prison was founded with reformation in mind and it was itself a symbol and consequence of reformation. The late eighteenth century was, according to Michel Foucault, “a time when, in Europe and in the United States, the entire economy of punishment was redistributed.”377 Prior to this period, capital punishment and hard labor were the most common


376 Dickens, 99.

forms of punishment, and they were carried out in public. Because the law was identical with the will of the monarch, transgressions of the law were therefore challenges to the monarch. Accordingly, torture and execution was enacted in public such that the gallows formed a stage on which the law was enforced and thereby reinforced. Public execution was therefore a political act inasmuch as it was a judicial one. “It belongs,” Foucault argues, “even in minor cases, to the ceremonies by which power is manifested.” However, the nature of that power—its sources, techniques, and justifications—would face structural challenges in the wake of the scientific revolution, the emergence of the bourgeoisie, and the proliferation of rationalist philosophy. These historical movements undermined the theological basis of sovereign right, contested its justification of political domination, and served as the social basis for a new form of cosmopolitan life. As a consequence, law and law enforcement had to be reformulated and given new justifications in order to conserve the possibility of an authority capable of regulating an increasingly secular society.

Expressing and reflecting these philosophical, political, and economic trends, Cesare Beccaria published *On Crimes and Punishment* in 1764, which articulated a secular philosophy of punishment that tied crimes to social welfare rather than to religious transgressions. Beccaria’s rationalist approach led him to criticize earlier forms of punishment as barbaric and detrimental to social wellbeing, and he prescribed a new way of thinking about crime: it had causes, which means that it could be remediated; those forms of remediation should be proportional to the offense, and their application should be universal rather than arbitrary; the remediation of offenses finds its social basis in the wellbeing of the community. In this way, he formulates law

---

378 Foucault, *Discipline & Punish*, 47.
and its enforcement as a way of producing subjects of and to a secular state: citizens who internalize the distinction between themselves and non-citizens through the enforcement of law. Concomitantly, the authority of this law and law enforcement were derived from its capacity to order society.

Becarria’s text proved massively influential, and its secularizing influence was reflected in the work of Benjamin Rush. A close friend of Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Paine, Rush played an important role in the movement for independence and in the nation-building that followed. After participating in the Continental Congress and signing the Declaration of Independence, Rush served as the Surgeon General for George Washington’s Continental Army and took up an influential role as an academic and teacher at the University of Pennsylvania following the war’s conclusion. In addition to training medical professionals, as well as founding a college himself, Rush also cultivated social power by joining and founding a number of organizations that would themselves go on to exert immense influence over the course of American social life. One such organization was the Philadelphia Society for Alleviating the Misery of Public Prisons, which grew out of a speech that Rush delivered at Benjamin Franklin’s home in March, 1787. Entitled “An Enquiry into the Effects of Public Punishments Upon Criminals, and Upon Society,” Rush’s speech offers a theory of the prison: how it should function, why, and what that function should be in relation to the broader society that employs it. In doing so, writes political scientist Thomas Dumm, Rush developed an idea of prison that would inform “every aspect of the theory and practice of punishment in the reformed system.”

Like many of the texts emphasized in this dissertation, this influence owes much to the

---

circulation of Rush’s ideas, which were republished in American Museum and then in pamphlet form.\textsuperscript{380}

In contrast with the prevailing attitudes of the time, Rush argues that public punishment is counter-productive to the regulation of a society. While it was intended to prevent crimes by displaying its consequences and to remove criminals from society, Rush writes that, “[e]xperience proves that public punishments have increased propensities to crimes.”\textsuperscript{381} Rather than reforming criminals or “exciting terror in the minds of spectators,” these spectacles actually discourage rehabilitation and elicit sympathy for the criminals. In the first instance, which refers primarily to public labor, punishment was often too short in duration to produce “those changes in body or mind, which are absolutely necessary to reform the obstinate habits of vice.”\textsuperscript{382} What’s more, such punishment rendered criminals ignominious, which is “universally acknowledged to be a worse punishment than death.”\textsuperscript{383} Instead of deterring crime, however, Rush argues that the severity of ignominy makes it a disproportionate punishment and the application of such punishment makes the state seem cruel. This perceived cruelty “creates a hatred of all law and government” among both the criminal and the spectators.\textsuperscript{384} In the second instance, which refers to capital punishment, Rush notes that it cultivates in the punished “a spirit

\textsuperscript{380} Michael Meranze, \textit{Laboratories of Virtue} (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 120.


\textsuperscript{382} Rush, “Enquiry,” 138

\textsuperscript{383} Rush, “Enquiry,” 146.

\textsuperscript{384} Rush, “Enquiry,” 146.
of revenge against the whole community” and makes “many crimes known to persons who would otherwise have passed through life in total ignorance of them.”\textsuperscript{385} On the one hand, then, it exacerbates the criminal’s so-called habits of vice while, on the other hand, inducing criminality in individuals who might otherwise abide by the law. Furthermore, while public punishment serves to elicit fear among spectators, it actually serves to provoke admiration and sympathy for the criminal. In any case, Rush argues, public punishment serves to induce criminality or antipathy toward law and law enforcement by producing habits and affects that stymie rather than facilitate governance.\textsuperscript{386}

Although much of the text is a thorough argument against these prevailing forms of punishment, Rush is careful to note that he does intend to abolish punishments altogether. “Far from it,” he writes, “I wish only to change the place and manner of inflicting them, so as to render them effectual for the reformation of criminals, and beneficial to society.”\textsuperscript{387} As an alternative to capital punishment or public labor, Rush proposes the erection of a “house of repentance”: “Let a large house be erected in a convenient part of the state. Let it be divided into a number of apartments, reserving one large room for public worship. Let cells be provided for the solitary confinement of such persons as are of a refractory temper.”\textsuperscript{388} Imagining it on the geographic margins of society (later in the speech, he replaces “convenient part of the state” with “a remote part of the state”), Rush imagines the penitentiary (as it would come to be known) as a

\textsuperscript{385} Rush, “Enquiry,” 139; 146.

\textsuperscript{386} Rush, “Enquiry,” 143.

\textsuperscript{387} Rush, “Enquiry,” 149.

\textsuperscript{388} Rush, “Enquiry,” 150.
place of solitude and isolation. In this way, it would replicate another age-old, cross-cultural form of punishment: exile. Life in exile would be lived in solitary confinement, prisoners would privately labor for the enrichment of the state, and constant silence would be enforced. The experience, Rush argues, would allow criminals to reflect on their actions and repent for their crimes, and thereby reform themselves. At the same time, the state could benefit from compelled labor without associating labor with crime.

Complementing the solitary dimension of prison, Rush imagines it as a secretive place as well. While he insists that punishment be “defined and fixed by law,” he also adds that “no notice [should] be taken, in the law, of the punishment that awaits a particular crime.” Punishment should be, in other words, concealed both from the public and from the criminal. Rush argues that this secrecy will elicit anticipatory terror from criminals who know not what awaits them while preventing “the mind from accustoming itself to the view of these punishments, so as to destroy their terror by habit.” In addition to silence and solitude, Rush goes on to note that these punishments should consist of “bodily pain, labour, watchfulness.” Through these means, Rush envisions an institution capable of reforming criminals and reforming them: rendering them fit for society.

Indeed, it was this capacity to mold individuals into citizens that, for Rush, made the prison a necessary institution. While he insists that this penitentiary would cost no more than

---

“one fourth as much as the maintenance of the numerous jails that are now necessary in every well regulated state,” he nonetheless asks “why should receptacles be provided and supported by an immense expense, in every country, for the relief of persons afflicted with bodily disorders, and an objection be made to providing a place for the cure of the diseases of the mind?” He insists, in other words, that prisons will save the state money in the long run, but they would be necessary even if they wouldn’t. Like schools and hospitals, Rush saw prisons as necessary for the regulation of American society. On the one hand, they served as the means by which knowledge about citizens could be produced and collected. On the other hand, they served as sites whereby state power could be applied, where citizens could be produced, educated, and trained. As Thomas Dumm puts in his history of the US’s disciplinary origins, they allowed the state to assess, manage, and control citizen’s habits of body and mind. They were mechanisms

393 Rush, “Enquiry,” 152-153. It is worth lingering on Rush’s formulation as would-be prisoners as people with “diseases of the mind.” Today, 43% of the US’s prison population and 44% of its jail population have been diagnosed with a mental illness (Prison Policy). Indeed, as a team of medical researchers recently concluded: “persons with mental illness get treated as criminals, arrested, charged, and jailed for a longer time in jail compared to the general population” (Ghiasi, et al.) Although Rush meant something closer to the idea that crime itself (“habits of vice,” as he puts it in his speech) are a psychological wound that must be cured through moral reformation, prisons and jails are increasingly serving as a warehouse for the mentally ill. They have become substitutes for health care infrastructure (mental and physical), and the provisioning of food, water, and housing; they are made to clean up the messes produced by alienation and a society reproduced through trauma; they exist as warehouses in which to abandon those people already abandoned by society. This link between the criminalization of mental illness and the medicalization of crime is forged here in Rush’s groundbreaking text. While I cannot offer a fuller account of this linkage, and the ways in which carceral and mental healthcare infrastructure developed one another over the last two hundred years, Liat Ben-Moshe details this history in her Decarcerating Disability (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2020). Prison Policy Initiative, “Mental Health,” Prison Policy Initiative, https://www.prisonpolicy.org/research/mental_health/. Noman Ghiasi, Yusra Azhar, Jasbir Singh, et al., “Psychiatric Illness and Criminality,” National Library of Medicine, 9 Jan., 2023, https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK537064/.

394 Dumm, 87-88.
for producing uniform citizens and social cohesion in the face of difference, diversity, antagonism, dysfunction, and disorder.

Philadelphia of the late eighteenth century was, for example, populated by working poor, free black people, enslaved black people, immigrants from various countries, and women who were galvanized by the American revolution’s putative universalism. In order to stabilize these contradictions between theory and practice, the national bourgeoisie had to rewrite the law so as to conform reality with their imagined community. The cacophonous panoply of American social life had reduced to a segment of itself, which would stand in for the whole. It had to be remade into the bourgeois intercourse of white men. This American reformation was to be effected through the application of law, which was manifest in the 1786 Act to Amend the Penal Laws of the State. Often referred to as “the wheelbarrow law” in scholarship, the 1786 Act authorized public labor as Philadelphia’s principal punishment, and blue and brown-striped men hauling wheelbarrows quickly became ubiquitous sites on the ordinary landscape of the city.395 As Rush recounts above, the public nature of the punishment was intended to shame criminals into changing their behavior and, at the same time, scare the public into abiding by the law. Because it helped reduce the public cost of punishment, the compulsion of labor justified it economically. However, Rush argues, the public nature of this punishment exacerbated the causes of criminal behavior and devalued the value of labor among the public. Indeed, as Jen Manion points out in her history of early America’s carceral culture, the compulsion of labor itself drew comparisons to slavery, which tugged on the heartstrings of Quakers, such as Rush.396 Accordingly, Rush–

395 For a more detailed account of this history, see Jen Manion, Liberty’s Prisoners (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015).

396 Manion, 22.
inspired by Cesare Beccaria and British reformer John Howard—moved to intervene in the exercise of punishment. Triangulating his religious beliefs, the secularizing, rationalist intellectual currents of his time, and the need to distance penal punishment from slavery while retaining its labor-compulsion, he proposed the penitentiary. This new form of punishment would disappear unruly, riotous, transgressive people from social life: removing them from their community, concealing them from sight, disciplining them into conformity with the law, and extracting their reproductive labor. This punishment, as Manion goes on to detail over the course of her book, was primarily deployed against women who failed to conform to gender norms, rebellious enslaved people, and free black people and Irish immigrants. From its inception, then, incarceration was a weapon for enforcing norms of race, gender, and labor. Conformity to the state’s codes of conduct were beaten in to people. Those who refused to conform were cast outside American society.

As Rush goes on to note, culture and fiction would play crucial roles in this regulatory function. “I cannot conceive any thing [sic] more clearly calculated to diffuse terror through a community,” he writes, “than the combination of the three circumstances that have been mentioned in punishment [solitude, secrecy, and the arbitrary duration of punishment].”397 Furnishing an example of this diffuse terror, he goes on to imagine children pressing “upon the evening fire in the listening of the tales that will be spread from this abode of misery. Superstition will add to its horrors: and romance will find in it ample materials for fiction, which cannot fail of increasing the terror of its punishments.”398 By privatizing punishment and


shrouding its workings in secret, Rush argues, knowledge of them will circulate. Because they are private and shrouded in secret, however, such knowledge will be speculative: a mythology of what goes on in the penitentiary will form, which will romanticize and hyperbolize certain features of it. Or, as literary critic Jason Haslam puts it, these narratives “create an imaginative excess of spectacle that the reality of public punishments cannot contain or effect.” In this way, fiction and storytelling will reveal and conceal aspects of incarceration at the same time, generating fear through the tension of this dialectical movement.

On this point, Rush echoes his contemporary Jeremy Bentham, who proposed publishing prisoner’s accounts in order to legitimize the efficacy of prison. For both thinkers, prison was to be a cultural black box: both hidden from free-world citizens and omnipresent in their lives. They would live in fear of it, but with only a distorted and warped understanding of how and why it functions. Their understanding would be both true and false at the same time. In contemporary culture, the most prominent example of this contradiction is in so-called “reality programs,” such as Lockup or 60 Days In. Purporting to be an immediate document of reality,

---


400 C.f. Bentham: “But the greater latitude he has in taking such measures, the less will he grudge the letting it be known that measures are which he does take, knowing, at the same time, that no advantage can be taken of such knowledge, by turning him out in case of his success, and putting in another to reap the fruits of his contrivance. I will then require him to disclose, and even print and publish his accounts—the whole process and detail of his management—the whole history of the prison. I will require him, I say, on the pain of forfeitures or other adequate punishment, to publish these accounts, and that upon oath I have no fear of his not publishing some accounts, because, if the time is elapsed and some accounts not published—a fact not liable to dispute—the punishment takes place of course: and I have not much fear that the accounts, when published, will not be true; because, having power to do every thing that is for his advantage, there is nothing which it is his interest to conceal; and the interest which the punishment for perjury gives him not to conceal, is manifest, more especially as I make him examinable and cross-examinable viva voce upon oath at any time.” (52-53). Jeremy Bentham, The Panopticon Writings, ed. Miran Božović (New York: Verso Books, 1995).
these programs offer viewers a window into prison, which is depicted as casually violent. This violence, however, is depicted as horizontal: as violence between prisoners. The ordinary violence and austerity applied by administrators is elided, or, when it is depicted, it is treated as just, fair, and legitimate violence. The prisoner is always deserving of their treatment—even (or perhaps especially) when that treatment is violent. In this way, these programs, and the countless others like them, trade on realist aesthetics to convincingly represent prison as an intensely scary place, but scary precisely because of the prisoners. In effect, they circulate negative affects about prison while marking prisoners, rather than prison itself, as the object of those affects.

Consequently, these cultural representations echo Rush’s imagined scene and thereby demonstrate the ways in which cultural forms continue to play an important role in the social reproduction of prisons.

While it takes decades for prisons to achieve the cultural prominence that they presently enjoy, they enter into popular fiction almost immediately after their reformation. Indeed, the first literary depiction of the modern prison appeared only nine years after the modern prison itself appeared. Designed by Robert Smith, who would go on to design buildings for Princeton, Brown, and Dartmouth colleges, the Walnut Street Jail was originally built in 1773 as a county jail. As was the common practice at the time, jails served merely to remand criminals until their trial and their sentencing. That began to change in 1787 when Benjamin Rush helped cofound the Philadelphia Society for the Alleviating the Miseries of Public Prisons just two months after delivering his “Enquiry into the Effects of Public Punishment.” Quickly the organization formed a legislative committee that lobbied the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania to modify penal law—efforts that culminated in the Act of April 5, 1790, which was, according to a contemporary,
“literally forced from the legislature” by the Philadelphia Society.401 This act commissioned the construction of a penitentiary like the one Rush had described. However, in contrast with his vision of a new building, with individual cells, Pennsylvania merely added an adjoining wing to the Walnut Street Jail. In many ways, the penitentiary wing strongly resembled its predecessors: prisoners were housed together, they were still able to freely accept visitors, there was no uniformity of dress, and irregularly-enforced standards of behavior. Nonetheless, the Walnut Street Penitentiary represented an innovation in the criminal legal system—distinguishing it from earlier regimes of punishment and, in so doing, forming the basis for the contemporary prison regime. Unlike the Walnut Street Jail, for example, the penitentiary wing housed prisoners from across the state. In this way, the Walnut Street Penitentiary introduced geographic dislocation as a key component of incarceration. In contrast with prisons, jails are more local and they are intended to detain prisoners awaiting punishment, which most commonly took the form of capital punishment, exile, or forced labor. With the founding of the Walnut Street Penitentiary, however, incarceration has increasingly become the punishment rather than a condition that precedes it. Because it founded itself with recourse to rehabilitation (a justification for earlier forms of punishment that was already well-worn by Rush’s time), the penitentiary had to tightly constrain the behavior of prisoners. While number of factors made this difficult to affect—the lack of professionalism among administrators, the congregation of prisoners, the lack of uniformity in other aspects of prison life, the porousness between the prison and the free-world—the Walnut Street Penitentiary nonetheless attempted it, instituting the routinization of prisoner life as a key component of contemporary incarceration. In these ways, the Walnut Street Penitentiary

represents the emergence of the modern prison while, at the same time, bearing residual features of the social order from which it emerges from. These residual elements, as I elaborate below, would serve as the basis for reform: for ongoing modernization, for intensifying standardization, isolation, and quantification.

Set in and around the Yellow Fever epidemic that struck Philadelphia in 1793, Charles Brockden Brown’s 1799 novel, *Arthur Mervyn*, speaks to this process of prison modernization (and fiction’s role in it) from an inflection point. Following the title character’s trials and tribulations as he moves from disaffected rural child to a modern, urbane professional, the novel’s narrative development anticipates the United States’s shifts from an agrarian economy to an industrial one over the nineteenth century. As Michael Ignatieff argues in his account of the British context, *A Just Measure of Pain*, this process of industrialization required new institutions to manage newly-formed industrial classes. Specifically, it needed the prison. This need is reflected in Brown’s novel, which pivots on a depiction of the nascent penitentiary. Halfway through the book, the narrator Dr. Stevens receives a note instructing him to come to “Debtor’s Apartments in Prune Street,” which Brown describes as a scene of decay and death. He writes that,

The apartment was filled with pale faces and withered forms. The marks of negligence and poverty were visible in all; but few betrayed, in their features or gestures, any symptoms of concern on account of their condition. Ferocious gayety, or stupid indifference, seemed to sit upon every brow. The vapour from a heated stove, mingled with the fumes of beer and tallow that were spilled upon it, and with the tainted breath of so promiscuous a crowd, loaded the stagnant atmosphere. At my first transition from the cold and pure air without, to this noxious element, I found it difficult to breathe.402

---

Prefiguring Charles Dickens’ descriptions of Eastern State Penitentiary, Brown renders this historical condition with moving detail, describing a space of confinement and prisoners bereft of their humanity. The air is noxious, and the mood anxious. Here the prisoners grow sick, and the pallor drains from their face. The prisoners themselves are the urban poor, and they are forced together in cramped quarters—a recipe for the transmission of disease and the intensification of neglect. In much the same way that Dickens, witnessing similar scenes, was offended by the condition to which these people are subject, Brown renders the space so as to turn his readers’ stomachs. Here, the penitentiary truly is what Rush imagined: an “abode of misery.” As Brown gestures to this penal experiment was quickly dashed on the rocky shores of reality, and by the time of the novel’s publication in 1799, the Walnut Street Jail had already become overcrowded, violent, and disease ridden. Those prisoners it released were quickly returned, and those it did not release repeatedly broke free of their own accord.403

As historian Michael Meranze points out, however, it is Brown’s “imaginative frame rather than the empirical content [that] is at issue here.”404 By rendering the Walnut Street Jail in this way, Meranze writes, “Brown does little more than reactivate older discourses of internal space and unreformed prisons.”405 This is to say that Brown’s novel does not serve as a critique of prisons as such. Instead, he critiques their early modern form, which still bears residual elements of their medieval form. Prison is not the problem, he insists. The problem is this specific instance of imprisonment, which is characterized by abandonment, violence, and

403 Teeters, 60-61.
404 Meranze, 209.
405 Meranze, 209.
degradation rather than rehabilitation and reformation. If Rush himself saw Brown as the reformist author par excellence, then, it is because he manages to evoke sympathy in his reader and militate them around a commitment to the prison: confinement does not work in the present, nor has it worked in the past, but it is socially necessary, so we must ensure that it works in the future.\footnote{C.f. Rush: “Of course I must be excused from undertaking the work you have suggested to me. I shall mention it to Charles Brown. He possesses talents more than equal to it. The subject would glow under the eloquent strokes of his masterly pen. I wish the history of our prison may not some years hence end with an account of the restoration of our old laws for whipping, cropping, burning in the hand, and taking away life. Many of our citizens wish for it, and I am sorry to say the manner in which our mild penal code has of late years been executed has furnished too much reason for retrograde opinions upon this important subject.” Benjamin Rush, “To Thomas Eddy,” \textit{Letters of Benjamin Rush}, vol. 2: 1793-1813, ed. Lyman Henry Butterfield. (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2019), 874-875.}

Although we might take it as an indication that caging human beings cannot remediate violence or produce public health, and efforts to reform it are similarly bound to fail, contemporaneous legislators instead took the Walnut Street Jail’s failure as the basis for further reform. “Whether discussing architecture, administration, or labor discipline,” writes Michael Meranze in his history of Pennsylvania penal reform during the late eighteenth century, “[prison administrators] pointed to structural conditions limiting the inspector’s ability to impose their will and directions on inmates and prison life. Until officials could control communication and individuate their subjects, the prison project was incomplete.”\footnote{Meranze, 247.} From the perspective of administrators, then, it was a lack of administrative power that led to the penitentiary’s failures. Consequently, the Pennsylvania legislature commissioned the construction of Eastern State Penitentiary, which opened in 1829. Situated on what was, at the time, the margins of
Philadelphia, the new prison would more closely match Rush’s vision while incorporating the ideas of other prisoner reformers, such as Jeremy Bentham. Building upon these ideas, architect John Haviland designed the prison to emphasize “efficient surveillance and security.” The cells were solitary, and separated from one another by thick walls of concrete. Though each cell featured a window, they were located on the ceiling and out of reach from prisoners. Peepholes were included, so that guards could covertly look in on prisoners, and food was delivered via a “feeder drawer,” which served as small windows that could easily be shut from the outside. Single-person cells were organized into wings, which extended out from a central watchtower that allowed guards to look out on the prisoners’ small, private exercise yards without themselves being seen. “It would achieve what the reformed organization of Walnut Street could not,” Meranze writes, “the penitentiary world be truly a world apart.” Meals and labor were taken and undertaken in the cell, and prisoners spent their days with minimal social intercourse. Intensifying and perfecting Rush’s vision of a solitary prison, this architectural design was supposed to protect guards from prisoners while isolating prisoners from one another. The effect, administrators imagined, would be a reduction in violence and more efficacious rehabilitation. Like the Walnut Street Jail, however, Eastern State Penitentiary was quickly beset by problems of violence and abuse. As early as 1834, for example, Eastern State administrators were investigated for “moral and financial improprieties as well as acts of cruelty toward prisoners within the penitentiary” and subsequently indicted “for violating both the letter of the

408 Meranze, 247.

409 Meranze, 247-249.

410 Meranze, 250.
penitentiary law and the spirit of proper penitentiary discipline.”411 Again, the “letter” and “spirit” of prison is upheld; what is condemned is a failure to live up to those ideals. The penitentiary has not worked so far, administrators and legislators signaled, but next time it will. Accordingly, Eastern State’s failures again served as the basis for reform.

Treading the path blazed by Philadelphia, New York opened its first penitentiary in 1797. Located in what is now Manhattan’s Greenwich Village, Newgate Prison quickly became a reflection of the Walnut Street experiment. In a matter of months, it was beset by disease, overcrowding, and rioting, and New York state responded in the same way Pennsylvania did: constructing Auburn Prison in 1816 with the goal of remediating Newgate’s failures.412 In contrast with Eastern State Penitentiary, however, Auburn prioritized rehabilitation through labor and congregation rather than isolation and repentance. “The Auburn system…separates convicts by night, but suffers them to work together during the day, requiring the most rigid non-intercourse,” as one anonymous author puts it in a 1839 comparison of the two systems. In contrast, “The Pennsylvania system…separates each convict from the presence of his fellows…; thus secluding him night and day from all intercourse with the world.”413 While Auburn was originally opened and operated according to the Pennsylvania system, historian W. David Lewis points out that this experiment “failed dismally.”414 After a number of prisoner suicides, and

411 Meranze, 307; 305.


414 Lewis, 56.
growing doubt about the efficacy of solitary confinement among free-world people, New York state legislatures began devising a form of incarceration that would provide prisoners with a (limited, alienated form of) social life while suppressing non-conformity and individualism. This new system would allow prisoners to congregate while preventing communication between them—habituating them to a paradoxically asocial or anti-social form of sociality ("non-intercourse").

Unlike the Pennsylvania system, prisoners would work and eat together; like the Pennsylvania system, they would live in silence. “In order to accomplish this goal,” writes Lewis, “it was necessary for prison officials to devise elaborate techniques for constant surveillance and to and to make unsparing use of coercion and intimidation.”

Refining the techniques of earlier penal experiments, Auburn’s administrators standardized and routinized every aspect of life at the prison, and introduced new prisoners to the facility through ritualized humiliation. Silence was enforced throughout the day, and violation was punished with immense physical brutality. While it was hoped that this new system would prove more effective in rehabilitating prisoners and thereby deliver on penitentiaries’ founding promise, S.G. Howe opened his 1846 report to the Boston Prison Discipline Society by observing that “There is not a prison in this wide land where any thing like sufficient provision is made for the moral and religious instruction and training of those whom the law forcibly holds under its guardianship. There is not a prison where their capacities for improvement and reformation are duly cultivated; not one where wrong is not done to their spiritual natures.” Despite its credulity regarding

---

415 Lewis, 81.

prison’s intention to edify and ennable prisoners, as well as its moral register, Howe’s claim underscores that the Auburn system—a reform of a reform of a reform of a reform—produces the same outcome as the practices its existence was meant to obviate. Violence proliferates, harmful behaviors and attitudes germinate, humans are broken down. No harm is repaired, and the causes of harm are left intact. A class of people is empowered to dominate another, and they do so with intensity and impunity. This suggests that prison itself is structurally incapable of repairing harm, or preventing harm, of producing justice, public health, or public safety. Nonetheless, the unreconstructed Auburn system proved popular among legislators and prison administrators into the 1840s.

Today, the practices and policies employed by prisons vary widely between the country’s nearly 1700 state and federal prisons. Nonetheless, each of these sites express the uneven and combined development of penal models that emerged at the turn of the nineteenth century and the continuous waves of reform that sweep the national consciousness every decade. While there are no facilities that still maintain Auburn’s compulsory and constant silence, communication between prisoners is still intensely alienated. Lockdowns are common, and the free association of prisoners is curbed in countless banal ways. That association and social intercourse is carefully watched through electronic means: an ever-expanding panopticon of cameras, which allow administrators and guards to observe more and more while being seen less and less. Though there are few prisons that are completely solitary—the “supermax” ADX Florence in Florence, Colorado is the only remaining U.S. prison of this type—most, if not all, feature a solitary wing of some sort: a secure housing unit, a control unit, an administrative detention

417 For a fuller account of how this popularity waned and the Auburn system was reconstructed during the Civil War years, see Lewis, 201-229.
block. Here prisoners are confined to particularly small cells for twenty-three to twenty-three and a half hours a day, and their “free time” is spent in a special yard, which is often barely bigger than their cell. However, no matter where you are in a prison, your experience is tightly circumscribed, routinized, and disciplined. Altogether, these architectures of life serve to manage prisoners: debilitating and incapacitating rebellious prisoners, cultivating reactionary violence, making concessions to the prisoners so that they will consent to the extraction of their labor in the social reproduction of the state and, if possible, the turning of a profit. Even the death penalty—the very form of punishment that Rush invented the penitentiary to abolish—persists across the country.

In part, both the unevenness of this carceral development and its historical durability are functions of culture, which mediates carceral theory and carceral practice. Indeed, the social expansion of prisons was paralleled and reflected in the literature of the time. Herman Melville’s 1853 short story “Bartleby, the Scrivener,” for example, ends with Bartleby confined to The Tombs—the colloquial term for Manhattan’s municipal jail—which served to warehouse the mass of alienated and dispossessed urban poor of the mid-nineteenth century. Likewise, Nathaniel Hawthorne opens his 1850 novel, The Scarlet Letter, with a chapter entitled “The Prison-Door.” In addition to these canonical works, this image of the prison door also haunted popular works of the time. In Horatio Alger’s influential 1868 bildungsroman Ragged Dick, for example, the title character frustrates a conman’s scheme and is threatened with a night in The Tombs.\footnote{Incarceration features elsewhere in the novel as well. In the first instance, Alger contrasts Dick with Mickey Maquire: a fellow bootblack who, rather than seeking to ascend the social hierarchy, has consigned himself to poverty. Reiterating the historical associations between the Irish, criminality, and poverty, Alger notes that the Irish Maquire leads a gang of young boys who are frequently arrested and incarcerated on Blackwell’s Island (What is now Roosevelt Island, New York). Starting in 1828, this island housed a penitentiary, a psychiatric facility, and later a hospital that would service prisoners and working class communities from the}
Dick (knowing that it won’t be acted upon) shrugs off the threat, the conman’s invocation suggests common knowledge (and common fear) about The Tombs as a site of degradation and depredation. As Caleb Smith points out, this site appeared in other popular fiction of the time, such as *Mysteries of the Tomb* and *Ten Days in the Tombs*, which depicted jails as “Dark Age dungeons, sites of grotesque suffering and cruelty.”

These macabre sites of punishment proved fertile images of Gothic fiction, which appropriated and transfigured popular images of prison into more abstract sources of terror. The Gothic fiction of Edgar Allen Poe is, for instance, replete with secret and arbitrary punishments, which include isolation, torture, captivity. In this way, prisons and jails provided Poe with his haunting images while Poe, in turn, wove these images throughout American life. In this way, writes Jason Haslam, Poe leaves his narrators and surrounding area. Here, in *Ragged Dick*, Alger assigns criminality to the Irish; he identifies prisons as things that exacerbate that criminality; and he links that criminality to a failure to assimilate to the American ethic of work. Elsewhere, however, Alger insists to the reader that prison works and it is not just a weapon against ethnic minorities. After thwarting his landlord Jim Travis’s effort to rob Dick, Alger apostrophes to the reader, writing that “Before dismissing the subject of Travis and his theft, it may be remarked that he was duly tried, and, his guilt being clear, was sent to Blackwell’s Island for nine months.” In the text, then, we have this contradiction: prisons socially reproduce the prevailing racial and ethnic hierarchies of everyday life, and they merely exacerbate the social problems they nominally exist to resolve; while, at the same time, prisons are the legitimate and good solution to these problems, and readers ought to assent to them. Stabilizing this contradiction is Alger’s narrative perspective, which naturalizes the effects of Irish criminalization. From Dick’s point-of-view, Blackwell’s Island fails to deter criminalized behavior and it conditions a resignation to their own criminalization among the Irish. Nonetheless, Maguire serves as the novel’s allegorical symbol for an ethnoclass of immigrants who fail to assimilate to American life (which is, after all, universalist) through a deficiency of industry rather than structural impediments. In this way, Alger reproduces American life as bourgeois (the novel is, after all, a romance of social mobility). At the same time, he represents American life that is universalist in theory but ethically-particular in practice. Accordingly, we might identify *Ragged Dick* as a profound example of carceral realism in rehearsal.


---

419 Smith, *Prison*, 56.
his readers “in the position of Rush’s terrified—but passive—citizen.” His texts, in other words, help readers internalize their subjection to prison: its omnipresence, its opacity, one’s own vulnerability to it. In much the same way, poets such as Emily Dickinson and Walt Whitman took up the prison as their image of consciousness itself. This formulation would be echoed by Dickinson’s correspondents Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau, who would similarly ground their influential philosophies of self-reliance and freedom with the metaphor of prisons.

In much the same way that prisons and captivity came to define the consciousness of nineteenth century Americans, the threat, experience, and metaphor of prison and jails (and, increasingly, the police) continue to define life in the twenty-first. It appears in the work of countless authors: popular, private, avant garde; those who were militantly political and those who strove for aesthetic (as opposed to political) achievement; white, black, Chicano, and Asian American; man or woman; queer or straight; across lines of geography and class. Encounters with the police similarly texture the biography of many writers. It was, for example, a transit officer that killed poet and short story writer Henry Dumas in 1968, which speaks to how the police make and break literary history every day. References to and depictions of prison and jail similarly texture mass produced films such as Penitentiary (1938), Brute Force (1947), Riot in

---


These themes and aesthetics are likewise reflected in the theoretical production of social life. The “Prison-House” serves critical theorist Frederic Jameson as a metaphor for language, for example, while queer theorist Jose Muñoz as a metaphor for the present and for heteronormativity. For bell hooks, black masculinity itself is a prison. Painter Faith Ringgold takes up prison as a metaphor for the United States, and urban theorist Mike Davis uses the term “prisoners” to describe Central American immigrants ensnared by an American nightmare.⁴²² Prison, jails, and the police, in other words, are all over the cultural scenes and artistic

movements that have proliferated across the twentieth century: it resides in every nook and cranny of the intellectual lives of everyone, precisely because it increasingly encroaches on the social lives and everyday experiences of everyone. “Captivity” even frames how we commonly understand the act of reading: we are “captivated” by a text, for instance, or a text “captures” our attention; we are a “captive” audience, and texts are “arresting.”

While many of these cultural artifacts take a critical stance toward prisons, the sheer quantity of them evidences the degree to which prisons and the police have saturated the consciousness of people in the United States (regardless of their ethnicity or their legal status as citizens). Moreover, the differences between these artifacts gestures to the contradictory role of prisons in cultural and social life. On the one hand, they speak to the ways in which culture socializes free world people to the ongoing existence of prison. Through reading, watching, and listening to these texts, we come to understand the prison as something that is always and everywhere lurking. What’s more, we come to understand prison as something we should do our best to avoid. In this way, these cultural objects supplement the disciplinary work of the prison by frightening us into the state’s prescribed manners, means, and modes of comportment, expression, feeling, and normalizing them for us. On the other hand, however, they illustrate the ways in which culture mystifies prison for free world people: rendering it as something we ought to be afraid of while warping our sense of how they work, why they work, and relation to those machinations. At their worst, these cultural products straightforwardly function to reify prison for their readers/viewers/listeners, rendering them natural, necessary, and desirable features of the social landscape. Even at their best, however, critical depictions of prison underscore that critique is an insufficient response. More than one hundred years of this critique has done
nothing to interrupt prison’s social reproduction. Indeed, these critiques have been recuperated by prisons and served as the basis for prison’s reform, which is to say, its social retrenchment.

The Unmaking of Americans

While the modern prison emerges as a mechanism of social control, it has increasingly come to serve as the primary means of racialization. Indeed, as countless historians, sociologists, geographers, and critical legal theorists have demonstrated, the end of the Civil War represented the emancipation of slaves but not the end of anti-black racism or the South’s economic dependence on cheap, black labor. In order to maintain their social and economic standing, the planter class had to recapture these newly-emancipated workers, and the letter of the thirteenth amendment gave them an opening to do so. Because it abolished slavery except as the punishment of a crime, this amendment created a legal pretext to re-enslave people by criminalizing and incarcerating them. Accordingly, southern states passed legislation criminalizing vagrancy, unemployment, and idleness, while curtailing black American’s right to self-defense and dispossessing them of their land. As early as 1935, W.E.B. Du Bois identified these “black codes,” as they came to be known, as “a plain and indisputable attempt on the part of the Southern states to make Negroe slaves in everything but name.”

A particularly useful illustration of the ways in which the Reconstruction-era prison integrated the plantation system’s infrastructure can be gleaned from the fact that many plantations were themselves converted into prisons. Perhaps most famously is the Mississippi State Penitentiary. Though it now sits on 18,000 acres of land, Parchman Farm, as it is more

commonly known, was first constructed on a nearly four thousand acre plot of land that the state purchased from Parchman Plantation. Like a plantation, Parchman Farm compels its (mostly black) prisoners to work in its fields: cultivating and harvesting produce for the enrichment of the state. Further echoing the plantation, the prison has similarly been characterized by routinized brutality, and this violence has made it a haunting presence in Southern Gothic literature. In his 1955 novel, *The Mansion*, for example, William Faulkner describes Parchman as “destination doom”: a description that is more recently echoed in Jesmyn Ward’s 2017 novel, *Sing, Unburied, Sing.* “It was murder,” as one character describes it. “Mass murder.”

Opened in 1901, Parchman was originally commissioned and constructed to handle convict-leases: a system of incarceration that first emerged in Louisiana in 1844 but proliferated during the period of Reconstruction. Under convict-lease, the state would sell (lease) prisoners to former planters, who employed the cheap labor to cultivate land and harvest crops. The state directly profited through this arrangement, while landowners acquired highly exploitable, highly violable labor. It was *Worse Than Slavery*, as David M. Oshinsky titled his 1997 history of convict-lease and Parchman Farms. While convict leasing per se is no longer practiced, the compulsion of (highly racialized) labor remains a common feature of incarceration in the South. “When we moved in,” writes former First Lady of Arkansas Hillary Clinton in her 1996 memoir, ...

---

424 In this context, it is worth pointing out that the proposed site of Atlanta’s police training facility is land that used to house a prison. Before it was a prison, it was a plantation. Before it was a plantation, it had to be cleared of Muscogee people. If I return to this example from a previous note, it is because it so clearly crystallizes the imbrications of policing and prisons, prison and plantations, chattel slavery and settler colonialism.


426 Ward, 73.
It Takes a Village, “I was told that using prison labor at the governor's mansion was a longstanding tradition, which kept costs down.”427 Indeed, as the American Civil Liberties Union concluded in a 2022 survey of incarcerated people:

8 percent of incarcerated workers, assigned to public works projects, maintain cemeteries, school grounds, and parks; do road work; construct buildings; clean government offices; clean up landfills and hazardous spills; undertake forestry work; and more. At least 30 states explicitly include incarcerated workers as a labor resource in their emergency operations plans for disasters and emergencies. Incarcerated firefighters also fight wildfires in at least 14 states.428

This is to say, in other words, that the labor power of incarcerated people continues to be extracted from them by force: not for the direct production of profits, but in reducing the state’s cost of maintaining and reproducing itself. They are slaves to the state, and their labor stabilizes the state. As the ACLU correctly notes, this stabilization is presently necessary in the face of ecological crisis. Perceived as a social surplus, incarcerated people are thrust to the front lines. The state uses their bodies as a buffer between itself and the crisis of capitalism it facilitates and stabilizes.

Though a growing consensus of scholars now recognize incarceration as one of slavery’s afterlives, it is too frequently treated as merely an extension of chattel slavery or American apartheid.429 Indeed, this neo-slavery/neo-Jim Crow thesis dominates popular discourse on


prisons and prisoners. In contrast with the neo-slavery thesis, however, I contend that post-Reconstruction prisons and jails folded the anti-black and exploitative functions of slavery into a system that already existed to discipline and subordinate a racialized class of laborers. This is to not to suggest that contemporary prisons in the United States do not bear many resemblances to the system of chattel slavery, nor is it to obscure the acutely anti-black character of prisons in the post-Reconstruction period. Rather, my contention is that understanding prison as merely neo-slavery or neo-apartheid fails to explain other aspects of incarceration, as well as geographic differences in prison’s racial composition and unevenness of prison administration. In the federal prison system, white people make up 57.5% of prisoners, black people make up 38.5%, Native Americans 2.6%, and Asian Americans 1.4%. These numbers are significantly different at the state level. As of 2015, for example, Native Americans are 6% of state residents of Montana (Native Americans constitute just 2% of the national population), but they make up 25% of the state’s jail population and 26% of its prison population. In Louisiana, black people make up just 33% of the state (three times the percentage of black people as a share of the national population) but 52% of its jails and 67% of its prisons. Data on Chicano prisoners is inconsistent and opaque; they are not measured at the federal level, and many Chicano prisoners are classified as white or Native. In Texas, data is kept on Latino prisoners, and they make up 38% of the state population but 33% of the prison population. However, in Massachusetts, where Latinos only make up 7% of the state population, they make up 24% of the state’s prison population. Asian Americans are significantly underrepresented in prisons across the country, but states with larger Asian American populations such as California incarcerate them at higher rates (Asian Americans

“Reagan” (2012), documentaries such as Ava Duvernay’s 13th (2013), and public-facing scholarship such as Hannah K. Jones The 1619 Project (2019).
make up 13% of the population of California and 2% of its prison population). Rates of Asian American incarceration in Iowa (2.2% of its population is made up of Asian Americans), however, are not even recorded.\footnote{Washington Federal Bureau of Prisons, “Inmate Race,” \url{https://www.bop.gov/about/statistics/statistics_inmate_race.jsp}. Vera Institute, “Incarceration Trends in Montana,” \url{https://www.vera.org/downloads/pdfdownloads/state-incarceration-trends-montana.pdf}. Vera Institute, “Incarceration Trends in Louisiana,” \url{https://www.vera.org/downloads/pdfdownloads/state-incarceration-trends-louisiana.pdf}. Prison Policy Initiative, “California Profile,” \url{https://www.prisonpolicy.org/profiles/CA.html}. Prison Policy Initiative, “Iowa Profile,” \url{https://www.prisonpolicy.org/profiles/IA.html}} What’s more, compulsory labor has long been a feature of US incarceration, and it appeared in the antebellum Auburn System as well as in Rush’s initial formulations of the penitentiary. Indeed, the debtor’s prison and the workhouse were longstanding forms of incarceration that were already old by the end of the eighteenth century. More important, though, is the fact that many incarcerated people do not perform any work whatsoever. For many, prisons and jails are warehouses that store people rendered socially surplus. Furthermore, a majority of those prisoners who do work perform socially reproductive labor: they clerk for administrators, prepare and serve food in the cafeteria, clean the cells, and launder the clothes and linens. Their work helps maintain the prison, but doesn’t produce profits. To be sure, prisons are imbricated in a vast web of profit-making and capital accumulation. They are crucial sites in the capital accumulation of telecommunications and technologies firms, as well as construction, food, and laundry servicers. Prisons in Texas, for example, will not accept publications not sent directly by “publisher, publication supplier, or bookstore.”\footnote{Texas Department of Criminal Justice, “Mail Systems Coordinator Panel,” \url{https://www.tdcj.texas.gov/divisions/cid/mgmt_ops_mscp.html}} Given its convenience and reputation, Amazon represents the only option for many, and it operates a virtual oligopoly over books purchased for prisoners. By controlling distribution in this way,
Amazon accumulates on the backs of incarcerated people and their free-world comrades. It extends, and in extending expands, its monopolization of life in the free-world, which it secures by rendering prisons more durable sites of accumulation. However, this economic role of prisons cannot be reduced to the compulsion of labor or the direct production of profits. In much the same way, anti-black racism constitutes an irreducible dimension of the post-emancipation prison even as the post-emancipation prison cannot be reduced to anti-black racism.

In an effort to more fully grasp the nature of prison than the neo-slavery thesis allows, Colin Dayan proposes a civil death thesis. Civil death, she writes, is “the state of a person who though possessing natural life has lost all civil rights.”

Inherited from English common law, civil death produces a person who can be treated as a non-person by the state. The civil dead are biologically living but legally dead: deprived of the legal capacity to marry at will, inherit or bequeath property, vote, sit on a jury, own a firearm, or otherwise participate in society. While they remain incarcerated, however, this form of civil death is particularly acute. The austerity, isolation, depredation, alienation, and routine violence that characterizes prison cultivates an experience that is closer to physical death in every sense of the word. “Penal incarceration and executions are the state’s procedures of discarding the unassimilable into an external inferno of nonexistence,” as political theorist Joy James put it over thirty years ago. Indeed, writes legal historian and literary critic Robert Ferguson in his more recent history of punishment in the U.S., Inferno, prisons can longer (if they could ever) be called houses of correction. “They exist now as holding pens,” he writes, “with incapacitation as the objective.”

---


433 James, Resisting State Violence, 47.

in other words, the warehousing and production of a class of people rendered socially surplus and treated as the constitutive margin of US society.

In the early nineteenth century, this sense of prison-as-death was already being felt by prisoners, prison administrators, and those who, like Charles Dickens, observe and record the condition of incarceration from outside. “[The prisoner] is a man buried alive,” Dickens writes, “to be dug out in the slow round of years; and in the meantime dead to everything but torturing anxieties and horrible despair.” While Caleb Smith correctly notes that the legal fiction of civil death was narrated as something that could be transcended—the prisoner, unlike the slave, could return to citizenship—it is the case for many that they will only see freedom when they die. Approximately 200,000 people (or one in seven prisoners) is currently serving life without the possibility of parole. For approximately 2,500 of these people, that death will be met by the state’s executioner. For thousands of others, their death will come at their own hand, at the hands of a fellow prisoner, or as a result of neglect. According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics, for example, nearly 4,000 people died in state and state-contracted private prisons in 2019 alone. Even for those who are released from prison, their return to citizenship is not straightforward. As crime, race, and citizenship have increasingly come to define one another

Dickens, 101.


The Death Penalty Information Center, “Death Row,” Death Penalty Information Center, 1 Apr., 2022, https://deathpenaltyinfo.org/death-row/overview

over the course of neoliberalization, this social alienation has increasingly taken economic form and become more permanent. Being convicted of a felony, for example, makes it more difficult to find a job and the jobs that are offered are insecure and pay poorly. This financial instability increases the chances of housing instability, which, given the ways landlords frequently screen out felons, is already unstable for many. At the same time, however, being convicted of a felony bars you from accessing many federal welfare programs. Since 1998, for example, thirteen states have barred felons convicted of drug-related offenses from accessing Supplemental Nutrition Assistance (food stamps) or Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (welfare). These economic constraints serve to make formerly incarcerated people more vulnerable to social predation: domestic violence, exploitation from landlords and bosses, illness, inter-personal violence, sexual violence, unemployment, starvation, drug abuse. These vulnerabilities, in turn, compel these people to engage in behavior that has already been criminalized: sex work, trading in illicit goods, the occupation of public space, welfare fraud, theft. In this way, they make themselves more vulnerable to state violence in order to survive. This is to say that prisons increasingly produce vulnerabilities that prisons then exploit. Civil death is, therefore, a condition of skewed life chances that lingers with individuals even after they complete the terms of their sentence. It is the making-disposable of a human being. As Lisa Marie Cocho has recently argued, this condition of social untouchability has become increasingly racialized at the

---

same time as it has become increasingly permanent. Its severity and its association with non-white people have, in other words, developed one another.\footnote{For a fuller account of this history, see Lisa Marie Cocho, \textit{Social Death: Racialized Rightlessness and the Criminalization of the Unprotected} (New York: New York UP, 2012).}

Rather than opposing (or conflating, as Cocho does) this condition of civil death to the more involuted concept of social death, which characterized enslavement, Dayan points out that these legal fictions served as one another’s basis. Because it created legal precedent for state-sanctioned unfreedom, she writes, “The racialized idiom of slavery in the American social order depended on the legal fiction of ‘civil death’.”\footnote{Dayan, \textit{The Law is a White}, 44.} In this way, she demonstrates that the condition of the prisoner and the condition of the slave have historically served as one another’s condition of possibility. Indeed, as Jen Manion points out, prisons and jails were sometimes used as means of punishing enslaved people.\footnote{Manion, 16-17.} At the same time, Benjamin Rush argued for the privatization of compulsory labor because public labor was associating work with crime and thereby devaluing it in the eyes of the public. His point of comparison is the West Indies, where “negro slaves” do all the work and “white men soon decline labour.”\footnote{Rush, “Enquiry,” 147-148.} There is, in other words, a dialectic tension at play, which produces uneven transformations and developments between prison and slavery, crime and work, race and value. It is for this reason that modern prisons—from their very beginning—feature aspects characteristic of slavery: compulsory labor, subjection to violence, a withdrawal of civil rights, entitlements, and protections. They are indissolubly bound up in one another. What the post-emancipation period represented then was not the reinstitution of chattel
slavery but the reassignment of slavery’s function of racial domination to an already racialized institution that already shared its socially and economically disciplinary function. This reconfiguration of the apparatus of racialization represents, then, the state-sanctioned orders adaptation to changing economic and ideological conditions. In this way, the civil death thesis doesn’t negate the neo-slavery thesis so much as it encompasses and elaborates it. From this perspective, we can recognize the contemporary prison-industrial complex as forming a historical continuity with slavery while, at the same time, recognizing that the prison extends other historical continuities at the same time: the regulation of urban poor and the itinerant working class; indigenous dispossession and genocide; imperialism in the American Southwest and Asian South East. Moreover, the civil death thesis allows us to recognize prison’s slavery-like characteristics as endemic to the modern prison and not merely a modification of its post-Reconstruction form.

Austin Reed helpfully prefigures and illuminates this contemporary analysis in his memoir, Life and Adventures of a Haunted Convict. Although it was completed in 1858, Reed’s memoir was not published until 2016. According to Caleb Smith’s introduction to the recently published text, the memoir surfaced at an estate sale in Rochester, New York in the 2000s, and its seller refused to reveal its provenance. Attributed to Rob Reed, the memoir baffled its initial readers. “Could it be a draft of a sensational novel?” Smith asks. “A long form criminal confession?” The question is a salient one given the memoir’s aesthetic features. As Smith points out, the narrative seemed to be written for an audience and Reed paces his adventure “with a novelist’s sense of plot” and connects his “personal struggles to the public conflicts of

---

the antebellum years.”445 After a process undertaken at the behest of Yale University, researchers including Smith, David Blight, and Robert B. Stepto located Reed in the state’s prison records and adjudged the book a memoir. Reflecting the discursive process of imputing value to prison writings based on their authenticity that I described in chapters one and two, Reed’s work is once again represented to its reader as valuable precisely insofar as it is true *in order to sell it as a commodity*.

In his account, Reed describes a childhood characterized by parental trauma, which was expressed as harmful behavior and punished with incarceration. In the work of twentieth century prison autobiographers, this trauma would take the form of divorce, abandonment, or state-sanctioned kidnapping. In Reed’s case, it takes the form of witnessing his father’s death—an experience that precipitates harmful behavior. “No sooner had the cold clods covered the remains of my father before I forgot his last blessing and dying prayer with all of his advice,” as Reed puts it. “I soon broke from the restraints of my mother and fell a victim to vice and crime.”446 Along with a group of other boys, Reed cuts down several of a neighbor’s fruit trees, and his mother is left distraught. When she attempts to punish Reed by whipping him with a piece of rawhide, he grabs an ax and threatens to “sliver her brains out on the floor.”447 Though he tries to swing at his mother, a neighbor prevents him from harming her, and he runs away in frustration. After Reed returns, his mother remands him to a neighboring farmer that Reed’s own brother


447 Reed, 6.
describes repeatedly as a “slave holder.” The farmer does indeed treat (the black but free) Reed “like a slave”—stripping him, confining him, and beating him—and, in response, Reed burns down his house. At just ten years of age, Reed is subsequently convicted of arson and sentenced to ten years of detention in the New York House of Refuge: the country’s first reformatory for juveniles, which is to say, the US state’s first cage for children. Combining a prison, a school, and a foster home, Reed describes the House of Refuge as an overcrowded place structured by administrative discipline and characterized by labor and silence. Reed tries to escape twice. After completing six years of his sentence, Reed is released from the House of Refuge and indentured to a farmer in Rockland County, New York. The following year Reed is convicted of larceny and sentenced to “two years hard labor” at Auburn prison—a sentence that Reed describes as his “doom.” What he finds in Auburn, however, is indistinct from the House of Refuge. Again he is compelled to work, kept silent, and compelled to follow the rules through violence.

In addition to its aesthetic features—the ways in which, as Smith points out, it often resembles a carefully composed novel—the autobiography is striking for the ways in which it anticipates and prefigures a narrative common to twentieth century prison autobiographers, such as Edward Bunker, Jimmy Santiago Baca, Leonard Peltier, and Jack Henry Abbott. While the white Bunker writes from Los Angeles, the Chicano Baca writes from Arizona, the Native Peltier writes from Kansas and the Pacific Northwest, and the Asian American Abbott writes from Utah, each of them describes a childhood characterized by economic instability and emotional crisis.

---

448 Reed, 8.

449 Reed, 18.

450 Reed, 133.
That crisis precipitates harmful behavior, and that harm is remediated by the state. This state-sanctioned remediation manifests as carceral reform schools, group homes, and residential boarding schools, and these institutional sites produce behaviors, attitudes, needs, relations, opportunities, desires, and vulnerabilities that ultimately result in later durations of incarceration. Like Reed, who was sent to Auburn at just fifteen, many of these later autobiographers would be incarcerated in adult facilities while they were still children. What emerges across history, geography, and race then, is an experience of vulnerability, which was exploited by the state in order to reproduce that vulnerability.

Though these texts feature many of the same narrative tropes, I want to resist forming them into a literary genre. I want to contend, rather, that the commonalities of these narratives speaks to an experience that is common among, if not essential to, the lives of Native people, black people, Asian people, Chicano people, and working class white people. This experience is one of criminalization, which refers, on the one hand, to a social process where individuals are presumed to be socially deviant as a function of their membership in a racialized community and treated as such. On the other hand, criminalization refers to the social process that creates conditions conducive to the flourishing of harm within these racialized communities and the treatment of that harm as criminal. If depictions of this experience recurs across time, geography, and race, it is not because these writers, in their capacity as authors, were self-consciously engaged in an intertextual dialogue. It was not because they were passing around a common literary trope. Instead, they narrate, as unique to them, an experience that is common to working class people and non-white people of every class. In this way, they share a common form of life, which is expressed as a manifold across these disparate literary productions.
Jimmy Santiago Baca elaborates on “the process of criminalization” in his 2001 autobiography, *A Place to Stand*.\(^{451}\) Arrested for possession of heroin with intent to distribute at the age of twenty-one, Baca was subsequently sentenced to five years in Florence—one of Arizona state’s maximum-security prisons. “It was serious time in a serious place,” he writes in the book’s introduction. Nonetheless, he recalls neither shock nor fear:

No, prison was not new to me when I arrived at Florence; I had been preparing for it from an early age. I had visited it a thousand times in the screams of my father and my drunken uncles, in the tight-lipped scolding of my mother, in the shrill reprimands of the nuns at Saint Anthony’s orphanage; in all the finger-pointing adults who told me I didn’t belong, I didn’t fit in, I was a deviant. Security guards and managers followed me in store aisles; Anglo housewives walking toward me clutched their purses as I passed. I felt socially censured whenever I was in public, prohibited from entering certain neighborhoods and restaurants, mistrusted by government officials, treated as a flunky by schoolteachers, profiled by counselors as a troublemaker, taunted by police, and disdained by judges, because I had a Spanish accent and my skin was brown. Feeling inferior in a white world, alien and ashamed, I longed for another place to live, outside of society. By the time I arrived at Florence, a part of me felt I belonged there.\(^{452}\)

Criminalization, as Baca understands it, is a process whereby an individual is prepared for and pushed toward prison. This process alienates individuals from a social formation by treating them as alien to it, and it is manifested in, and manifested by, ordinary acts of distinction. These acts of distinction sit along a continuum: from generalized expressions of mistrust to punishments issued and enforced by the state; from a white woman tightening her grip on her purse to the domination of schoolteachers, police officers, and judges. “At any time,” Baca writes, “I could be swept up by the state, put in handcuffs, and given over to a stranger. I was at the mercy of state officials—state-clothed, housed, and fed, a number on a case file in an

\(^{451}\) Baca, *A Place to Stand*, 37.

\(^{452}\) Baca, *A Place to Stand*, 12.
office.”\textsuperscript{453} Not only are these actions predicated on Baca’s perceived racial identity—his “Spanish accent” and brown skin—but they, in turn, serve to alienate Baca from the “white world” of American life and push him towards people, places, and behaviors that are considered illicit. He is racialized because of some supposed criminality, and he is criminalized because of perceived racial difference. In this way, he is slotted into a process that precedes and exceeds him. Baca alludes to this when he notes the ways in which his family members were caught up in this process before he was born and the long shadow it cast over his sense of self. “[I]t remained a fixed, haunting reference point to which I would return to time and again,” he writes. “Whether I was approaching it or seeking escape from it, jail always defined in some way the measure of my life.”\textsuperscript{454}

As Reed highlights in his own narrative, he experienced similar forms of economic instability and racialized vulnerability to premature death. Instead of mediating the emotional crisis that economic instability and social vulnerability precipitated, however, the young Reed—not yet a teenager—was subject to forms of punishment unevenly applied across lines of race. Though he was never enslaved, for example, Reed understands his experiences as slave-like. Rather than correcting his behavior, these experiences cause Reed to lash out—a rebellious tendency that he conserved his entire life—and this lashing out results in his long term incarceration. Like Baca, Reed narrates an experience of racialized vulnerability, which is exploited and exacerbated, and that culminates in his incarceration. What he narrates, then, is his criminalization: an experience of being treated as though you are already a criminal and the

\textsuperscript{453} Baca, \textit{A Place to Stand}, 33.

\textsuperscript{454} Baca, \textit{A Place to Stand}, 11.
production of behavior, which has been criminalized. In these ways, Reed doesn’t so much anticipate the experience of incarceration in the twentieth century so much as he affirms that its logics, techniques, and targets have changed very little over the last 170 years.

On this point, then, *The Life and Adventures of a Haunted Convict* seems to affirm the civil death thesis. Incarcerated nearly two decades prior to the Civil War, Reed’s descriptions of incarceration echo the experience of enslavement narrated by authors such as Frederick Douglass, Harriet Jacobs, or Olaudah Equiano. Besides the captivity of incarceration, the compelled labor, and the regimented daily life, Reed repeatedly articulates a geographic dislocation from the “land of [his] nativity.” Like enslaved people, Reed and his fellow prisoners are disciplined through the application of arbitrary violence and routinized instability, which impress upon Reed a sense that he is permanently vulnerable to state-sanctioned violence. Moreover, as Reed details, this violence is meted out by lashes, which “leaves a deep cut in the back, causing the tender skin to burst while the blood flows freely down the back from the cuts it leaves, leaving the back entirely stripped with red.” The resemblance between this scene and the “primal scene” of racial subjection—the beating of his Aunt Hester that Fredrick Douglass describes in his *Narrative*—is glaring. However, while Reed is repeatedly distinguished as black by Auburn’s administrators, he underscores how these slavery-like conditions were applied

---

455 Reed, 26.

456 Reed, 40-41.

to non-black prisoners as well. Further, Reed describes an experience of being alienated, violated, and broken down by the prison rather than subordinate to it. He writes in one passage:

Having nothing more to do, and no more injury to commit on the state, I sat in the one corner of my cell and covered my face with both hands and gave way to a full flood of tears and silent reflections, and these was my reflection—that I entered the prison with my mother’s prayer printed upon my lips and my father’s blessing upon my head, endowed with good reason and ample store of good education, but you, ye dare face looking devils, have whip my mother’s prayers from my lips into curses, and beaten my father’s blessing from my head with a heavy hickory club, and took away from me all the good reason which God had endowed me with.

Prefiguring George Jackson’s twentieth century claim that “men are brutalized by their environment—not the reverse,” Reed describes an experience of being transformed by the prison, of being unmade by it. While he entered the House of Refuge as a child, endowed with certain capacities, the routinization and violence of prison has incapacitated him. In this way, Reed’s

---

458 Echoing Crèveœur’s marginalization of the Irish at the end of the nineteenth century, Reed narrates an escape from the House of Refuge. Reed and his fellow escapee Mike make their way to the home of Mike’s parents. After Mike is recaptured, the McCollough family—who “had a son in the Refuge” themselves—offers Reed a place to stay (36). When the policeman Mr. Hayes arrives to recapture Reed, he is accosted by Mr. McCollough who recalls Hayes’s kidnapping of the McCollough’s son just two years earlier (38). Sensing that Mr. McCollough is willing to come to blows with Hayes, Reed allows himself to be taken. When he returns back to the House of Refuge, Mike informs Reed that his punishment had been a whipping, which Reed details for his reader in depth (40-41). Witnessing the way the Irish Mike is punished, and having experienced Irish solidarity himself, Reed declares that “Reader, if you are on the right side of an Irishman, you have the best friend in the world” (43). Over three pages, Reed effusively praises the Irish and condemns the “dare devil Yankees” that have oppressed them—highlighting a convergence of Irish and black struggles for liberation (41). As Mr. McCollough highlights as well, these struggles are bound together through shared experiences of colonization, racialization, criminalization, and punishment. Though the subsequent history of the Irish and race is marked by the state and capital’s attempts to sever these bonds, Reed here underscores the ways in which punishment, while unevenly applied across race and ethnicity, is applied across these distinctions.

459 Reed, 163.

460 George Jackson, Soledad Brother, 19.
memoir allows us to grasp a logic and procedure of prisons which is inherent and persistent across time and space, and in spite of well-intentioned reforms. It demonstrates that the problems with contemporary prison cannot be reformed away, because they are the very thing that constitute prisons: structuring them, producing them, justifying them, and otherwise enabling their subsistence.

Likewise, the memoir and its critical reception shed light on the role that realist cultural forms play in the social reproduction of prisons. In addition to the prefiguration of carceral autobiographical tropes I identified above, the novel reflects those more contemporary narratives in another key way: it privileges reading and writing as means of ennobling oneself in prison.

“One year rolled away,” Reed writes early in his memoir, “and I found myself the master of a pen and the reader of a book, and a conqueror of arithmetic.”461 Reed’s appetite for reading quickly proves so voracious, in fact, that recalls being “called up before Mr. Williams the school teacher one day and laid across the stool, where [he] got fifteen cuts with the rattan for having more than one book in [his] desk.”462 However, these experiences of reading would remain, for Reed, an important, positive aspect of incarceration. After escaping the House of Refuge for the second time, Reed has an audience with Judge Smith. The judge knows Reed’s schoolteachers, Mr. Hart and Mr. Wood, and Reed identifies them as positive influences in his life. “Yes,” he says, “it is Mr. Wood that first gave me the little education that I now possess. It was the same gentleman that made so many improvements in our school house. He put a stage for us to speak poetry and pieces on, and a thousand other improvements did Mr. Wood make while he was

461 Reed, 25.

462 Reed, 26.
Despite being beaten by these very same instructors, Reed nonetheless represents them as progressive, reformist elements within the prison that managed to ennoble him in the face of incapacitation. This representation follows Judge Smith’s acknowledgement of his friendship with Mr. Hart and Mr. Wood, which circumscribes Reed’s preceding claims that he liked Hart and Wood. Through this exchange between prisoner and state-functionary, Reed depicts the dialectical way prison education is made to absolve prison of its sins. In this way, he again prefigures the ways in which twentieth century prison autobiographers represent reading and writing as means of escaping incarceration.

Unlike more contemporary prison writing, however, the relationship between Reed’s memoir and fiction is more vexed. Inverting the treatment of contemporary fiction and poetry by incarcerated people, which is taken as non-fiction, the discursive formation of Reed’s memoir has hinged on its resemblance to fiction. As I noted above, Caleb Smith in his editor’s introduction remarks on the ways in which Reed’s memoir flows, develops, contracts, and expands in the ways that novels often do and memoirs often do not. Indeed, Reed anticipates and prefigures narrative developments, alluding to future events and apostrophizing his reader. As with any good bildungsroman, Reed narrates his growth and maturation over the course of his experiences, and his narrative is rich with explosive drama and memorable characters. It is no wonder, then, that public-facing critics trade on its aesthetic features as much as its historical value.

---

463 Reed, 89.

464 Simply considering the blurbs on the 2017 Modern Library paperback edition of the book: Michiko Kakutani, writing for The New York Times, compares the book to work by Dickens and Defoe; while the Paris Review describes it as a “sensational, novelistic telling of an eventful live”; still other publications emphasis the narrative’s propulsion, drama, structure.
This emphasis on the memoir’s resemblance to a novel bears noting given the memoir’s own description of novels. Though he shares an elective affinity for Robinson Crusoe, Reed notes later in the memoir that:

I despise the looks of a novel. The cursed infernal things, I can’t bear the sight of one. They are a curse to everyone that reads them. I never could bear the looks of them. They are pack full of lies. They are a store House of lies. I never could take any comfort in reading them. Give me the history of some great and good man who is laboring for the welfare of his country, like Wm. H. Seward, who is fighting against the world of enemies every day for the promotion and benefit of his country, and laboring with a strong arm for to crush vice and crime and morality under the feed of the world. That is such a book which I love to read. Novels are books that will bring many a young man to a gloomy cell, and many a weeping mothers to their graves.465

In contrast to his statements later in the memoir, Reed echoes a still ongoing debate regarding the effects of reading fiction. Here he adopts the position that fiction is deleterious—so deleterious, in fact, that reading fiction precipitates incarceration. Consequently, he legitimizes the treatment of literature by incarcerated people as non-fiction because it is edifying rather than deleterious. In this way, we might say that Reed is a carceral realist avant la lettre. However, given that Reed frequently adopts aesthetics more characteristic of the novel, his text’s own status as non-fiction is not as stable as he insists. He changes dates and names, condenses history, writes under a pseudonym, intentionally conceals aspects of his narrative, ends it arbitrarily,. Recently, critic Rebecca Kling has even gone as far as arguing that Reed’s memoir is structurally and tropologically a re-writing of Robinson Crusoe. Though, as she points out, Reed himself understands Defoe’s novel as a history rather than fiction.466 In the text, as in discourse on the

465 Reed, 65-66.

text, fact and fiction are confused. While this makes it difficult to draw conclusions about the
text vis-a-vis fiction, this discursive blur speaks to the ways in which fiction is routinely taken as
non-fiction and nonfiction appropriates the aesthetics of fiction. Though they are often
understood as one another’s negation, they are actually inseparable. If this is true of Reed’s
memoir, it is because it is true of all texts more generally. Written at a time (and under
conditions) when the border between fact and fiction was less precisely policed, Reed’s memoir
opens up this general condition of textuality even as it frustrates efforts to draw neat conclusions
about it.
Chapter Four:  
(Counter)Revolution and the College Campus  

As I have pointed out in chapters one and two, H. Bruce Franklin’s 1978 monograph, *The Victim as Criminal and Artist*, stands as the first academic study of prison writing and its publication inaugurates the institutionalized literary study of prison. Because it serves as the discipline’s founding text, nearly all scholarship on prison writing as a genre makes reference to Franklin in some form or fashion.\(^{467}\) Most commonly, this reference takes a binary form in which the critic treat Franklin’s ideas as either settled ground or something to be dispensed with entirely. In this way, Franklin’s work has served as a crucial work in the institutionalization of prison literary studies and, therefore, an important role in the formation of carceral realism. In contrast with this critical tendency, however, I have attempted to treat *The Victim as Criminal and Artist* as an internally contradictory text that intervenes in literary study, that runs up against its limits, and that creates the conditions necessary for its readers’ supersession of those limits. As Franklin himself gestures toward in his introduction, these qualities are a function of the historical conjuncture that he’s writing from. In his introduction, he observes that

> The social upheaval of 1964-72 had had some effect on every institution, and almost every individual, in American society. Certainly it changed my own life and thinking profoundly. This book itself is a product of the changes forced upon my outlook and upon our literature, and it will end by attempting to show some of the ongoing–and deepening–cultural changes flowing from these events.\(^{468}\)

---

\(^{467}\) See, Harlow, 10; Rodriguez, 81; Larson, 154; Mirpuri, 48; Porterfield, 81 n5.  

\(^{468}\) Franklin, xviii.
A product of social changes and an attempt to deepen them, *The Victim as Criminal and Artist* is both a symbol and consequence of the various movements for liberation that characterized the late 1960s and early 1970s. It is not merely a reaction to those movements, then, but an attempt to build upon their political interventions and extend them into a specific field of knowledge. Indeed, throughout the text we find Franklin highlighting the work of politically radical authors, drawing historical connections to earlier modes of captivity, and drawing connections to contemporaneous political struggles. By extending these struggles into literary study, Franklin allows us to recognize the discipline itself as a place where values and practices are fought over through various means. Literary study is, in other words, a site of contestation: a dynamic field of prevailing and countervailing forces, which condition and constrain Franklin’s work. If these conditions include the social upheaval of 1964-72, then the constraints must include the period of repression that followed. In this way, *The Victim as Criminal and Artist* (and carceral realism as a consequence) is structured as much by the neoliberal counter-revolution of the late ’70s as the rebellions of the late ‘60s: a dual character that offers us insight into how that repression functioned in literary study and in the formation of carceral realism.

From this perspective, we can situate Franklin’s work on prison writing within a period of counter-insurgency, which sought to resolve a social crisis without antagonizing the underlying conditions that had engendered the crisis in the first place. By bringing prison writing into the university, he brought it under the auspices of the university and subject it to the neoliberal logics of knowledge production that were emerging at the time. Resting upon the infrastructure that earlier generations of scholars and university administrators had composed, and needing to produce an object of knowledge that was legible to these parties, these new logics consisted of racial privatization, depoliticization, and the formulation of unique, disciplinary
techniques and objects, which became the basis of inter-racial competition. One could now become an expert in prison writing by producing knowledge about prisons without the input of prisoners, for example, and they could circulate it as though it were a commodity. In doing so, the expert could now accumulate prestige that functioned like capital, giving the expert power over the (re)production of knowledge. They could police its boundaries and punish transgressions of those boundaries. As I illustrated in chapter one, the currency of institutionalized prison literary study was authenticity and realism, which formed the basis of expertise (the power to determine authenticity) and racial privatization (marking certain people as fit and unfit to know on the basis of their identity). The political effect of this commodification has been the mystification of prison and the depoliticization of prisoners.

While Franklin repeatedly struggles against this depoliticization, his text functions within a discourse structured by and through the confounding of those intentions. Accordingly, Franklin represents prison writing as a primarily black literary tradition rather than an eminently multi-racial one, which has contributed to a popular misunderstanding of prison as a technology of violence levied exclusively against black people. Likewise, he overrepresents the radical politics of prisoners such as George Jackson while, at the same time, occluding the long, multi-racial history of anarchist and socialist prisoner-authors such as Emma Goldman, Eugene Debs, C.L.R James, Alexander Berkman, Ricardo Flores Magón, and Benjamin Davis. As a result, *The Victim as Criminal and Artist* inhibits rather than facilitates anti-prison solidarity across lines of race and blinds us to the fact that prisoners are multi-racial group with diverse politics who are struggling among themselves over concepts and ideas, experiences and interpretations, strategies and tactics.

In opposition to that incapacitation, this chapter argues that struggles against prisons and
police unify black, Asian, native, and Chicano people without effacing the differences that distinguish them from one another. To that end, this chapter focuses on the concept of policing, which conditions the possibility of capital accumulation through the production and management of populations considered surplus from the perspective of capital. In this way, policing represents a social function and a social process: a production that includes the dialectical processes of racialization and criminalization, which produce populations as surplus and manage them through surveillance and punishment. As this chapter demonstrates, this management of surplus populations (and their production as surplus) includes the management of the knowledge they produce as well as the knowledge that institutions produce about them. It even includes the production of people who can do that managing for the state. It includes the production of knowledge producers and culture workers who can act on behalf of the state as though its interests were their own. In order to study the conditions under which and processes whereby this knowledge is produced, this chapter offers an account of the contemporary formation of ethnic studies. In doing so, it elaborates the broader social and institutional context in which institutional prison literature emerges while, at the same time, mapping the more general institutional logics by which it operates. Moreover, this emphasis on ethnic studies allows me to highlight the role police and prison have played in the regulation of Asian American and Chicano life, which include their role in regulating knowledge about these communities. What this emphasis allows, in other words, is an opportunity to broaden my readers’ sense of what the PIC entails and includes while allowing me to further explore the role that the university more generally plays in the social reproduction of prisons and the police. Moreover, it allows me to explore the ways in which Chicanx and Asian American literatures are conscripted to enforce and reinforce carceral realism—despite the ways in which they are frequently represented as
oppositional or resistant to prisons and the police.

The Police

The nature of policing and its role in the institutionalization of knowledge is perhaps best illuminated by an abolitionist reading of Oscar Zeta Acosta’s 1973 novel, *The Revolt of the Cockroach People*. A fictionalized account of Acosta’s own experiences with the Chicano movement in Los Angeles at the end of the 1960s, the novel traces the political development of Acosta’s thinly veiled stand-in, Buffalo Brown. Like Acosta himself, Brown ran for LA County Sheriff, and his platform had only one plank. “If I were elected Sheriff,” Brown tells an audience of radio listeners,” I would make every attempt to dissolve the office.” He goes on to describe the law enforcement officers as “professional killers,” noting that they exist “for the maintenance of the status quo…The police are the violent arm of the rich and I would get rid of them.”

Here, then, he articulates a theory of the police: they are murderers who serve at the behest of the capitalists; they cannot be reformed; they must be destroyed. In addition to this destructive imperative, as Héctor Calderón points out, Acosta’s actual Sheriff campaign included reconstructive dimensions. New processes and institutions for social ordering would be developed, such as community review boards that would assess the community’s needs and allocate necessary resources. Despite a forceful critique of the police, however, Acosta’s efforts to abolish its logic are frustrated. Many of the alternatives he proposes, for instance, were

---


470 Acosta, 136.

merely policing by another name. This contradiction between abolitionist rhetoric and reformist policy structures the novel, as well as the discourse on it. In contrast with typical readings of the novel, which have tended to treat Acosta (and the novel) as either sincere or cynical, revolutionary or buffoon, I try to wrestle with this contradiction by treating him as both at the same time. Although he was a blustery, narcissistic, celebrity hound, he nonetheless offers a perspicacious theory of policing. In fact, it was so compelling that Acosta garnered nearly 110,000 votes for Sheriff.\textsuperscript{472} Despite these political insights, however, he nonetheless reproduces the logic of policing. By recognizing him as neither a philosopher nor a clown but both \textit{at once}, we can better understand the tension that structures \textit{The Revolt of the Cockroach}. Through such an investigation, the logic structuring Chicano studies opens up to us as well.

Perhaps the most efficacious place to begin is at a campaign event, which see Brown theorizing the police for a group of UCLA students. Following Angela Davis and Rodolfo Gonzalez, Brown rises to speak. While he agrees with the statements of Davis and Gonzalez, Brown strikes a sharp contrast with them, telling the audience that “you’re fucked!”\textsuperscript{473} He goes on, insisting that

\begin{quote}
You don’t know what you’re screaming! You don’t know what you’re asking for! Do you realize that when it comes down to it…and it will come down, believe me…When the fires start up, when the pigs come to take us all, what will you do? Will you hide behind your skin? Behind your school colors? Will you tell the arresting officers that you are with the rebels? Will you join up with the Chicanos and blacks? Or will you run back to the homes of your fathers in Beverly Hills, in Westwood, in Canoga park? Will you be with us when the going gets rough?\textsuperscript{474}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{472} Calderón, 93.

\textsuperscript{473} Acosta, 180.

\textsuperscript{474} Acosta, 179-180.
Although the audience is alienated by these remarks—he is called a “creep” and told to “fuck off” by one student—what Brown asserts here is merely the reality of anti-capitalist, anti-imperialist, anti-racist political struggle in the United States: a confrontation with the police is inevitable; historically, this confrontation has been brutal.\(^{475}\) Moreover, Acosta suggests, his audience may have to be brutal themselves. From the preponderance of the second person pronoun, “you,” and the insistence that his audience confront their own family members in wealthy and predominantly white neighborhoods, we can infer that Brown is speaking to a primarily wealthy, white audience: a group of people for whom political violence is unfamiliar. Indeed, it is precisely this distance from death and death-making that marks them as white, and sets them apart from the Chicano people Brown claims to speak for. “Death at the hands of the pigs is nothing new to us,” he tells the crowd, and resistance to this death necessarily involves self-defensive violence.\(^{476}\) While this truth may be ugly to the UCLA students, it is one that Brown insists they grapple with if they are ever going to align their actions with their values. Will Brown’s audience ally themselves with the rebels in practice as well as theory? Will they retreat into the arms of the state they claim to hate? While these questions are challenging—and impossible to answer until the police are kicking your door in or disappearing your neighbor—they are important ones to grapple with, because solidarity with Chicano people and their struggle means making sacrifices. It means risking something. It means waging war, and war is ugly. If the students cannot accept this ugliness, if they will indeed turn and run in the face of it, then they have no place in the struggle.

\(^{475}\) Acosta, 180

\(^{476}\) Acosta, 179.
In the novel’s opening chapter, Acosta underscores this ugliness of Chicano struggle by depicting a firsthand experience of it. Here, Acosta narrates a protest at the St. Basil cathedral on Christmas Eve, 1969. Occupying 40,000 square feet of land in what was, at the time, an underdeveloped sector of the city, the cathedral was controversial from its inception. As a spokesperson for La Raza told the L.A. Times, “it is a $3 million structure that graphically illustrates the misapplication of funds which should be devoted to the poor and to social justice.” Accordingly, the cathedral was a site of protests from its June 1969 dedication onward, and these protests erupted into violence late on Christmas eve. “The peaceful demonstrations contrasted sharply with a demonstration early Christmas morning,” Dan Thrapp wrote in the L.A. Times, “when a general melee erupted outside the church.” Four days earlier, the same paper had offered a less moderated account, describing the event with the front-page headline: “Club-Swinging Mob Breaks into Church at Christmas Mass.” Like Thrapp, whose article draws mostly on quotes from the Archdiocese that operates the church, this headline acknowledges the violence of the event while casting the protestors as its instigators and the church itself as its innocent victim. Through the eyes of the mass media, they are a “mob,” an irrational, unorganized, depoliticized collective; they “broke” into the church and are, therefore, criminals. Consequently, the violence they were met with was deemed just and necessary.

---


478 Thrapp, 3.

Offering one of the only accounts of the protests in any form, and the only from the perspective of the protestors, Acosta depicts this experience of Chicano criminalization from the perspective of the criminalized Chicanos. As he narrates it, the church is spatially embedded in a nexus of dispossession and capital accumulation. Physically standing beside “The Bank of America, Coast Federal Savings, and all those other money institutions that sit in judgment of our lives,” the church helps constitute a capitol of capital, which must be militarily defended from insurgents.⁴⁸⁰ Indeed, Brown observes that outside the church are “SOC [Special Operations Conspiracy] Squad desperados standing in formation. Clubs and pistols with dum-dum bullets. Solid helmets with plastic visors from the moon of Mars. Ugly ants with transistor radios, walkie-talkies and tear gas canisters dangling from their hips. There are fifty pigs waiting for us to make the wrong move.”⁴⁸¹ As historian Ernesto Vigil explains in his account of Chicano militancy and the US government’s war on dissent, the SOC squad was composed almost entirely of Mexican-American officers and it functioned to infiltrate and repress Chicano social movements that the city saw as a threat. Affirming Acosta’s description, Vigil points out that the SOC was highly militarized and they regularly used deception to provoke Chicano militants into conflicts as a pretense to wield extraordinary violence.⁴⁸² In Revolt of the Cockroach People, for instance, violence only erupts when a young man named Gilbert is grabbed by someone he believes to be a church usher and lashes out. “And then it comes upon us in a wave,” Acosta

⁴⁸⁰ Acosta, 12.

⁴⁸¹ Acosta, 14.

⁴⁸² For a fuller account of the SOC and the relationship between the police and Chicano communities during the early 1970s, see Ernesto Vigil, The Crusade for Justice: Chicano Militancy and the Government’s War on Dissent (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1999), 130-150.
writes: “it isn’t an usher. The police have tricked us again!” In response, “the vestibule explodes as men in blue run in formation swinging two feet of solid mahogany” while five other would-be ushers reveal themselves as police and pepper-spray the crowd. In response, the crowd of Chicanos erupts in every direction, “swinging and screaming and shouting, and we are into a full-scale riot in the blue vestibule of the richest church in town”—a description, it is worth noting, that bears a profound resemblance to the strike-turned-riot that Edward Bunker depicts in The Animal Factory.

Anticipating Brown’s later assertions that Chicanos “are the Viet Cong of America” and “Tooner Flats is Mylai,” what Acosta describes here is a warzone. Indeed, this framework of war suffuses the scene, and textures it for the reader. Before the conflagration, Brown observes how the “The young wear clothes for battle…olive-drab field jacks and paratrooper boots spit-shined like those of the old veteranos who once went to war against America’s enemies.” After the conflict has subsided, Brown “scans the battlefield” and encourages others to “go home, shower up and regroup here for another battle.” While critics such as Jayson Sae-Saue have correctly noted the “troublesome contradictions” engendered by Acosta’s warfare metaphor, they have also noted its efficacy “in unifying Chicana/o protestors into an organized

---

483 Acosta, 16.
484 Acosta, 16.
485 Acosta, 16.
486 Acosta, 200.
487 Acosta, 12.
488 Acosta, 19; 20.
and massive presence.” If it is indeed effective in galvanizing and mobilizing Chicanos, as the novel itself would have us believe, then perhaps it is because the description speaks to an experience of being policed that is common among, if not essential to, Chicano people: the police produce a pretense to beat, arrest, and jail Chicano people, because they are already assumed to be criminals. Through this application of power, the state reifies this presumption and lays the groundwork for future perceptions of Chicano’s as innately criminal. What’s more, this police power enforces and reinforces spatial arrangements that entail dispossession, extraction, and the overdevelopment of wealthier, whiter communities at the cost of underdeveloping poorer, browner communities. In addition to directly producing individuals as criminals, then, the police indirectly conditioned behaviors, practices, needs, desires, and relations that have been criminalized. This process of criminalization is legitimated and redoubled by the discursive construction of Chicanos as criminal, which is affected by bourgeois media such as the L.A. Times. In this way, Tooner Flats, like Mylai, is what James Baldwin once called Harlem: “occupied territory.” The US state is there to wage war.

By framing the experience of criminalization in terms of war, Acosta attunes us to the ways in which “policing has arguably never been distinct from a kind of civil warfare.” Indeed, as historian Nikhil Pal Singh demonstrates in his account of Race and America’s Long War, these twinned political projects constitute one another through a dialectical relationship.

---

Jayson Gonzales Sae-Saue, *Southwest Asia: The Transpacific Geographies of Chicana/o Literature* (New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 2016), 34.


They share language, attitudes, personnel, and resources. The Korean and Vietnam wars were, for example, considered “police actions” by the United States, while the police have waged too many “wars on…” poverty, crime, drugs, terror to catalog. More than mere rhetoric, however, these metaphors evince a long history whereby policing and warfare have materially shaped each other’s ends and means. August Vollmer, for example, is often referred to as “the father of modern law enforcement” for his role in founding the country’s first criminal justice program at University of California at Berkeley in 1916. Berkeley’s first police chief, as well as the first chief in the country to centralize police records, the first officer to utilize a lie detector test, and a prolific writer of academic literature on policing, Vollmer trained untold numbers of police officers, helping to professionalize them and modernize their policing techniques. Rather than generating these standards and practices ex nihilo, however, Vollmer drew on his own experiences administrating the US colonial occupation of the Philippines between 1898 and 1899.\footnote{For a fuller history of Vollmer, see Alex Vitale, The End of Policing (New York: Verso, 2018), 39-43.} In addition to chattel slavery and strike breaking, then, the form and function of modern policing also has its genesis in colonial occupation and warfare.\footnote{For a fuller account of the multiple genealogies that converge to form the contemporary police, see Kristian Williams, Our Enemies in Blue: Police and Power in America, 3rd ed. (Oakland: AK Press, 2015).} In concert with Singh, historian Stuart Schrader has recently demonstrated that this interplay between warfare and policing has become especially pronounced in the post-WWII period such that, since the 1960s, counterinsurgency has become the prevailing modus operandi for police and the military. Preceding the insurgency it claims to react to, counterinsurgency is an anticipatory practice that links “security imperatives” (policing) to “economic uplift” (capital accumulation) by
preempting “symbolic and other violence against people and property that was organized, collective, and addresses to capital and state.”

From this perspective, we can recognize prisons and the police as counter-insurgent mechanisms that fabricate a social order.

In fact, as Mark Neocleous lays out in his *Critical Theory of Police Power*, the term “police” itself derives from the 16th century French “policie,” which referred to the ongoing administration of a community. Under capitalist modernity, this administrative project serves to reproduce the conditions of capitalist social reproduction, which is to say, it involves the compulsion and coercion of labor in order to “drive out what from the perspective of capital appear to be modes of life that are either useless or antithetical to accumulation (usually both).” In this way, the police function as part of what Marx describes as primitive accumulation, which is “nothing else than the historical process of divorcing the producer from the means of production.” This process is, in other words, the ongoing alienation of people from their means of subsistence, which are thereby transformed into capital. It is the

---


496 Neocleous, 21.

497 Marx, *Capital*, 432.

498 While there has been a long debate about whether or not Marx understood primitive accumulation as a historical moment or process (see, Roberts), it seems clear to me that he meant us to understand this concept as a historical precondition for capital accumulation that needs to reproduce itself historically across time as a necessary feature of capitalist social reproduction. William Clare Roberts, “What was Primitive Accumulation?: Reconstructing the Origin of a Critical Concept,” *European Journal of Political Theory*, vol. 19, no. 4 (2020).
reification of the capital relation through the production and regulation of the working class and the relative-surplus populations that constitute “a mass of human material always ready for exploitation.”499 After all, it is the police who enforce the power of landlords by evicting tenants, arresting trespassers, and criminalizing homelessness; it is the police who enforce the power of bosses by breaking strikes and defending scab labor; it is police who reify the privatization of property by punishing theft and enforcing the boundaries of property. It is, in other words, the police who prevent people from living for free and it is the police who punish anyone who tries to.

Following Neocleous, we can understand policing “as an activity and process rather than an institution or organization.”500 Rather than being assigned merely to people with badges, this social function is diffused throughout the entire social body and while it is most fully embodied by uniformed police officers, it is also executed by doctors, lawyers, teachers, social workers, and parents: those vested with authority by the state. Policing is, in fact, the use of this authority to discipline subjects so that they better conform with the conduct prescribed by the state. This is to say that policing is the social production of law-abiding citizens. However, as Jacques Derrida has demonstrated in his deconstruction of the “mystical foundations of authority,” the legitimacy of policing is formed through the very application of the power that claims such legitimacy as its basis. Drawing on Walter Benjamin’s distinction between law-conserving and law-founding violence, or law enforcement and law making, Derrida destabilizes this opposition to argue that policing brings the law into being by enforcing it. “Conservation in its turn refounds,” as he puts


500 Neocleous, 21.
it, “so that it can conserve what it claims to found.”"\textsuperscript{501} Or, put differently: the law is an abstraction that exists only at its point of manifestation. By enforcing it, policing makes law by materializing it, making it real, reifying it. Naturalized, this law then serves as the foundation from which policing claims to derive its powers of enforcement. In this way, the defense of law creates the power to defend law because, like capital, state power has to circulate to exist. From this perspective, we can understand policing as the ongoing (re)constitution of the state (“law in its greatest force”) through its application, which creates citizens, or, those individuals who are subjects of and to the law.\textsuperscript{502} It is no wonder, then, that Louis Althusser offers “the most common everyday police (or other) hailing: ‘Hey, you there!’” as the paradigmatic instance of interpellation.\textsuperscript{503} In this exchange, the consent to be policed is demanded and given over, compelled and extracted by the presumption that the demand is always already legitimate.

While a growing consensus among scholars maintains that police power is unevenly applied across lines of class, race, gender, and sexuality, the Center for Research on Criminal Justice (CRCJ) noted as early as 1975 that “it is clear that the police have primarily served to enforce the class, racial, sexual, and cultural oppression that has been an integral part of the development of capitalism in the US.”\textsuperscript{504} Indeed, as historians and sociologists such as Khalil

\begin{footnotes}
\item[502] Derrida, “Force of Law,” 34.
\item[504] Center for Research on Criminal Justice, 11.
\end{footnotes}
Gibran Muhammed, Luanna Ross, and Kelly Lytle-Hernandez have more recently demonstrated, prisons and police have historically served as flexible technologies for the dispossesession and dismemberment of political communities who refuse or otherwise fail to conform to bourgeois values and practices regarding work, value, leisure, punishment, family, sex, et al. Because these bourgeois values and practices are racialized white, this has meant the criminalization of Native and Chicano people, poor whites, free blacks, and Asian immigrants across different geographies. This criminalization sanctions state violence, which takes the form of arrest, imprisonment, eviction, beating, murder, and the separation of children from their parents. Although vigilantism, which is to say extralegal violence, is often represented as the antithesis of law enforcement, the CRCJ argues that “[t]his model is inadequate and ignores the integral role that vigilante action has played within the ruling class imposed legal order.”

The role of anti-black extralegal violence in the regulation of social life (and its collusion with the state) has been well documented, but historians William Carrigan and Clive Webb and Monica Munoz Martinez have more recently demonstrated how analogous violence was used to similar effect in landscapes other than the US south and on differently racialized communities. This extralegal violence serves as the avant-garde of legal violence: going where it does not yet extend and, at the same time, serving as the justification for expansion.

This collusion between legal and extralegal power with the shared goal of appropriating land and compelling labor according to race is powerfully illustrated by Gloria Anzaldúa, whose

---

505 Center for Research on Criminal Justice, 28.

poem “We Call Them Greasers” adopts the perspective of an Anglo-American settler who dispossesses Chicanos from their land through the assertion of self-evident state power. “I showed ‘em a piece of paper with some writing,” Anzaldúa writes,

tole ‘em they owed taxes
had to pay right away or be gone by manana
By the time me and my men had waved
that same piece of paper to all the families
it was all frayed at the ends.507

Purporting to wield legal power, which is supported by the threat of legal violence, the speaker and his posse comitatus plunder the Chicanos: seizing their land or whatever money they may have. Though, as the passages’ concluding lines suggest, the settler’s claims to the land are fabricated, the threat of violence is compelling and convincing. If it is so, perhaps it is because when the Chicanos “appealed to the courts./ It was a laughing stock.”508 Even when it is not carried out at the behest of the state, the settler’s seizure of land is sanctioned by the state and supported by state power precisely because its targets are Chicano and its beneficiaries white. When this application of state power is not sufficient to compel the Chicanos off their land, the settlers resort to extralegal violence, which here takes the form of ritualized rape. Narrated from the perspective of the settler, this sexual violence against Chicanas is itself framed as the appropriation property, as the seizure of something that belongs to the Chicanos. Having dispossessed the Chicanos of their land and their women, the settlers punctuate the scene with a lynching.509 Featuring numerous aspects of the racialized class war that characterizes Chicano

---


508 Anzaldúa 156.

509 Anzaldúa 156.
life, the scene crystalizes the historical project of settler colonialism: its agents, its means, its ends, and the death and suffering left in its wake.

Although Acosta and Anzaldúa provide their readers with a perspicacious account of policing’s role in the fabrication of social order, we also find them fulfilling that very social function elsewhere in their respective texts. Emerging from the Chicano movement to articulate a national identity—a political community constructed as “the people”—Acosta’s novel develops a distinct Chicano identity. Although critic David J. Vásquez argues that Acosta articulates a kind of “insurgent nationalism” that undermines “liberal political notions of self, community, and the nation,” Acosta plainly narrates Chicano nation-formation as a racial formation, constructing it through the disavowal of Asian and blacks life and an appropriation of indigeneity. 510 As part of his legal defense for those involved in the St. Basil riot, for example, Brown narrates a history of colonization and Chicano dispossession, attributing to “the people,” a belief in themselves as neither American nor Mexican. 511 Rather, “We are Chicanos from Aztlan. We have never left our land.” 512 As a legal and cultural strategy, then, Brown and Acosta both posit the existence of a political community (nation) defined by biology (race) that claims a legal entitlement to the land as a function of their nativity. However, as Acosta’s biographer Illan Stavan’s notes, the term indio, or Indian, was ubiquitous in Acosta’s childhood home, and his parents used it as a


511 Acosta, 161.

512 Acosta, 161.
pejorative to distinguish civilized from uncivilized people.\textsuperscript{513} This is to say, in other words, that while Acosta constructs Chicanos as indigenous, his biography speaks to a construction of Chicano identity over and against indigeneity, as separate and superior. In this way, Acosta appropriates indigeneity to advance political claims and thereby legitimate Chicano political identity within a settler colonial political order while, at the same time, obscuring the ways in which he himself (like many Chicanos) has been alienated from indigeneity as a function of that political order. Part and parcel of this nation-making project, and the settler colonial logic organizing it, is Acosta’s patriarchal masculinism. As literary critic Marc Priewe argues, Acosta’s novel “remains ideologically tied to male-centered and male-dominated national discourse, which denies the liberation of Chicanas from internal oppression and discrimination.”\textsuperscript{514} Indeed, throughout the text, we find Acosta cataloging Brown’s perceptions of women \textit{ad nauseum}. Before he even begins his defense of the St. Basil twenty-one, in fact, his “mind spasms back into the past…” as he zones out recalling the legs of a female colleague from law school.\textsuperscript{515} Throughout, Brown perceives women as sexual objects, as property and commodity.

This masculinist-nationalist character of Acosta’s novel is most evident in one of the book’s earliest scenes, which sees Brown visit his sister, Teresa, in the L.A. suburbs. Describing


\textsuperscript{514} Marc Priewe, "Turn on, Tune in and Drop out in East Los Angeles: Reflexive Nationalism and Urban Space in Oscar Zeta Acosta's \textit{The Revolt of the Cockroach People}," \textit{Arizona Quarterly}, vol. 74, no. 1 (2018), 85.

\textsuperscript{515} Acosta, 158.
it as a “homestead,” Acosta details Teresa’s “huge breadbox with a white picket fence, a kidney in the back yard for swimming, and a two-car garage.” Outside, all the lawns are mowed and “[k]ids on mini-bikes are criss-crossing” in the street. What Acosta illustrates, in other words, is an image of white bourgeois suburbia straight out of *Leave it to Beaver*. Even the interior, with its “Keane paintings of big-eyed children,” speaks to the racially homogenous and mass produced character of the bourgeois culture that dominates suburban life. The use of “homestead” to frame this description of white, bourgeois life casts it as the historical reiteration of earlier colonial settlements, which implies a contemporary analog for the genocidal wars that preceded those historical encampments. Here, that settler warfare is represented by Teresa’s husband, who works for the US army against the Chicanos of Southeast Asia: the Viet Cong. Supporting and allowing herself to be supported by settler warfare and global policing, which is to say genocide and extraction, Teresa positions herself as the beneficiary of colonialism and thereby whitens herself: a process codified by her marrying a white man and symbolized by her changing her surname to Hurley.

Though Acosta represents her as a class traitor, Brown does not afford her the requisite agency to betray. Instead, he sees her as “a sexual object” that has been expropriated by a “blue-eyed fag” who has “trapped, chained” his sister with the “promise of more make-up and

---

516 Acosta, 24-25.
517 Acosta, 25.
518 Acosta, 25.
519 Acosta, 25.
Capital seduced her from him, and she is its prisoner. It is not, however, his sister’s captivity that affronts Brown. It is her subordination to a white man. From this perspective, class war is transfigured into race war, which is expressed as a competition between would-be patriarchs, a competition between masculinities. Brown understands the competition over Teresa to be a question of reproducing la raza: a group over which, Brown presupposes, men enjoy a hegemony. In this way, Acosta formulates Chicano national identity as a racial identity, which is expressed as a patriarchal identity in order to lay legal claim to state power. Consequently, Acosta reenacts the possessive and patriarchal logic of domination that has long been at the heart of racial capitalism and settler colonialism.

Developing in tandem with Acosta (and the literary-political cohort he represents) was a critical response to this masculinism. Though Lorna Dee Cervantes was publishing critiques of patriarchal revolutionaries as early as 1975, this feminist tendency in Chicana literature is most often represented by Anzaldúa, who stands in for a whole cohort of Chicana authors who were incorporated into the academy during the 1980s. These women contested the notion that “[m]ales make the rules and laws; women transmit them,” as Anzaldúa herself puts it in her 1987 collection of philosophy and poetry, *Borderlands*. Like Acosta, Anzaldúa perspicaciously identifies the border as an abstraction materialized by state-sanctioned violence. This border exists to distinguish white people from “aliens—whether they possess documents or not, whether

---

520 Acosta, 24; 26.

521 For a fuller account of how the social and legal domestication and objectification of women has historically served as a key instance of primitive accumulation, see Silvia Federici, *Caliban and the Witch* (Brooklyn: Autonomedia, 2004).

522 Anzaldúa, 38.
they’re Chicanos, Indians or Blacks.” In contrast with Acosta, however, much of Borderlands pivots on a diagnosis and critique of the ways in which Chicanx people are socialized into a culture that dominates women by holding them as property, which is justified as the protection of their femininity, and extracting value from their (socially and biologically) reproductive labor. “Women are at the bottom of the ladder,” Anzaldúa writes, “one rung above the deviants.” As she goes on to write, this deviance is acutely embodied by queer people, who are subject to intense violence and social abandonment because they do not reproduce themselves biologically and are therefore perceived as failures to faithfully reproduce Chicano life. In this way, Anzaldúa accuses Chicano culture of harboring patriarchal masculinity as a constitutive feature.

“Chicano culture,” however, is figured here as those cultural practices characteristic of Chicano life. Chicano life is, from this perspective, anything Chicano people do. “Being Chicano,” then, is not a matter of participating in particular cultural forms. Rather, the nature of those cultural forms is a function of their participants’ identity. What, then, makes someone Chicano? For Anzaldúa, they are a biologically unified and distinct community: a race. Drawing upon Jose Vasconcelos’ concept of la raza cosmica, Anzaldúa envisions the emergence of a mestiza race, a mixed or hybrid race. “At the confluence of two or more genetic streams,” she writes, “with chromosomes constantly ‘crossing over,’ this mixture of races, rather than resulting in an inferior being, provides hybrid progeny. From this racial, ideological, cultural, and

---

523 Anzaldúa, 25.
524 Anzaldúa, 39.
525 Anzaldúa, 40.
biological cross-pollination, an ‘alien’ consciousness is presently in the making.” Although she strives to articulate an emergent form of consciousness, she repeatedly grounds her repudiation of racism in a language of the body, in discourse of genetics and chromosomes. She thereby conserves race as a biological quality and reinscribes Chicanos as a biological community rather than a cultural or political one. In doing so, she reconstructs and thereby conserves the racial logic underpinning the masculinist logic that she critiques. It follows from this racial logic that, if Chicano life is to be reproduced, it must be reproduced biologically. As such, the means of biological reproduction become the primary sites of social reproduction. By conserving a racialist conception of Chicano identity, then, Anzaldúa conserves her object of critique. She renders Chicanx wombs as something over which different genders must compete if they want to control the reproduction of Chicano social life. Even as she critiques the masculinism of her cultural antecedents, Anzaldúa hereby maintains the logic that underpins it and ensures its discursive persistence.

In these ways Revolt of the Cockroach People and Borderlands exemplify a critical tendency within Chicano literary history, and indeed across ethnic American literary canons. Like countless other Chicano texts of the 1960s and ‘70s, which emerge in concert with and in response to movements for Chicano liberation, Revolt of the Cockroach People offers a robust critique of Chicano dispossession and alienation that centers prisons and the police in those processes. Coming out of these movements, these texts extended and expanded what was, in many ways, a revolutionary energy that contested the status quo of American social life. However, these revolutionary qualities are undermined by the texts’ residual elements of the very

526 Anzaldúa, 99.
social order it was revolutionizing: the reassertion of the patriarchal logic of possession that underpins its objects of critique and the racial privatization of common political struggles. They limit themselves, in other words, by recourse to “the people.” Writing with this patriarchal hangover, Anzaldúa, and the queer, feminist response to those conditions she exemplifies, likewise conserve the object of their critique through their critique: repudiating sexism on the basis of racial identity and thereby reinscribing race as the structural foundation of Chicano literary production. As I elaborate in the following section, however, this dialectic of critique and conservation is not an essential quality of Chicano literary production nor is it an inescapable rhetorical maneuver. Rather, *Revolt of the Cockroach People* and *Borderlands* crystallize a cultural logic that highlights the antagonism between Chicano life and the US state while, at the same time, mystifying that antagonism thereby ensuring its reproduction. Accordingly, these texts exemplify a particular cultural tendency, which is both overrepresented in and cultivated by post-1968 academic discourses of literature, representation, authenticity, and race.

The University

In 1968, revolution seemed imminent as students in Mexico, Brazil, Japan, France, and the United States rioted and rebelled against the conditions of work and knowledge production. As the popular philosopher Herbert Marcuse noted in 1970, the economic growth that followed WWII had begun to slow and capitalist economies had begun the long process of deindustrialization and automation that we are still living through at present. Accordingly, workers increasingly found themselves unable to maintain the standard of living that preceding

---


252
decades of prosperity had accustomed them to. They could neither work nor consume as they once did, which imperiled capitalism’s capacity to reproduce itself through strictly economic means: widespread availability of jobs, high wages, strong welfare infrastructure, low cost of commodities. Instead, the task fell on the repressive apparatus of the state, “which [was] faced, in the international arena, with a militant opposition ‘from below’ that, in turn, sparks the opposition in the metropoles.”\(^{528}\) Comprised of international movements for decolonization, domestic demands for black, indigenous, queer, and women’s liberation and intensifying opposition to the US wars in Southeast Asia, this opposition “from below” challenged the political order that had secured the US’s economic hegemony in the post-war era. This is to say that the economic crisis that characterized the late 1960s was expressed by what Stuart Hall and his co-authors call a “crisis of authority”: the failure of a political order to reproduce itself.\(^{529}\) To resolve this crisis had to be policed: authority had to be reasserted and thereby re-secured, enforced and thereby reinforced.

As Hall and his coauthors note in their 1978 study of how this crisis was policed, college campuses represented a particularly acute site of social struggle precisely because they embodied the intensifying contradictions of capitalism. On the one hand, universities promised a life with less drudgery and more abundance, less labor and more leisure. On the other hand, however, universities prepared students for a routinized life of work and consumption. They were, in fact, where the state and capital converged in the reproduction of their bureaucrats and managers. Or, as Roderick Ferguson has more recently put it, the academy “socializes state and capital into


\(^{529}\) Hall, et al., 241.
emergent articulations of difference.”530 This is to say that universities in the United States have historically served to integrate capitalists and state functionaries and prepare them to manage an internally contradictory social order. As such, universities have served a critical role in the social reproduction of the capitalist political order, which made them both important to the political-economic system and a place where its contradictions accumulated. The post-war economic growth and the concomitant expansion of the welfare state was, for example, expressed by a democratization of universities and colleges. Between 1940 and 1970 the percent of adults over 25 who earned a Bachelor’s Degree more than doubled: jumping from 4.8% to just over 10%.531 This increase in the rate of enrollment was driven by a boom in the post-WWII economy, which expanded the middle class, and the broadening of access to college in the form of the GI Bill and the Higher Education Act of 1965, which made attending college affordable to poor and working class students. Over the course of their education, students grew concerned with the contradictions of capitalism, the hypocrisy and violence of the US state, and the toil, homogeneity, and social underdevelopment that characterized their parents’ lives (and which their parents expected them to reproduce). Black, Chicano, Native, and Asian American students chaffed at the racism they encountered on campus and in the classroom. Accordingly, many of these students came together in order to appropriate the critical and creative means of social reproduction that their education provided them. Operating in concert with a broader effort to transform the society in which those critical-creative means were embedded, the students’ goal


was to challenge and thereby transform the educational apparatus they had been subject to. In doing so, they hoped to contribute to the broader social transformation their movements were an expression of. They hoped, in other words, to fulfill the promise of their education by modifying its form and content in response to the new needs and qualitative changes that form and content had engendered. Within and against these contradictions, “the system’s own vanguard,” its would-be shareholders, middle-managers, and bureaucratic functionaries, mounted an “assault on the culture and superstructure of late capitalism.”

From coast to coast and college to college, students spread a strike wave that rendered the university a strategically crucial site of struggle over capitalism and the cultures that sustain it: challenging curriculum, forms of pedagogy, administrative policies, the university’s relationship to its surrounding community, the integration of support staff in university life, as well as individual administrators and faculty members.

This movement of capital’s vanguard against itself was most militantly manifested in a series of student and labor strikes on the campuses of UC Berkeley (UCB) and San Francisco State College (SFSC). Organized and directed by the Third World Liberation Front (TWLF), the strikes emerged out of a protracted struggle with university administrators to found and adequately fund Black Studies programs. Of the fifteen demands made by the TWLF to SFSC, in fact, ten were explicit reiterations of demands made by the Black Student Union (BSU): demands for equal access to resources (money, space, personnel); the power to award degrees; and autonomy from administrators so that they could determine both the criteria to award those degrees and the content of curricula among themselves. With the support of organizations

---
532 Hall, et al., 241.
representing Latin American Students, Mexican-American students, Chinese-, Filipino-, and Japanese-American students, and the BSU themselves, the TWLF demanded similar power and resources for all colonized students. These movements converged with anti-war, pro-socialist organizations such as the Students for a Democratic Society, which had earlier identified UCB and SFSC’s ties with the military-industrial complex, and formed a popular front against imperialism, colonialism, capitalism, and racism. At SFSC, this front was joined by the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), who tied their 1969 labor strike to the BSU and TWLF’s demands. In their list of demands addressed to SFSC administrators, for example, the AFT included: “Black Students Union and Third World Liberation Front Strike grievances resolved and implementation assured.”533 As they drew the support of teachers, students and faculty at other universities, and members of the surrounding community, the TWLF strikes grew in scale, scope, and militancy.

In his recent account of Third World Studies, Gary Okihiro notes how the TWLF and its interrelated organizations theorized a resolution to their grievances among themselves and made concrete proposals for its implementation. Articulated in position papers, pamphlets, ‘zines, and fliers, the TWLF and various other student organizations outlined what Okihiro calls a “Third World Curriculum,” which would highlight the experience of colonization, imperialism, and racial subjection, which is shared by all Third World peoples.534 Classes would prioritize the contemporary material needs of communities, as well as their histories, and their focus would be


local. Latin American studies courses would focus on the conditions and needs of Latin American people in the Bay Area, for example, while the Chinese Ethnic Studies Department would offer classes on “The Chinatown Ghetto.” These programs crossed disciplines, and they included classes in history, sociology, psychology, and the arts.535 In making these proposals, these various student organizations hoped to engender solidarity among people and, at the same time, destabilize the ideas and practices organizing all academic disciplines. This is to say that they hoped to reorder the state’s apparatus of knowledge production such that it produced antagonism to, rather than conformity with, the state’s terms of order. They hoped, in other words, to heighten and deepen the contradictions that had produced their blooming form of consciousness.

University administrators, regents, trustees, Governor Reagan, President Nixon, and parents of students responded by bringing down the hammer of the state. During the first two months of struggle, as the AFT’s strike bulletin The Partisan reported at the time, police had arrested more than 700 students and faculty at SFSC alone.536 These arrests followed a declaration of a State of Emergency: everyone but the police were banned from carrying firearms; “amplification equipment” was banned; if they were to be held, public events required


the approval of university administrators; and any interference in any scheduled class or 
administrative function was forbidden.537 Citing the terror of faculty and the largely female 
administrative staff afraid of “young men who have been known to roam the halls during 
demonstrations and disruptions,” SFSC president S.I. Hayakawa brought in the police to enforce 
these demands.538 By appealing to the interests of his monologic constituents, which he 
constructed in opposition to rebellious students, which were represented by young men of color 
who were perceived to threaten the femininity of white women, he invoked state power with the 
intention of reshaping the composition of campus so that it better conformed to the constituency 
he claimed to govern in the name of. Though there were indeed faculty, staff, students, and 
parents who sided with administrators, they can hardly be said to have represented the only 
position among faculty—many of whom cultivated, encouraged, and aided rebellious students, 
and many more of whom joined them directly when the AFT struck 1969. Rather, the 
administration’s allies formed a bloc: a coalition of parties whose shared interests were 
represented by the administration as though they were universal. In this way, Hayakawa’s “pig 
administration,” as students began calling it, formed a hegemony by appealing to and applying 
repressive state power. Though it cost the city of San Francisco $30,000 a day (equivalent to 
approximately $240,000 per day in 2023), Mayor Joseph Alioto assured Hayakawa that he would 
receive “police support as long as [he] wanted it.”539 “The Trustees of California State Colleges


Documents, J. Paul Leonard Library, San Francisco, 

repeated their backing,” as one student observed at the time, ”so did Governor Reagan and
Superintendent of Public Instruction [Maxwell] Rafferty.”540 This backing would take the form
of the national guard, and with it, SFSC received the green light to interminably sink vast sums
of public funds (at both the municipal and state levels) into repression.

As it came to be existentially reliant on police power, the Hayakawa administration
acquired the existential need to reproduce police power in order to reproduce itself. Hayakawa
himself makes this reproductive intention clear, writing in a November, 1968 public statement
that “We should have police on campus not only in crisis situations but in daily life.”541 In the
hopes of mitigating anti-police sentiment among ”agent provocateurs” who “disrupt and terrorize
the campus until the police have to be called in,” Hayakawa intended to saturate the campus with
police officers who would come to be seen as “classmates and colleagues.”542 He proposed a
“continuing police training program in criminology, urban sociology, race relations, group
dynamics, social psychology, etc.,” which would enhance the capacities of the police while
ingratiating them to their classmates.543 On the one hand, then, Hayakawa figures dissenters as
simultaneously non-political actors and people who bring repression down on themselves. On
the other hand, however, Hayakawa proposes more police as the solution to their dissent. They
should receive more money, he insists, and more respect. They should receive more professional
training, and be enabled to perform their function more effectively. They should be seen as

540 Hsu, 7.

541 Hayakawa, “Public Statement,”3.

542 Hayakawa, “Public Statement,” 2; 3.

friends and loved ones, as community members with the students’ best interests at heart. In this way, Hayakawa represents the police as socially necessary: as a fundamentally reactive force and as an anticipatory pro-action. This social function, he insists, needs to expand its scope in order to prevent emergent threats to the social order.

As the mass transfer of public funds and resources into funding and training police officers attests, this social function became a site of investment: a place where public resources are sent and where public funds are spent. Consequently, it became a site of ideological and affective investment as well: something perceived to ward off the (racialized) objects of fear and terror, something that individuals are bound to and by. Indeed, the material and ideological investments form a dialectical relationship, and as the material infrastructure of policing has developed, as it has increasingly suffused the social landscape, it has come to increasingly suffuse psychic life. It has, in other words, increasingly come to appear as if it has always been there and will always be there. It has come to seem not just good but necessary. In addition to illuminating his historical moment, then, Hayakawa’s statements also exemplifies the formation of carceral realism in rehearsal.

As abolitionist scholar Dylan Rodriguez pointed out in a recent interview, this ideological consensus around policing—what Geo Maher calls “the pig majority” but what I have been calling carceral realism—requires the policing of consciousness.544 “So what is happening in this [ideological] bloc,” Rodriguez says,

is another critical form of counter-insurgency and policing...a policing of imagination by way of policing of fantastic possibilities. I’ll just use the phrase ‘fantastic possibilities’

for now. Other people might want to use the term speculative…The policing is of this imagination, these fantastic possibilities, these speculations that are already in the forms of revolt and insurgency that people are undertaking against state power, against police power, and for that matter against Civilization as an ongoing genocidal, anti-black colonial global project.545

What this means, in other words, is that institutions such as the university have to do more than expand the social role and power of the police. They have to also perform the functions of the police: disciplining and punishing students, and regulating knowledge so as to better habituate the public to policing and to being policed. Institutionalists must, therefore, establish the limits of social transformation as institutional reform so as to reproduce their conditions of existence. Accordingly, they couch themselves in the language of “systemic change.”546 As Rodriguez points out, however, “The phrase ‘institutional transformation,’ y’know, police chiefs say that shit. Right? University presidents, and boards of regents, and chancellors say that shit.”547 More often than not, however, “that shit” is mere rhetoric unmatched with any alteration of the social conditions in need of changing. Instead, “institutional transformation” functions to transform the institution so as to stabilize it in the midst of crisis. These reforms serve to defend and expand the university’s capacities to accumulate capital, commodify knowledge, privatize resources, produce bourgeois and petty bourgeois students, and reproduce the indentured class of contingent, adjunct, and graduate labor on whom it increasingly depends. This is precisely why this rhetoric, with its patina of radicalism, sits comfortably in the mouths of police chiefs and


547 Rodriguez, “Beautiful Revolutionary Wildness and Counterinsurgency,” 0:21:00.
university chancellors alike. By speaking this language, university presidents can acknowledge the need for change while conserving the university’s self-image as a site of political progression, as an institution responsive to the changing world around it, as a place of ennoblement and edification: *without changing anything*.

In this way, carceral realism is characterized by a contradiction: a recognition that change is necessary and a refusal to make necessary changes. Because such changes would antagonize its conditions of reproduction, the university has to embed that refusal in the minds of the subjects it produces in order to ensure its own reproduction: administrators, staff, faculty, students, teachers, readers, writers, critics, workers, middle-managers, capitalists, future bureaucrats and politicians. As Althusser famously noted, citing Marx, every child grasps that if a social formation is to survive even a year, every instance of social production must produce, among other things, its conditions of reproduction. Accordingly, the university's police function must produce subjects capable of reproducing policing. Consider, for example, the ways university administrators increasingly task teachers (full-time faculty, adjuncts, and graduate instructors) with the surveillance and disciplining of students, as well as the punishment of those who will not or cannot reproduce the university’s prescribed codes of conduct. This punishment maintains the discipline of students by incentivizing their habituation to and internalization of those codes of conduct. Mirroring the ways in which teachers discipline students, teachers are themselves disciplined by administrators when they refuse or otherwise fail to conform with the university’s codes of conduct. These codes extend in the forms of scholarship (or objects of

---

inquiry) that are allowed and disallowed, and they are expressed in the disciplinary regulation and separation of those categories. Because it facilitates the application of top-down discipline and helps ensure the university’s smooth social reproduction, what this discipline produces above all else is self-disciplining subjects: subjects who discipline themselves internally and who discipline one another so that administrators don’t have to.

What universities therefore produce is what the formerly-incarcerated dramaturge Augusto Boal calls “The Cop in the Head.” “There are many people who dare not participate in or other political action,” Boal writes. “Why? Because they have cops in their heads. They have internalized their oppression.” Boal goes on to write that this internalization occurs via osmosis: in social intercourse and through a social formation’s means of producing knowledge about itself. This ideological deputization is, therefore, expressed in the knowledge produced as well as in the forms of knowledge production, which must produce both cop-knowledge and cop-knowledge producers at the same time. The nature of this process is, therefore, opened up by questions such as: Who is authorized to speak? What are they authorized to say? Through what process, according to what values, are individuals authorized to speak? How do critics contest an individual’s authorization? What are the conditions under which they do so?

The Hayakawa administration’s production of the cops in our heads is perhaps best expressed by its eventual compromise with striking students and faculty. Rather than developing Third World Studies, administrators and conservative faculty granted students and progressive

---

faculty ethnic studies. Instead of unifying the struggles for black liberation, socialism, decolonization, and anti-imperialism, as Third World Studies sought to, ethnic studies separated individuals into identity categories, which were understood to be autonomous from one another. A stark contrast from the anti-imperialist, anti-capitalist, solidaristic curricula proposed by the BSU and TWLF, the ethnic studies curricula emphasized the overcoming of and end to political struggles, the incorporation of non-white people into America, the reconciliation between black and white or white and Asian. The students had no power to determine syllabi, and faculty did not have power to determine the criteria for the conferring of credentials. Many of the classes proposed by Chinese- and Mexican-American students, which would confer credit upon students for their involvement in local communities, were not adopted. Forget about the experimental pedagogy theorized by the students, such as the proposed Third World Creative Writing Workshop, for which “[t]here will be no teacher, in the traditional sense,” and that would require only as much work “as an individual believes his writing is worth.” This is all to say that the founding of ethnic studies represents a structural adaptation by the university that stabilizes its reproduction atop shifting social terrain. Rather than liberating students, it empowered the university to more tightly regulate them, knowledge about them, and the knowledge they produced.

In order to realize this regulative intellectual project, Roderick Ferguson writes, the university devised new “ways to make those subjects and knowledges respect power and its

550 Okihiro, 1.

‘laws’.” To have a canon, then, is to have both a law and field of objects whose authority is produced by the law’s enforcement. As part of its founding comprise, which required it to outline a field of knowledge and a meta-methodology for including and excluding things from such a field, the various sub-genres of ethnic studies had to lay down such laws and thereby regulate vast, heterogenous, dynamic, cross-racial, transnational, multilingual fields of knowledge that remain, persistently, in excess of themselves.

In her 2011 study of state-managed antiracism, Represent and Destroy, Jodi Melamed describes the logic organizing these processes of canon-formation in the period following World War II. On her account, the United States responded to internal and external pressure by developing “a framework for race matters that portrayed race as a contradiction to modernity rather than one of its structuring conditions.” Rather than a redistribution of social power (electoral and economic), these post-war discourses on race offered formal inclusion and assimilation into bourgeois life without altering its fundamental characteristics: the forms of white freedom described in chapter three. Melamed’s term for this project is racial liberalism,

552 Roderick Ferguson, 12.


554 Jodi Melamed, Represent and Destroy (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011, ebook), 36.
which absorbed the energy of organizations such as the TWLF and diffused it. Crucial to this process of integration and diffusion was the practice of literary study. Indeed, writes Melamed, “literary studies has come to play a uniquely powerful part in producing commonsense notions about race in the United States after World War II.”

Key to rewriting these codes of race, Melamed is careful to note, was the question of “national culture” and its policing: the production of American citizens in and against the contradiction between its putative universalism and racially-exclusive reality.

As she points out, however, this has less to do with the content of specific texts and more to do with the ways in which those texts are discussed, read, taught, and circulated. Representing literature as a transparent account of reality, and one with greater emotional force than empirical scholarship, “racial liberals never theorized readership or questions of interpretation or reception; instead, they proposed that information retrieval and sympathetic identification were built into the literary object, were qualities of race novels themselves.”

Mirroring the ways in which institutional prison literary study has constructed the genre of prison writing, racial liberalism constructed ethnic American texts as “authentic, intimate, and representative.” This claim is borne out by a survey of the last sixty years of African-American literary criticism, which has overrepresented realist literature and the sociological content of black literature as though that form and content were universal. Like the

---

555 Melamed, Represent and Destroy, 40.
556 Melamed, Represent and Destroy, 41.
557 Melamed, Represent and Destroy, 84.
558 Melamed, Represent and Destroy, 57.
work of incarcerated people as well, the most highly valued content of black literature is
depictions of suffering.

Though Chicano intellectual production, like African-American literary production, has
long been characterized by internal struggles against objectivity and authenticity, literary critic
Christopher González nonetheless exemplifies the ways in which recourse to authenticity and
testimonial continues to dominate literary critical discourses. Characterizing the canon of
Chicano literature, he emphasizes authors who “use narrators, fictional or otherwise, that take on
the project of filtering their experiences through the sieve of narrative, often to create a record
that documents particular experiences to relate them for a reader’s (or listener’s)
consumption.”\footnote{Christopher González, \textit{Permissible Narratives} (Columbus: The Ohio State University, 2017), 32.} By formulating his description in this way, González expresses and thereby
exemplifies an institutional and disciplinary logic that sees ethnic American literature
exclusively in its mimetic capacity and its readers primarily in their consumptive capacity. This
emphasis is not new, however. As early as 1974, the influential political scientist Raymond A.
Rocco noted “The Role and Power of Authenticity in the Chicano Movement.” For Rocco,
“authenticity” refers to two things: first, acting genuinely or sincerely; and two, “to a form of
human existence where myth, deception and illusion, in regard to oneself and also in relations
with others, is eliminated.”\footnote{Raymond A. Rocco, “The Role and Power of Authenticity in the Chicano Movement,” \textit{Atzlán}, vol. 5, no1 (1974), 170.} Authenticity, in other words, means: how it \textit{really} is for you.

While Rocco is careful to note that authenticity is not a function of content, nor does it make an
individual’s experience universal, he nonetheless treats authenticity as a strategically useful
value for Chicano liberation movements to adopt. As the history of Chicano studies attests, however, the conservation of “authenticity,” much like the conservation of “the people,” conserves the conditions for discursive and social marginalization and exclusion. This is the case precisely because these concepts are constitutively haunted by their own contradictions. The authentic is, in other words, always beset by the specter of the inauthentic. The two must be continually separated from one another (symbolically, spatially, institutionally, discursively). In this way, authenticity always presupposes an already-authorized author of authenticity: some one or some group of people empowered to police, judge, and punish transgressions of these boundaries. This social function necessitated by the conservation of authenticity is, in turn, seized upon by the state to stabilize its reproduction. What gets authenticated is that which conforms to the logic of authenticity. It is this institutional commitment to authenticity that leads John Alba Cutler, in his history of “The Formation Of Chicano Literature,” to rescue “assimilation” as not “upward mobility” or a symptom of “alienation” but as “really a negotiation of cultural change and dynamism taking place on other terms.”

Assimilation is, from this perspective, authentic too.

Because he writes in a realist mode, and he has movement bona fides, Acosta and *Revolt of the Cockroach People* are able to accumulate this authenticity for themselves. As a result, the novel gets taken up by scholars of Chicano literature in the 1990s as exemplifying a “revolutionary class consciousness.” This canonization of Acosta is ironic, however, given the ways in which the novel functions to mystify its own inauthenticity: its insincerity, its cynicism,

---

its misogyny, its appropriations of indigeneity, its role in Acosta's self-mythologizing and self-aggrandizing project of forging himself as a celebrity-fetish. By formally conjuring a sense of authenticity for his reader, and emphasizing his relationships to political organizations and movements, Acosta is able to obscure these features of the text and commodify himself by trading on his authenticity. In representing itself as an authentic account of Chicano struggle (how it really is), the novel consequently makes itself vulnerable to conscription by an institutional apparatus that traffics in realism and subsists on this authenticity. From this perspective, we can recognize the sincerity in Buffalo Brown’s ironic retort to the students at UCLA. When the police arrive, he asks, “We’ll slaughter them with our Rolling Stones albums, right?”563 Revolutionary culture, he highlights, is no culture of revolution. Cultural products with revolutionary sentiment are swell, but books won’t keep the police from killing you. In fact, as the discursive formation of Acosta (and his novel) attest, books might be used as a weapon against you. The alienation this culture speaks to can be re-appropriated in order to reproduce that alienation. It can be employed to produce consent, passivity, acquiescence, and it can be used to conscript authors the way it conscripted the SOC squad that Acosta describes in Revolt of the Cockroach People: Mexican-Americans struggling within the contradictions of capitalist modernity who, as a function of those contradictions, are conscripted into the policing and regulation of Chicano life.

Overseen by institutionally credentialed literary critics, editors, teachers, and administrators, this police function produces a racial identity as a commodity. As the discipline that regulates this identity matures—in this case, Chicano studies—its internal struggles shift to

---

563 Acosta, 179.
debates over the terms of this identity rather than over its status as a commodity. It should come as no surprise then that the first issue of the influential journal *Atzlán* is dedicated to circumscribing the objects and methods proper to Chicano studies. Nor should it come as a surprise that debates around ethnic American literature in the 1980s and ‘90s were framed as a “canon” war or “culture” war. This is in part because these debates largely emerge through and in English departments, which, as I noted above, discipline students, researchers, critics, and writers into the practice and process of canonization: the regulation of intellectual life according to principles of mimesis, continuity, progress, humanization, value extraction, and truth. Gloria Anzaldúa, for example, received a master’s degree in English from UT Austin. Through the processes of professionalization, she was disciplined into discourses of representation, race, and reform. They professionalized themselves by participating in these discourses, and, in turn, their participation was cultivated, rewarded, and promoted by universities for the ways in which it enabled the reproduction of professional literary study.

Rather than casting aspersions on specific authors, however, I merely want to underline the ways in which a certain critical register conserves its object of critique by conserving its conditions of reproduction, and thereby ensures the reproduction of certain academic forms of knowledge production. Moreover, I want to highlight how that rhetoric is institutionally cultivated. It is these cultural products (sincerely produced and reactive to genuine social conditions, but generated in and around classrooms and susceptible to recuperation) that are highlighted, promoted, (re)cited, taught, and discussed in college and high school classrooms, university presses, academic and popular publications. In much the same way that political opposition to colonialism, racism, capitalism, and imperialism characterized canonical Chicano literature of the late-’60s/early-’70s, for example, canonical Chicana literature of the late-
'70s/early-'80s was characterized by opposition to the masculinism of this earlier literary generation. However, as I have teased out above, this latter opposition grounded itself in a consensus of racialism: the very grounds of masculinist discourse. Through this racialist logic, the late-'70s literary cohort ensures the protraction of its struggle by articulating it in an interminably circular logic. In this way, opposition and contestation themselves became the commodity produced and circulated by the institutionalization of Chicano life. In order to ensure an endless supply of commodities, however, the prescribed form of opposition cannot dislodge its social antagonist (that would end the struggle and halt the supply of opposition-commodities). Indeed, the institutional history of authors like Anzaldúa further speaks to the ways in which the US academy recuperates opposition by literally incorporating it. They are authorized by the university, and authorized precisely to authorize Chicano literature: legislate and regulate it. Or, to put it differently, their presence in the academy speaks to the “concerted disciplinary effort” required to preserve what Renato Rosaldo identified in 1989 as the untenable (“except perhaps as ‘useful fiction’) “notion of an authentic culture as an autonomous internally coherent universe.”564 By preserving the ways in which the university produces opposition to itself, which it re-integrates and then sells back to people (precisely in order to mystify this process), these authors are subsumed into the university as its controlled opposition, which conditions its accumulation and expansion.

Through this dialectical process of opposition-recuperation, opposition is deradicalized and the conditions being opposed are reproduced. In this way, the university and the institutionalization of knowledge production serves a police function in the discursive regulation

of Chicano life. Consequently, post-1968 ethnic studies exemplifies the ways in which, as Antonio Gramsci puts it, institutional intellectuals serve as “the dominant groups ‘deputies’ exercising the subaltern functions of social hegemony and political government.”\(^{565}\) They produce the consent to be governed among the non-white bourgeois and the (lumpen)proletariat of every color. While this scholarly tendency could not possibly characterize all work done in ethnic studies departments or produced by ethnic studies scholars, it does predominate within those spaces and that work. Accordingly, the role of prison-authors such as Ricardo Sánchez, Raúl R. Salinas, and Judy Lucero are marginalized in the history of Chicano literature, and scholarship on them is sparse. As a consequence, these authors have been disappeared from studies of prison literature. In much the same way, journals produced outside the academy and in concert with prisoners, such as *De Colores*, are invisibilized. Unlike *Aztlán* (still running, still published by UCLA, every issue digitized and available through the Southern Methodist University library), it is nearly impossible to find issues of *De Colores*.\(^{566}\) None of its contents have been digitized, and no more than one or two random issues are held in any university archive or public library. When I looked, I could only find a single issue for sale. If not for a reference in B.V. Olguín’s study of Chicano prison writing, *La Pinta*, I would not even know the journal existed. My contention, then, is not that *Aztlán* is not valuable or important, or that it is not home to its own contradictions and internal differences. What I am suggesting, rather, is that *Aztlán* has been institutionalized because it has tended to produce knowledge amenable to the

---

\(^{565}\) Gramsci, 12.

\(^{566}\) For a history of *De Colores* narrated by one of the journal’s founders, see José Armas, “The Origins of Chicano Studies in the Southwest: *De Colores* Journal and Pajarito Publications,” *Diálogo* vol. 20, no.2 (2017).

272
institution—an institutionalist tendency that has been intensified as a consequence of its institutionalization. In this light, *De Colores* represents a countervailing tendency within Chicano literary production, which is less amenable to the logic underpinning universities. Indeed, the small (often highly mediated) fragments of the journal that I have been able to examine speak to a profoundly important site of struggle over ideas, discussions, provocations, and formulations that cannot be so easily wrangled within a logic of racial privatization, authenticity, and, increasingly, embourgeoisement. Here, on the page, activists, academics, prisoners, and working-class artists took seriously the idea that art and knowledge could be different: look different, have a different role in our lives, be produced under different conditions. Here, comrades took seriously the idea that seizing the means of knowledge and cultural production could allow Chicano people more say in the course of their lives. It could galvanize the desire for more demands for more freedom in other aspects of their lives. It could, in other words, contribute to their liberation from their boss, their landlord, their bank, the police, the military. In liberating themselves, the contributors to *De Colores* insisted, Chicano people could contribute to and participate in the liberation of all human beings from petty tyrants and ordinary fascists, drudgery and toil, exploitation and domination. Nonetheless, this journal has been institutionally abandoned. Consequently, it attests to the limits of institutionalization, which produces contradictions that can be recuperated and some that can’t be.

---

567 For a survey of *De Colores*’s contents, see Elizabeth Conrood Martínez, “Anatomy of an Early Journal: *De Colores,”* Diálogo, vol. 20, no. 2 (2017).
The Contradictions

Because it shares an institutional genealogy with Chicano studies, Asian American studies bear a structural resemblance as well. Like its counterpart, the canon of Asian American literature is built atop histories of racialization and criminalization. Or, as A.J. Yumi Lee puts it in her entry in the 2019 *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Asian American and Pacific Islander Literature and Culture*: “Incarceration has been central to the formation of Asian American subjectivity” and its literary expressions have, consequently, “prominently include[ed] narratives emerging from and about carceral sites.”

For example, in *Aiiieeee!*, the influential 1974 anthology that unified ethnically disparate peoples under the common banner of Asian American, the Combined Asian American Resources Project (CARP) attribute the invention of Japanese American literature “full blown” to John Okada’s 1957 novel of Japanese internment, *No-No Boy*, and describe Miné Okubo’s *Citizen 13660*, the 1946 account of her internment, as “the first serious creative writing by an Asian American to hit the streets.”

Also included in *Aiiieeee!* were excerpts of Carlos Bulosan’s 1946 novel, *America is in the Heart*, which similarly depicts the police as a force that criminalizes Filipinos, and marks them as racially unfit for American citizenship. Building an Asian American literary canon out of these texts rather than incorporating them into one, CARP situated the experience of racialization-via-incarceration as a cornerstone of Asian American political identity. This centrality of

---


incarceration and policing to Asian American life was reflected in contemporaneous publications, such as Mitsuya Yamada’s 1976 poetry collection *Camp Notes*, and it persists in more contemporary texts, such as Perry Miyake’s 2002 novel, *21st Century Manzanar*, Chang-rae Lee’s 2014 novel, *On Such a Full Sea*, or Elaine Hsieh Chou’s 2022 novel, *Disorientation*.

Like the institutional study of Chicano literature, the academic formulation of Asian American literature most commonly apprehends its object as resistance literature: literature defined through its opposition to racism and assimilation. As literary critic Viet Thanh Nguyen argued nearly twenty years ago, this institutionally prevalent framing “stems from the moment of 1968, when Asian American intellectuals self-consciously formed ‘Asian America’.” On Nguyen’s account, the unification of Asian America as a “political and cultural bloc” was a project largely spearheaded by intellectuals who were both formed in and would, in turn, go on to compose college campuses. There, they were fashioned into institutional outsiders who would, in turn, reproduce themselves as outsiders in order to assume a place inside. In contrast with this tradition, however, Nguyen demonstrates how accommodationist and assimilationist tendencies constitute Asian American literature just as much as resistance does. The dialectic of these tendencies is evident in the cruelly optimistic endings of foundational texts such *America is in the Heart*, *No-No Boy*, and Younghill Kang’s *East Goes West*, which conserve the promise of America even as they strain against the reality of its non-fulfillment. This cruel optimism

---


571 Nguyen, 7.

572 I draw the concept of cruel optimism from Lauren Berlant, who writes that “A relation of cruel optimism exists when something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing…They become cruel only when the object that draws your attachment actively...
persists in more contemporary work, such as Nguyen’s own 2015 novel, *The Sympathizer*, which critiques the twinned histories of US orientalism and imperialism while, at the same time, jockeying for recognition by and inclusion into the United States. In this way, Nguyen explains and demonstrates the ways in which ethnic studies recuperates the rhetoric and energy of rebellion and rearticulates it as a commodity through the production of (con)text.

Deeply indebted to but written in tension with this intellectual tradition, Karen Tei Yamashita’s 2010 novel *I Hotel* takes post-’68 ethnic studies’s logic to its conclusion, critiquing it and running up against the limits of critique. Organized into ten “hotels”—novellas that overlap temporally and share characters—Yamashita’s novel focuses on the titular International Hotel and its role as a hub of political organizing between 1968 and 1977. By making this space her protagonist, Yamashita disarticulates the history of the I Hotel from any one individual or collective and, in doing so, she demonstrates how Asian American life is characterized by ethnic and political heterogeneity. While this heterogeneity structures the content of the novel and its diversity of narrative voices and perspectives, it is most obviously evident at the level of form. Indeed, Yamashita appropriates a number of cultural forms to compose her novel, which unfolds through prose and poetry, aphorisms and folktales, stage and screenplays, comics and illustration, and even FBI surveillance dossiers. “The result,” writes Jolie Sheffer in *Understanding Karen Tei Yamashita*, “is a dizzyingly complex portrait of a moment and a movement whose members periodically found common purpose together, but just as often splintered into competing efforts. No one person could see the whole. But there were a thousand impedes the aim that brought you to it initially” (1). Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham: Duke UP, 2011).
points of entry and egress.” This is to say that Yamashita represents the I Hotel as a site of struggle: contradiction without reconciliation, which is expressed at the level of form.

In this way, I Hotel appears to refuse the literary modes and critical methods prescribed by ethnic studies. In fact, the novel is a self-conscious critique of that disciplinary formation. As Yamashita notes in the book’s afterword, for instance, the novel has its genesis in an essay she wrote in the 1990s, which was styled as an academic article: a critique of a fictional novel by the Japanese American writer Karen Tei Yamashita. “That [essay] led to thinking about that unwritten work,” she writes. “It was about the Asian American movement mostly as I knew it in Los Angeles.” In a dialogue with translator Ryuta Imafuku published sometime before I Hotel, Yamashita proleptically elaborated her perspective on this “vital and exciting time,” telling Imafuku that “These movements changed the picture of the academy’s response to ethnicity in the United States. Yet, these movements have been eaten up by the academy in the sense that ethnic studies programs created in this period now have to produce the same kind of work that they were perhaps rebelling against.” As she points out, rather than resolving the crises that these movements arose in response to, the university instituted ethnic studies programs, which were made to conform to the prevailing logic of the university and expected to produce scholars capable of reproducing that logic.


While *I Hotel* was quickly canonized following its publication, literary critics have failed to examine the novel in the context of Yamashita’s critical frame. As I argue, this is in part because such an account would unsettle such processes of canonization. Instead of an aesthetic orchestration underpinned by a political unconscious, *I Hotel* represents the return of the repressed: the political unconscious exploding into consciousness. Indeed, when read as a critique of post-1968 ethnic studies, the novel’s opening sections come into focus. From this perspective, we can see Yamashita there, self-consciously depicting the formation of ethnic studies as a bloody struggle full of contradictions and producing some of its own. She depicts it as a compromise between militant students and conservative administrators, who employ the police and national guard to demilitarize students and remove them from campus. Produced through this application of police power, Asian American studies—as an institutional formation—is an expression of that power. It is itself structured by and through the policing of Asian American life. By rendering this history in this way, Yamashita offers a robust critique of ethnic studies as something that cultivates rebellion and recuperates it into racial capitalism and its carceral logic. Because her work emerges out of and as a critique of this logic, it too is bound by it.

Writing within and against this logic, Yamashita frames the formation of ethnic studies as a class struggle over the means of social reproduction. Because UCB represented itself as “a factory of knowledge,” Yamashita writes, the students came to understand themselves as “worker-products.” As such, they claimed a right to strike over control of production.

---

576 Yamashita, 18;19.

577 Yamashita, 19.
SFSC, however, understood its role as one of mediation, providing “the middle management, mid-level professionals, the credentialed workers of the great society.”

If UCB was a factory, SFSC were train tracks, ferrying students along predetermined paths. The one produces knowledge-commodities while the other produces state functionaries. Being “worker-passengers,” the students claimed a right to strike over their capacity to self-determine the course of their lives. In both cases, students understood themselves as workers whose conditions of work were mediated by the reproductive organ of the state in the service of capital. Accordingly, the tactic they claimed for themselves was the strike. Recalling the way that capitalists employed the police to break labor strikes, the university and its administrators struck back: wielding the police as an instrument of class war against the students. “If the police feel that their duty is to provoke violence,” one sympathetic professor tells a crowd in the novel, “all hell is going to break loose.”

Break loose it does: “They arrest the good doctor and club the non-innocent bystanders. Throw everyone into paddy wagons. Situation goes on a rampage.” In much the same way that Acosta depicts the police as a counter-insurgency that produces the very insurgency they claim to ward off, and Edward Bunker identifies prison guards as producing rebellion as a pretext to (re)order prison life, Yamashita depicts the police as instigators that exacerbate and escalate situations in order to recompose a group of people. They transform a protest into a riot, which legitimates and justifies the beating and arresting of rioters.

---

578 Yamashita, 19.
580 Yamashita, 16.
581 Yamashita, 16.
Nonetheless, the students persist. After “fifty-three days of striking and four hundred arrests” at UCB and “137 days of striking and nine hundred arrests” at SFSC, the universities made concessions: there would be a department of ethnic studies.\footnote{Yamashita, 19; 21.}

Although these histories are mediated by an indeterminate narrator who frames them as moral tales about language, Yamashita draws our attention to the material effects of the UCB and SFS actions by reiterating them for her reader. The story of “Institution A” (a clear analog of UCB) and “Institution B” (SFSC) are narrated in sequence as two divergent narratives. Nonetheless, both stories conclude with identical passages: “Establishment of the department [of ethnic studies] came with some fanfare and a budget just substantial enough to create a sensation of power and competition, creating political fissures between black, brown, yellow, and red students and faculty, throwing into contest what had once been idealized as a rainbow of colored solidarity.”\footnote{Yamashita, 19; 21.} While the narrator (who, Yamashita implies, is S.I. Hayakawa himself) insists that “the students got what they wanted,” Yamashita suggests that their desires were betrayed.\footnote{Yamashita, 21.} Contesting racism, imperialism, and capitalism, the students understood themselves as connected across lines of race, gender, and geography in a common struggle against the disciplinary formation of knowledge production and the social reproduction of capitalist social order. What they demanded was an anti-capitalist, anti-colonial curriculum and the power to determine it for themselves. More importantly, they demanded the power to further modify it according to changing needs and desires. Faced with this demand, the university offered recognition by and
incorporation into the current mode of knowledge production, which is discretely separated by discipline: self-regulating fields that justify their existence by carving out unique objects of inquiry and proprietary methods of analysis. With the militant students arrested and the radical professors fired, only those uncommitted to political struggle remained on campus. “The work of education” is consequently left “to the bureaucrats and the folks who needed jobs.” From this perspective, we can see how university administrators compose the campus body and regulate its intellectual and political life through the application of state violence. In doing so, these administrators produce student and faculty bodies less likely or willing to revolt. These more pliable students and faculty accept the offer of ethnic studies, and agree to quarrel among themselves rather than with one another against the university.

Struggling within these contradictions, the students manage to extract concessions from university administrators in the form ethnic studies. In turn, however, they produce new contradictions of their own. Yamashita works this out in the second hotel’s first chapter, which focuses on Tom Takabayashi: a Japanese American survivor of US concentration camps, a former probation officer, and an academic who finds himself consigned to an “empty campus building slated for demolition, where he meets remaining students who are allowed to finish their degrees.” Takabayashi was on faculty at the UCB School of Criminology, where he belonged to a small Marxist group of “radical criminologists.” As such, he was one of the few faculty members to support and nurture the TWLF strike–an experience that produced “an experimental

---

585 Yamashita, 19; 21.

586 Yamashita, 127.
course” whose students “invented a new political category: Asian American.” This new political category consolidated Asian America along racial lines, and its formation required the disavowal of Third World politics. Accordingly, Asian American Studies was composed so as to distinguish Asian Americans from other racialized groups rather than forging links of solidarity across racial lines. Asian American life and history was thereby transformed into something only Asian Americans could speak to or about. While the student movements on campus “challenged the idea that society, and therefore education, should be controlled by the threat of punishment and the history of race,” as Takabayashi tells an interlocutor, racialization and punishment reassert themselves and reclaim their structuring roles in the university’s (re)productive process. As a consequence, one of the faculty members who helped cultivate the TWLF strikes finds himself disassociated from both the discipline that conditioned the strikes (UCB’s school of criminology) and the discipline produced by the strikes (Asian American Studies), and he finds himself responsible for racially privatizing Asian American through his efforts to socialize it.

Although the disciplinary formation of Asian American studies is not identical to the institutionalization of prison literary studies, Yamashita herself analogizes the two for her reader. As the FBI records Takabayashi telling some unnamed interlocutor: “I learned the hard way that whether it’s the prison community or the Asian American community, the academy will close ranks to keep that experiment with reality out…In a short period of time, we saw the

587 Yamashita, 122-123.
588 Yamashita, 123.
589 Yamashita, 127.
politicization of prisoners and the criminalization of students. And this scared folks. Students saw three choices: go to school, go to prison, go to war.”

The academy’s experiment with reality, we are to understand, is the incorporation of contemporary social movements into campus life, which includes a grappling with the differences and disputes internal to those movements and its external relations to other movements, as well as the challenges those movements make to the very structure of universities. The closing of ranks, then, is Takabayashi’s metaphor for the ways in which those differences were disavowed, obscured, downplayed, or oversimplified. In this way, the disciplinary formation of Asian American studies serves a policing function by incorporating Asian American life into hegemonic modes of knowledge production so as to resolve a social crisis without altering the underlying conditions that produced it. As Yamashita gestures towards here, this process mirrors the institutionalization of prison studies, which serves a complementary social function. If this is the case, it is because, as Yamashita demonstrates over the course of the novel, these processes of disciplinary formation are part and parcel of a broader process of neoliberal counter-revolution that condition and are conditioned by applications of carceral power.

By depicting the university from this perspective, Yamashita’s novel supplements recent scholarship in critical university studies (CUS). Like much of CUS scholarship, Yamashita renders campuses as the site of political contestation, and she gestures towards the ways in which these struggles determine the composition of universities in the present. Unlike scholars such as Christopher Newfield, however, Yamashita privileges the late 1960s as the crucible of modern campus life rather than the culture wars of the 1980s. Further, she makes progressives/liberals

Yamashita, 127.
the agents of campus counter-revolution rather than conservative pundits and politicians. In doing so, she antagonizes what Abigail Boggs and Nick Mitchell call the crisis consensus, which “pivots on the invocation of the university as a good in itself, as an institution defined ultimately by the progressive nature at its core.”\textsuperscript{591} As Boggs and Mitchell argue in their survey of CUS literature, this consensus privileges the 1990s as the period of neoliberalization par excellence and it seeks a return to the golden age of academia: the 1960s and ‘70s. In doing so, it obscures the policies of dispossession that have long propelled public higher education in the US, such as the 1869 and 1890 Morrill Acts, which appropriated indigenous land and granted it to states to build their institutions on, as well as the counter-revolutionary movements of the so-called golden age. By reframing the 1960s in this way, Yamashita attunes readers to what Boggs and Mitchell call “accumulation-by-education,” which describes the ways in which neoliberalism reconfigures universities into more efficacious sites of capital accumulation.\textsuperscript{592} As such, neoliberalism integrates universities into a mode of social reproduction characterized by securitization: militarization \textit{and} financialization.\textsuperscript{593} Militarization, as Yamashita illustrates, includes the physical repression of social movements countervalent to neoliberalization as well as the demilitarization of those movements. As I have reiterated throughout this chapter, that demilitarization included the institutionalization of those movements and the ratification of


\textsuperscript{592} Boggs and Mitchell, 453.

\textsuperscript{593} Boggs and Mitchell, 445.
ethnic studies: a process that, on Yamashita’s own account, includes the institutionalization of prison studies.

In opposition to this neoliberal social contract, however, Yamashita’s novel refuses an account of Asian American life that is not already always entangled with black and indigenous life. Moreover, it insists on the centrality of struggles against prisons and the police in the history of Asian American life. In addition to Mao, *No-No Boy*, and *America is in the Heart*, for example, Yamashita’s characters read James Baldwin, Malcolm X, Robert F. Williams, Eldrige Cleaver, and George Jackson. They listen to James Brown at demonstrations, and host screenings of *The Battle of Algiers*. “The honorable ministers of information of the Black Panthers Part and the Red Guard Party” even hole up in hotel rooms in Moscow and contemplate “their next moves” together. In fact, one character thinks to themselves, “Black-yellow connections go back. Deeper than Mao.” In part, these black and Asian connections are forged through mutual participation in other social movements. This mutual participation is borne out in Yamashita’s account of the Indians of All Tribes occupation of Alcatraz island. Lasting nineteen months, the 1968-69 occupation was a site where black, Asian, and indigenous militants gather and build power together. Accordingly, *I Hotel’s* characters draw their *nom de guerres* from Native activists, such as La Nada Means, while the sixth hotel opens with a chapter framing the Alcatraz occupation and Asian history in the Americas through the lens of native mythopoetics. Situated within this complex weaving of black, native, and Asian struggle are Latinx people: Chicana

594 Yamashita, 193.

595 Yamashita, 201

596 Yamashita, 202-203; 334; 373.
actors taken for white; Salvadorans taken for Asian; Filipinos who organize with Cesar Chavez; unspecified characters who adopt “Dolores Huerta” as their code name; an anthropomorphic Chiquita Banana that gives birth to a pair of “Siamese twins,” one Chicana and the other Asian American; Native Hawaiians who float around within this Asian-Indigenous-Latinx matrix.

This is all to say that Yamashita represents the Asian American experience as one intimately bound up with black, native, and Chicano life, which are woven together through a shared history of racialized violence, exploitation, and captivity. This binding together is most profoundly affected through the application of state power, through imprisonment and policing. Whereas Acosta’s novel formally attenuates connections between The Revolt of the Cockroach People from non-Chicano texts, such as Audre Lorde’s 1974 poem “Poem to the Survival of Roaches,” Yamashita urges us to draw connections between the eviction of the I Hotel that concludes the novel with similar scenes across racialized canons of literature: we can link it not only to Stubborn’s eviction in H.T. Tsiang’s The Hanging on Union Square, but also to the eviction that climaxes Ralph Ellison’s Invisible Man or Langston Hughes’ “The Ballad of the Landlord.” We can link Yamashita to not only No-No Boy and America is in the Heart, but to Ocean Vuong’s more recent work, such as his 2016 poem, “My Father Writes From Prison.” Moreover, Yamashita attunes us to two things: the near total dearth of published work by Asian American prisoners; the critical oversight of the little work that does exist.597

---

597 In the first instance, the 2007 collection edited by Eddy Zheng, Other, represents the first (and still the only) published collection of writing dedicated to the work of Asian American prisoners. As far as I can tell, there has been no scholarship on this text. Since 2018, the Asian American Writers Workshop has published “A World Without Cages” online. This project publishes creative and analytical writing by incarcerated people, as well as creative work about incarceration by free-world people. As with Other, there has been no scholarship on this project thus far. In the second instance, Jack Henry Abbott’s In the Belly of the Beast has received
By drawing these connections for her readers, Yamashita socializes a set of political struggles that are more commonly taken as racially private affairs. In this way, she intervenes in the history of Asian American literature by opening it up: revealing its multi-racial character, and its various interventions in the histories of the state, capitalism, and captivity, as well as its blind spots. Further, by foregrounding the historical role played by these systems and enabling her putatively free world reader to situate themselves in relation to them, Yamashita draws readers’ attention to the ways in which their own lives are determined by these repressive apparatuses, how they are, in fact, unfree because of them. At a rally in front of the San Francisco jail, for example, the student-protestor Akagi puts a finer point on this claim. Speaking before a group of black, Chicano, Native, Asian, and white anti-fascist militants, Akagi asks his audience to understand that the Los Siete trial and what’s happening to the Soledad Brothers are not isolated incidents. They’re just like the practicing of a theory. And dig, this theory is a theory of genocide by the United States government and all their lackey’s domestically and international. Understand that this theory is not an academic one, dig. It’s not even really very heavy, but if I was to articulate this theory it would go like this: The only good one is a dead one.598

As Akagi goes on to note, the “one” targeted by this theory is indeterminate precisely because it was practiced against Native Americans, Chicanos, black people, and Asians: not any one specific group, but all of them. If these people share a political struggle, then it is because they have been subject to the same violent techniques and technologies of subordination, exploitation, and extraction. Linking these histories to “the credit agency our parents owe money to” and

598 Yamashita, 211.
“institutions like the Bank of America,” Akagi links warfare and incarceration to the compulsion of future labor (debt) and capital accumulation (commercial banking).\textsuperscript{599} By returning us to a scene remarkably similar to Acosta’s opening to \textit{The Revolt of the Cockroach People}, Akagi frames policing as a determining force in the conditions of work and social life more broadly. Prison and policing are, in other words, aspects, sites, and technologies of class war, and their ongoing reproduction conditions the unfreedom of those in the putatively free world. Until prisoners “walk free of the institutions that bind them,” Akagi tells the crowd, we won’t “walk free of the institutions that bind us.”\textsuperscript{600} “Twist your mind around that,” he adds, “we’re all some kind of prisoner.”\textsuperscript{601} It is here where Yamashita is at her most straightforward and radical. It is, in fact, her straightforwardness that makes her radical. What she means is clear. The challenge for the readers is to struggle with her implications.

This is not to suggest, however, that Yamashita or her novel are not deeply embedded in the same institutional machinations she critiques. In much the same way that \textit{Revolt of the Cockroach People} illuminates the collusion between the state and capital in the regulation of knowledge production, \textit{I Hotel} speaks to the flexibility of that regulative function and its products’ capacity to regulate themselves according to its logic. The novel was, for example, a finalist for the 2010 National Book Award while Yamashita herself is a professor emerita at UC Santa Cruz. This is to say that while \textit{I Hotel} in many ways constitutes a refusal of the logic that predominates in the institutional study and writing of Asian American life and literature, it has

\begin{itemize}
\item[599] Yamashita, 212.
\item[600] Yamashita, 212.
\item[601] Yamashita, 212.
\end{itemize}
nonetheless been appropriated by that institution precisely because of its critical qualities. In part, this recuperation is made possible by the text itself. In much the same way that Acosta and Anzaldúa’s work has been conscripted to regulate Chicano life precisely because it already operated by the logic imposed by universities, Yamashita’s work strives to faithfully reproduce reality. In distinction from more straightforwardly realist novels, however, *I Hotel* does not strive to reproduce a credulous subjectivity in great detail. Instead, she strives for a higher realism: a realism that represents reality in its polyphonic, heterogloss aspects. To this end, she appropriates a number of literary forms—transcripts, interviews, surveillance footage—so as to more viscerally manifest a sense of historicity and intimacy. Likewise, she employs dozens of narrators in order to apprehend the contradictions that texture everyday life and to unify them in their multiplicity. While Yamashita casts doubt on the possibility of objectivity, these stylistic techniques convey the only truly objective quality of reality, that which more classically realist literature can only disavow: the ultimately subjective character of existence. The novel is consequently representable as an innovation in, which is to say reform of, those earlier periods of more generically realist literature. It transcends those earlier works and, in so doing, extends the logic that canonized them by affirming its principles of realism. In these ways, Yamashita’s novel signals the limits of institutional knowledge production even as it butts its head against those limits. It rebels against the institution that would hold it captive, but it does so in captivity. In this way, *I Hotel* heightens and deepens the contradictions that structure it.
During a 1972 speech at the University of British Columbia, the science fiction writer Philip K. Dick considered the various ways in which recent technological advancements were changing people: their bodies and minds, their perceptions and sensations, and their relations to one another. New electronic technologies were making it increasingly easier to accumulate more, and more precise, information about a person, to track them more accurately, and to observe them more constantly. A burgeoning complex of public and private infrastructure was emerging, which functioned to surveil and police, and over the 1970s these commercial products became increasingly commonplace. “I now have a passive infrared scanning system in my own home,” Dick admits, describing for his audience how it functions by monitoring heat, movement, and sound in and around his home’s perimeter.  

The system constantly monitors and collects information about a property, which it then shares with the local police department. The precision and constancy of its monitoring, as well as the reliability of its connection to the police, were precisely why individuals such as Dick purchased it. The commodity being consumed, in other words, is the surveillance and policing of property. “Someone suggested,” he recalls, semi-seriously, “that perhaps this passive infrared scanner sweeping out the interior of my house constantly ‘might be watching me and reporting back to the authorities whatever I do right there

in my own living room.” Though he does so with a kind of wry humor, what Dick draws our attention to are the ways in which individuals are increasingly being tasked with consuming their own subjection to the carceral state. Moreover, he underscores how that consumption and technological proliferation were transforming individual’s perceptions of themselves.

Observing these then-emergent logics, social infrastructures, and ideologies of what we now call neoliberalism, Dick hones in on them, magnifying them for his reader and making them recognizable. This critical emphasis on the growing entanglement of corporations and the carceral state characterizes much of Dick’s work, which offer terrifying visions of a neoliberalizing world. While the force of Dick’s work lies in the perspicacity of his vision, the realism with which he plots out neoliberal development has come to be read as confirmation of its historical inevitability. This is to say that neoliberalism has recuperated Dick’s critique in order to enforce and reinforce its hegemony. In fact, as Fredric Jameson writes, we might best understand Dick as the “Shakespeare of Science Fiction.”

We might, in other words, best understand him not as a prophet of neoliberal modernity but as one of its progenitors. For instance, in his recent theorization of pre-crime (the vast array of information technology that predicates and penalizes crimes that have not yet occurred) Andrew Hope cites Dick’s 1956 novella “The Minority Report” as the source of this anticipatory practice. While policing has long positioned itself as anticipatory, and Dick merely extrapolates that trend with some literary conceit (his story, for example, features psychics who can actually see into the future), the

603 Dick, “The Android and the Human.”


believability of his depictions of how that logic might intensify nonetheless become the grounds for its intensification in reality. In this way, Dick represents carceral realism more fully than nearly any other author: he diagnoses the ways in which policing increasingly shapes the lives of his reader; he maps the intimacies between the carceral state and private enterprise in order to stoke a critical resistance to those intimacies; his critical opposition is recuperated by neoliberalism and made to reinforce and actualize the developments he feared.

By reflecting on Dick, I hope to have recapitulated the arguments that have run through the preceding chapters while, at the same time, re-introducing speculation as an important tool in the study of neoliberalization. As Dick’s work demonstrates, speculation can be employed to defamiliarize the present and thereby clarify readers’ perspectives on it. As his work’s social uptake demonstrates, however, this projected development of the present can easily be recuperated to affirm the inevitability of these developments. Even those literary modes that seem furthest from reality, such as science fiction, can be conscripted by neoliberalization and made to reassert carceral realism as the only available mode of consciousness. In fact, because science fiction has to extrapolate from the present while remaining believable, the best of the genre often ends up retroactively confirming the inevitability of these extrapolations. However, this is not to take a cynical position vis-a-vis the political efficacy of speculative fiction. Rather, it is to render speculative fiction as a site of struggle where values, interests, and ideologies struggle with and against one another.

In addition to highlighting the potency of neoliberal recuperation, Dick’s work returns us to a period where neoliberalism had not yet achieved a hegemony and its development was still being contested: the 1970s. In addition to the dystopian realism of Dick, this period also saw the publication of speculative fictions that imagined worlds and events unlike our own: anarchist
societies, indigenous-feminist futures, black insurrections that overthrow the United States of America. Unlike Dick, authors such as Ursula K. Le Guin, Samuel Delaney, Joanna Russ, Marge Piercy, and Sam Greenlee imagine worlds in which prisons and police have been abolished, marginalized, or successfully confronted in armed struggle. Accordingly, they have not been—cannot be—recuperated into carceral realism. In fact, these works are constituted by a militant opposition to a world that could have prisons and police. As such, they exemplify a concept that I first alluded to at the end of my reading of The Animal Factory: abolitionist speculation.

As I explore over the course of this chapter, abolitionist speculation is a literary and cognitive mode that imagines a society without prisons and policing, as well as the conditions necessary for such a society to exist. In much the same way that I posit carceral realism as a complement to capitalist realism, I hope to situate abolitionist speculation within a broader milieu of anti-capitalist cultural production that Mark Fisher calls acid communism. This concept refers to the “fusion of new social movements with a communist project” that emerged briefly in the late 1960s before being repressed across the long 1970s. Describing capitalism, “with all its visored cops, its teargas, and all the theological niceties of its economics,” as an impediment to the development of “the collective capacity to produce, care, and enjoy,” Fisher once again figures police as the handmaiden of capital and insists that anti-capitalism cannot be satisfied with merely critiquing or confronting capital. Rather, anti-capitalism should focus on growing those already existing alternatives to capital: those capacities that threaten to make capitalism obsolete. From this perspective, the late-'60s/early-'70s represent a moment in which such

---


alternatives were being explored in mass culture, and literary studies interested in those alternatives should turn their attention there. What I intend to demonstrate by focusing on cultural productions from this period is that, in addition to broader currents of anti-capitalist politics, this period also saw the emergence of anti-prison and anti-police politics, which are expressed in contemporaneous literary cultures. While these texts have not yet been read in relation to abolitionist politics, I contend that abolitionist speculation structures them at the level of form—a quality that has been repressed in scholarship on them.

The Defamiliarization of Everyday Life

At approximately 10:00 pm on May 28th, 2020, the Minneapolis Police Department (MPD) did something that would have been unimaginable even just hours before: they abandoned their third precinct. At that moment, the people of Minneapolis were breaching the building, which had, as local journalists Angela Caputo, Will Craft, and Curtis Gilbert put it, “become a symbol not only of the department’s failure to hold abusive officers accountable…but also the deteriorating relationship between the police and the community they were hired to protect.”

This was the building where Derek Chauvin worked and the precinct he was policing when, three days earlier, he had murdered George Floyd. Caught on camera and circulated around the planet, Floyd’s lynching—the latest in a seemingly endless catalogue of anti-black murders and maimings—was met with rage. In the street, people shared their anger with one another and collectivized their affect: rioting, rebelling, and revolting. The MPD responded by fortifying their precinct headquarters and abandoning the surrounding community, which had

erupted in disorder. Rather than obviating this disorder, however, the MPD’s dereliction merely intensified the anger of the community, and focused it more directly on the police themselves. By the night of the 28th, the insurrection had been near-constant for three days. The MPD’s forces were spread too thin and had been too demoralized to defend the third precinct building, so they abandoned it completely. In the face of a militarized security force sanctioned and supported by the most powerful military in the history of the planet, the people of Minneapolis succeeded in forcing the US’s carceral apparatus to retreat, and they celebrated their victory by burning down the building that, for so many of them, embodied a lifetime of repression.

Before the building was burned and before it was stormed by members of the surrounding community, however, at least one of those people envisioned that such a victory was possible. By acting on that vision, they made it more imaginable for millions of other people as well. “What seemed impossible has suddenly become possible,” writes Charmaine Chua in her firsthand account of Minneapolis in the aftermath of the event.609 The event, in her words, “peeled the skin off a carceral state that has been ethically and politically indefensible for too long.”610 Rupturing the commonsense that prisons and police are natural and/or inevitable, the event demonstrated that these institutions can be confronted and that they can be defeated. However, as Chua notes, citing Ruth Wilson Gilmore, abolition is as much a constructive project as it is a deconstructive one. It refers not merely to the absence of police and prisons but to the presence of institutions, practices, and social relations that make prisons and police unwanted and unnecessary. As Chua puts it, “we have as much, if not more to learn from preceding and

---


610 Chua, 142.
ensuing local efforts to build an abolitionist infrastructure as we do from the spectacular act of the riot.”⁶¹¹ The local efforts that Chua refers to include mutual aid efforts to shelter groups of unhoused people, and while these efforts were imperfect and impermanent, they nonetheless provided an opportunity for people to experience a police-free, non-capitalist world for themselves. By enabling people to experience a different kind of world, a social life organized by different principles, these events thereby conditioned a shift in consciousness.

Halfway across the country, similar efforts were underway to shift people’s consciousness. Inspired by the uprising in Minneapolis and organizing efforts in its wake, protestors confronted and encircled the Seattle Police Department’s (SPD) East Precinct. After seven days of confrontations, the SPD abandoned the precinct on June 8th, 2020, and the surrounding Capitol Hill neighborhood was transformed into an autonomous zone. Writing for the Seattle Times, reporter Evan Bush visited the site on June 10th and described “a new protest society” where “most everything was free.”⁶¹² Food and housing were freely available, free film screenings were held in the evenings, and the space was free of police. The space was not perfect by any means. It lacked organs of self-management, social cohesion, and self-defense, and could therefore neither prevent nor respond adequately to a number of killings in and around the area. These failures were seen as justifications for the necessity of the police, which lead the SPD to reclaim the territory on July 1st.⁶¹³ Nonetheless, the Capitol Hill Autonomous Zone (CHAZ)

---

⁶¹¹ Chua, 129.


represented a real, meaningful break from a society structured by commodity production and exchange. Like those mutual aid efforts in Minneapolis, CHAZ was a spontaneous experiment in living otherwise, of living outside and beyond law and law enforcement.\textsuperscript{614}

These experiments were underpinned by a form of consciousness called abolitionist speculation, a concept that Samuel Delany exemplifies and theorizes in his 1976 novel, \textit{Trouble on Triton}. Set on Neptune’s largest moon, the novel follows protagonist Bron Helestrom as he (later she) explores the societies of a future in which human beings have colonized most of the solar system. Over the course of the novel, Bron moves throughout his/her own society and travels to others, which allows Delany to work out various ways in which aspects of his present might develop over time. While many of the societies depicted in the novel have preserved law and law enforcement, they have likewise preserved a zone of ungovernability. “At founding,” Delany writes

\begin{quote}
each Outer Satellite city had aside a city sector where no law officially held–since, as the Mars sociologist who first advocated it had pointed out, most cities develop, of necessity, such a neighborhood anyway. These sectors fulfilled a complex range of functions in the cities’ psychological, political, and economic ecology. Problems a few conservative, Earth-bound thinkers feared must come, didn't: the interface between official law and official lawlessness produced some remarkably stable unofficial laws throughout the no-law sector. Minor criminals were not likely to retreat there: enforcement agents could enter the u-I sector as could anyone else; and in the u-I there were no legal curbs on apprehension methods, use of weapons, or technological battery. Those major criminals whose crimes–through the contractual freedom of the place–existed mainly on paper found it convenient, while there, to keep life on streets fairly safe and minor crimes at a minimum. Today it was something of a truism: ‘Most places in the unlicensed sector are statistically safer than the rest of the city.’ To which the truistic response was: ‘But not all.’\textsuperscript{615}
\end{quote}


While Delany’s novel is, in many ways, pessimistic about the idea of historical progress, what he describes here is a natural human tendency toward lawlessness. Rather than rapacity and violence, however, Delany means something closer to ungovernability. This is to say, Delany posits a fundamental human desire to live outside the impositions of a state. What Delany offers, then, is a notion of the state and society at odds with predominating Enlightenment philosophers. Contra Thomas Hobbes and John Locke, Delany posits that societies form even in the absence of a state. Though this may, at first glance, seem like a libertarian conception of society and the state, Delany is careful to note that this social formation is precisely that: social. Rather than an unbound collection of atomized individuals, members of this society hold the collective together through their actions and choices, which prioritize the wellbeing of the community over their own personal enrichment. These individuals understand their comfort, safety, and health to be produced by a comfortable, safe, and healthy whole. It is precisely because people produce these features of life in the u-l on an ongoing basis that people continue to live there—imperfect though it may be.

Although *Trouble on Triton* suggests that this non-state society will likely never be the dominant mode of life, Delany nonetheless posits that the desire for such a life is inherent to being human, something towards which groups of people will necessarily tend. In this way, *Trouble on Triton* theorizes a social formation without recourse to law enforcement, rendering the abolition of the state as practical rather than fantastic. Moreover, he makes the bold claim that an irrepressible desire to do away with state repression underpins all human sociality. On his account, a kind of non-state society inevitably develops, and this social order preserves and transforms itself through values and practices internal to it. This non-state social formation
develops “of necessity,” despite state efforts to repress it, and we might therefore speculate that, from *Triton*’s view, this non-state society is historically and ontologically anterior to the state. Indeed, we can understand it as sociality itself, which forms the very base upon which the state is composed. Delany counterposes this desire to the commonsense of “Mars sociologists” and “conservative, Earth-bound thinkers,” and he thereby implies that experiments in non-state sociality are underpinned by the capacity to break free from these ruling ideas. In this way Delany theorizes (by practicing, which he does by imagining) a form of consciousness that I call abolitionist speculation.

By speculation, I mean something close to what the literary critic Darko Suvin calls cognitive estrangement. Suvin appropriates “estrangement” from Viktor Shklovsky and Bertolt Brecht, and he defines his concept with specific recourse to the latter. “A representation which estranges,” writes Brecht, “is one which allows us to recognize its subject, but at the same time makes it seem unfamiliar.” Estrangement, then, refers to a process of positive alienation whereby works of art defamiliarize an aspect of reality for their reader. This process makes something that was once perceived as mundane, obvious, natural, necessary or commonplace appear strange, unfamiliar, or otherwise contingent. Or, as Fredric Jameson puts it in his gloss of the concept, cognitive estrangement is “a shocked renewal of our vision such that once again, and as though for the first time, we are able to perceive [“our culture and institutions”] historicity and their arbitrariness, their profound dependency on the accidents of man’s historical adventure.” Cognitive estrangement, in other words, is the act of making a reader’s own

---


subjectivity recognizable as historical. Cognitive estrangement is, therefore, a mode of}

estrangement in which cognition, or thinking itself, is defamiliarized. Suvin argues that science
fiction is uniquely characterized by this kind of estrangement. By representing consciousness in
this way, science fiction renders consciousness historically self-conscious, alienating readers
from themselves by exposing them to new modes of thought.

Like Suvin and Jameson, I am particularly interested in works of science fiction and their
political function. Unlike them, however, I do not view science fiction as the only literary genre
capable of cognitive estrangement. Rather, I understand cognitive estrangement to be a more
common capacity for self-consciousness: an ordinary function of cognition, which can be
adopted by any one at any time, precisely because it is a constitutive quality of consciousness. As
such, cognitive estrangement can be appropriated by and integrated into any literary form or
genre. Accordingly, I prefer the more ordinary term “speculation,” which refers to thought’s
capacity for reflection. This is analogous to what Raymond Williams calls the subjunctive mode
of writing, “which is clearly ‘what if’ or ‘would that’ or ‘let us suppose that’. In other words…a
perspective which is not socially or politically available.”  

If examples of the subjunctive or
speculative mode of consciousness come more readily from works of science fiction, or are
featured more prominently there, it is perhaps because, as Suvin claims, estrangement “has
grown into the formal framework of the genre.”  

Science fiction is, in other words, premised
on the conventions and expectations of large scale and aesthetically realist speculation. This is
not to oppose speculation to realism, then, but to posit speculation as something that renders, in


619 Suvin, 7.
the realist mode, worlds that don’t (yet) exist but very well might—elsewhere or elsewhen. Speculation is, therefore, the critical function constitutive of thought: consciousness’s capacity for self-consciousness, reality’s capacity to alter itself.

By abolitionist speculation, then, I mean the speculative dimension of prison industrial complex abolitionism. If PIC abolitionism is the struggle to compose a world without prisons, abolitionist speculation is the practice of imagining a society without prisons and/or the conditions that would make such a society possible. Abolitionist speculation is, therefore, a break from carceral realism, or the widespread sense that prisons and police are natural and inevitable features of social life. This break antagonizes carceral realism’s conditions of reproduction insofar as abolitionist speculation refuses the historical inevitability of prisons and contests their

---

620 To return to a discussion of socialist realism and abolitionist speculation begun in footnote 155: on this point, the similarities between the two should be apparent. For example, Lukács writes, socialist realism finds its “ideological basis in an understanding of the future, [and] individuals working for that future will necessarily be portrayed from the inside” (95). However, I want to distinguish the two by contending that what Lukács envisions is a realist portrait of the development of socialist societies in progress: the emergence of the future in the present. Abolitionist speculation, however, refers to the envisioning of an abolitionist future so that it might be built in the present. Though it shares with socialist realism a naturalized perspective on this future society, they have different relationships to time and history. Socialist realism is a document that will, in the future, retroactively locate the seeds of socialist society in the (relative) past. By contrast, abolitionist speculation appears (in the present) like a (potential) future reaching back into the past. Moreover, abolitionist speculation is a literary mode rather than a narrowly-defined genre of prose literature. For Lukács, socialist realism is characterized by its typologies, its contradictions, its privileging of scientific socialism over utopianism. On this account, a work is either one of socialist realism or it is not. Abolitionist speculation is, however, a thoroughly utopian perspective that authors irregularly take up and put down. A largely critical realist work like Blood in my Eye, for example, has within it moments of abolitionist speculation. Because it is a utopian vision that emerges in, through, and as a critique of the present, abolitionist speculation contains elements characteristic of critical realism and socialist realism while distinguishing itself from both through non-realist elements: aliens, spaceships, faster than light communication, or even just counterfactuals etc. In these ways, it bears some resemblance to Lukács’s concepts while confounding them in some places and breaking from them entirely in others.
reproduction in the social landscape. As such, it is a necessary if not sufficient condition for abolitionist political activity. Indeed, abolitionist scholars such as Dylan Rodriguez have noted the “creative, imaginative, and speculative collective labor” of prison abolitionism.\textsuperscript{621} Describing abolition as “a kind of speculative and inherently contradictory goal,” scholar Grace Hong notes that

\begin{quotation}
Abolitionist work is simultaneously working under constraints – the proliferation of prisons, the culture of punishment, enclosure and surveillance – asking ourselves, how do we concretely try to mitigate these constraints and get people out of prison? At the same time, how do we try to not just be constrained to the way the world is now? How do we completely reenvision what it would mean for us to relate to each other differently not based on ideas of consequences for individual actions, but based on care?”\textsuperscript{622}
\end{quotation}

Because abolition requires the deconstruction of already existing social infrastructure and the composition of alternative infrastructure, it must be attuned to political realities while treating them as changeable. Moreover, it requires the planning of alternative institutions, practices, ideas, and forms of organization. Efforts at change are, therefore, preceded by ordinary acts of imagining the means by which and ends toward those changes can be effectuated. “Abolition is imagination work,” as abolitionist scholar Robyn Maynard put it in a letter to abolitionist organizer and intellectual Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, “anti-colonial struggle is imagination work, conjure work, science fiction in real time.”\textsuperscript{623} Or, as the abolitionist philosophers Stefano

\begin{footnotes}
\end{footnotes}
Harney and Fred Moten might put it, abolition requires acts of fugitive planning.\textsuperscript{624} Such acts of planning fall within the field of abolitionist speculation, as do other overlapping, if not identical, concepts, such as historian Robin D.G. Kelley’s concept of freedom dreams, Mikhail Bakhtin’s concept of the carnivalesque, W.E.B. Du Bois’ concept of double consciousness, or the Afropessimist imperative to “end the world.”\textsuperscript{625} Although others have identified a speculative dimension of abolition virtually no work has been done exploring that relationship and its relationship to speculative literature.

To flesh out this concept of abolitionist speculation in greater detail, I turn now to the tradition of utopian fiction, which is replete with examples of nascent or incipient abolitionist speculation. Indeed, at first glance, abolitionist speculation appears as one of the genre’s

\textsuperscript{624} Though Harney and Moten don’t offer a systemic theorization of “fugitive planning,” the concept runs through their collection of essays, \textit{The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study}. With this concept, the pair means something like: an informal and collaborative drawing of short-term plans (in its ordinary sense) that emerges under and against conditions of confinement, and that emerges through and in order to evade top-down efforts to regulate life.

\textsuperscript{625} Though this refrain can be heard throughout the corpus of Afropessimist thought, one of the framework’s progenitors, Frank Wilderson is often quick to point out that the phrase refers to a passage in Aimé Césaire’s \textit{Notebook of a Return to a Native Land}, which comes to Wilderson via Fanon. From Wilderson’s perspective, Césaire’s line—“One must begin somewhere. Begin what? The only thing in the world worth beginning: the end of the world, of course” (22)—refers to the creative destruction of the planetary political-economic order (which, on Wilderson’s account is constituted by and through anti-blackness) and the production of a new world built on different principles. This Afropessemist refrain has drawn significant criticism, but, I contend, not much understanding. In contrast with critics who see Wilderson’s refrain as romanticizing destruction, provocation, or libertarian adventurism, I posit that Wildeson means something closer to: Afropessimists insists that the present political-economic-epistemological order cannot be reformed; it must be ended, and the necessity of its end does not obligate black people to have an alternative form of society already waiting in the wings. For a fuller account of what Wilderson means by this provocative phrase, see Frank Wilderson, “We’re trying to destroy the world,” Ill Will Editions (2014), \texttt{https://illwilleditions.noblogs.org/files/2015/09/Wilderson-We-Are-Trying-to-Destroy-the-World-READ.pdf}. Aimé Césaire, \textit{Notebook of a Return to the Native Land}, trans. Clayton Eshleman and Annette Smith (Middletown: Wesleyan UP, 2001).
constitutive tropes. In his 1516 novel *Utopia*, for example, Thomas More describes a fictional people called the Polylerites and their system of punishment. When it comes to thieves, More writes, “unless the theft be very heinous, they be neither locked in prison nor fettered in gyves, but be untied and go at large, labouring in the common works.”

The Polylerite system of punishment, though by no means perfect, is a far cry from the one that More or his readers would have been familiar with. The use of capital punishment is greatly constrained, prisons are used only as a last resort, and the punishment itself functions to integrate the criminal into a network of community relationships. In fact, punishment is only justifiable so far as it enables the maintenance and reparation of social relations within a community. Because the novel is a complex weave of irony and the displacement of perspective, it is hard to be certain how More intended his readers to perceive the Polylerite system.

Nonetheless, More contrasts the example with then-dominant attitudes regarding crime and punishment, which is embodied by John Morton, Archbishop of Canterbury. By juxtaposing these perspectives against one another, *Utopia* presents the Polylerites to its readers as one alternative way, among many, that human beings could organize themselves and a different end toward which they might do so. He thereby enables readers to view recent historical developments as only one path down which humans might tread.

---


627 Per Susan Bruce explanatory notes, “Polyerite,” is a compound of the Greek for “much” and “nonsense,” and “Polyerite” should therefore be translated as “nonsensical people.” Susan Bruce, “Explanatory Notes” to Three Early Modern Utopias (Oxford: Oxford World’s Classics, 2008), 218n27.
Writers following More would hew closely to the tropes established by his novel, and we can find similar abolitionist impulses in nearly all utopian novels since. In Erewhon, the utopia in Samuel Butler’s 1872 novel of the same name, crime is treated as though it were an illness. Butler writes that

if a man forges a cheque, or sets his house on fire, or robs with violence from the person, or does any other such things as are criminal in our own country, he is either taken to a hospital and most carefully tended at the public expense, or if he is in good circumstances, he lets it be known to all his friends that he is suffering from a severe fit of immorality…  

Likewise, the protagonist of Edward Bellamy’s 1888 utopian novel, *Looking Backwards*, “noted the total disappearance of the old state prison.” In his 1890 response to Bellamy, *News from Nowhere*, William Morris describes a future that has done away with prisons. In fact, they have abolished both criminal and civil law altogether. “How could we have [criminal’s],” asks one character, “since there is no rich class to breed enemies against the state by means of injustices of the state.” “I doubt even if there will be jails,” H.G. Wells remarks in his 1905 *Modern Utopia*. In reference to judges and policemen, one utopian subject of Aldous Huxley’s 1962 *Island* informs the reader’s stand-in that “We still need them. But we don’t need so many

---


631 Morris, 68.

of them as you do.” Likewise, in the anarcho-feminist society described by Marge Piercy in her 1976 novel *Woman on the Edge of Time*, “prisons, police, spies, armies, torture, bosses, hunger” are things of the past, though executions and exile are sometimes still employed in extreme and rare cases of violence that have exhausted other, reparative options. In Bernadette Mayer’s 1984 prose poem, *Utopia*, “There are hardly any prisoners anymore but there are some and they are torturers, people who’ve starved and abused others, people who’ve put one over on a whole population…” She goes on to note that, “Prison wildernesses surround most of the old abandoned prisons, they are open to the public for making love and the putting on of obscene plays and poetry readings; some are daycare centers.” If there are to be prisons, in other words, let them be filled with “former heads of state, high government officials, corporate executives, landlords, toxic waste entrepreneurs, machine-gun manufacturers, etc.” Close nearly all the prisons and repurpose their facilities for the flourishing of life: sex and the rearing of children.

In addition to these explicit acknowledgements of prison’s absence in utopia, or its infrastructural reduction, or its different uses, these novels go to great lengths to describe for their reader “how the change came,” as Morris formulates it in the title of one chapter of *News From Nowhere*. There, Morris tells of a long and bloody struggle that begins with hoping and


636 Mayer, 35.

637 Mayer, 35.
dreaming of socialism that precipitates organization and action. As a matter of course, other utopian novels feature similar passages, and it is generic for them to devote significant time to describing the genesis of their society. In addition to the aforementioned *Utopia* (1516), *Erewhon, Looking Backwards, A Modern Utopia, Island, Woman on the Edge of Time*, and *Utopia* (1984) we can find passages conforming to this trope in Edward Johnson’s *Light Ahead for the Negro*, Alexander Bogdanov’s *Red Star*, Charlotte Perkins Gilmore’s *Herland*, Ursula K. Le Guin’s *The Dispossessed*, Terry Bisson’s *Fire on the Mountain*, and Kim Stanley Robinson’s *Pacific Edge*.638

If the radical transformation of systems, institutions, and ideologies of law-enforcement and punishment has helped mold the utopian tradition, it is precisely because, as the literary critic Robert Elliot puts it, utopia is not merely a literary genre. Indeed, it names a much larger social force: “the ineradicable human impulse to imagine the terms in which a better life might be led.”639 It is a metonym, in other words, for a desire to facilitate human flourishing, which retributive punishment is an impediment to. This distinction between utopian desire and utopian literature was first articulated by the Frankfurt School philosopher Ernst Bloch, whose innovation in the study of utopia was the introduction of what he calls alternatively “the utopian

638 In this context, it is worth offering a counter-example that makes my case by way of inversion: an early and profoundly influential anti-utopian novel, Yevgeny Zamayatin’s *We* (1924), which inverts the utopian paradigm and founds the modern dystopian tradition. Teasing out the ways in which one person’s utopia can quickly become another person’s dystopia he depicts a single world state that has taken the prison as its model of society: cities are walled in; life is highly routinized and highly uniform; variation is punished; qualitative experience is reduced to a bare minimum; and individuals are given numbers instead of names.

principle,” “the utopian function,” and “utopian consciousness.” For Bloch, utopia is a mode of consciousness, a principle of action, and the social function that enables social transformation. Operating within a Marxist tradition that understands social being as the producer of consciousness, Bloch identifies utopianism as the capacity of consciousness, which is conditioned by social being, to act on and thereby modify social being. It is, in other words, a way of thinking that directs ways of doing, and it is an inalienable characteristic of being human. In this way, Bloch makes human beings not merely products of their social life but agents in that social life’s ongoing transformation. While More gives a name to this form of consciousness, utopian thinking is not reducible to utopian literature. Rather, utopian literature most fully embodies the utopian mode of consciousness. Synthesizing the work of Elliot and Bloch, Fredric Jameson has more recently articulated the distinction as one “between the written text or genre and something like a Utopian impulse detectable in daily life and its practices.” This utopian impulse, Bloch posits, is something like “anticipation in general.”

Although utopian consciousness and abolitionist speculation seem to overlap and utopian literature furnishes innumerable examples of abolitionist speculation, I want to resist reducing

---


641 C.f. Bloch: “If being is understood out of its Where From, then it is so only as an equally tendential, still unclosed Where To. The being that conditions consciousness, and the consciousness that processes being, is understood ultimately only out of that and in that from which and towards which it tends. Essential being is not Been-ness; on the contrary: the essential being of the world lies itself on the Front.” https://www.marxists.org/archive/bloch/hope/introduction.htm

642 Jameson, Archeology of the Future, 1.

one to the other. The primary reason for this is that utopia, as Tom Moylan writes, “is, at heart, rooted in the unfulfilled needs and wants of specific classes, groups, and individuals in their unique historical contexts.” This is to say that utopian consciousness, and indeed utopian literature, has no inherent political content. Individuals from different social positions, different classes, will imagine different utopias. While most utopian literature as well as most studies of utopian thought are, at least nominally, politically left, this is not true of all utopian literature. Nor is it true of all instances of utopian thinking. For example, Robert Heinlein’s 1966 novel, The Moon is Harsh Mistress, details a successful anti-colonial revolution from a ground-level perspective. In the novel, the moon has been transformed into a penal colony and inhabitants made to produce wheat for the Earth’s consumption. Dissatisfied with this economic arrangement, the lunar colonists secure their independence through armed struggle. This is not, however, a progressive novel of anti-colonial revolution. Rather, the more perfect society that Heinlein imagines is a staunchly capitalist, resolutely libertarian one. While the post-colony he depicts bears striking resemblance to the post-colonial societies in Africa, South Asia, and Latin America that have been organized by their national bourgeois and consequently reformed as capitalist and neo-colonial societies, he did not intend to depict the unintended results of anti-colonial bourgeois revolution. Instead, Heinlein ought to legitimize the bourgeois revolution as the privileged mode of anti-colonialism. Along these lines, the geographer David Harvey describes neoliberalism itself as a utopian project, precisely because neoliberalism makes certain assumptions regarding human nature and how to optimize it. These assumptions underpin

---


645 Harvey, 19.
political activity that strives to bring about this more perfectly ordered society. More perfectly ordered, that is, for capitalists and capital itself. Writing in 1987, Tom Moylan identifies advertising and Disneyland as examples of capitalist utopianism.\textsuperscript{646} In 2023, we can add to this catalog those states, such as Singapore and the United Arab Emirates, that have fashioned themselves into clearinghouses of capital by serving as technocratic hubs of finance and sites of exorbitant commodity consumption. These places have developed powerful and repressive infrastructures of policing in order to discipline indentured migrant labor and thereby secure a high standard of living for a global class of wealthy elites who live in or pass through these places while accumulating capital elsewhere in the world.

In contrast with utopianism, then, abolitionism names a political project with goals and a history, a concrete and determinate set of political means and ends. Whereas utopian consciousness is compatible with capitalism, abolitionist speculation is not. This is precisely because abolitionism understands police and prisons as forces of capitalist social (re)production. The burning of a police station, for example, cannot be reconciled with the expansion of the carceral state. As I have tried to illustrate in my previous chapter, they function as instruments of primitive accumulation and technologies of racialization, and thereby condition the possibility for capital accumulation. Abolishing prisons and the police is, therefore, co-terminus with the abolition of capitalism, among other things. These things include compulsory heterosexuality, patriarchal domination, white supremacy, colonialism, and the state. Accordingly, abolitionist speculation overlaps with feminist, queer, anti-racist, indigenous, anti-fascist, socialist, communist, and anarchist traditions of speculative thought. While it is not reducible to any one

\textsuperscript{646} Moylan, 7-8.
of these traditions, abolitionist speculation shares with all of them a concrete set of politics that distinguish them from utopian thinking in the abstract.

It is for this reason that I have tried to qualify my preceding examples of abolitionist speculation with words and phrases such as “incipient or nascent,” “at first glance,” “appears.” While many of the examples provided above do offer a criminal legal system strikingly different from our own, many utopian novels preserve punishment in some form or fashion—exceedingly rare and regrettable though it may be. Prisons, jails, and law have been completely abolished in News From Nowhere, but carceral elements persist in some diminished form in A Modern Utopia, Island, Woman on the Edge of Time, and Mayer’s Utopia. These latter visions qualify as abolitionist speculation insofar as they challenge the notions of crime and punishment that prevail under capitalist modernity. Moreover, they imagine conditions that would make it possible to scale back the carceral infrastructure characteristic of capitalist modernity, and they model practices, values, ideas, relations, and policy that can be rehearsed and enacted by their readers. There are still other utopian examples, such as Samuel Butler’s Erewhon, which require further parsing before they can be accepted as abolitionist speculation. Although crime is treated as a disease in Erewhon, ill health is treated as a crime. Getting sick is punished, which only seems to make things worse. “I don’t think I would like to live in Erewhon,” writes Thomas Matthiessen in his 1973, The Politics of Abolition. “I would worry a great deal if something like this became the road.” Nonetheless, the example is useful for Matthiessen insofar as it defamiliarizes crime and punishment. After encountering this text, readers can grasp crime as something that can be treated—as if it were a symptom of some chronic social malady—and

---

647 Matthiessen, 36.
punishment can be understood as something odd and ineffective, something that will not resolve the problem it arises in response to. In this way, Erewhon doesn’t model a perfect society so much as it embodies the critical function of utopian fiction: casting its own historical present askance, galvanizing and altering reader’s affective responses to their own lives.

In this way, abolitionist speculation constitutes a subgenre of utopian consciousness and literature, or a tendency within it. As such, abolitionist speculation shares utopia’s quality of being suffused throughout social life and literary history. While abolitionist speculation can consequently emerge in any kind of literary text, it is more pronounced or prominent in some texts than in others. The utopian literary form and science fiction more broadly, for example, lend themselves most readily to abolitionist speculation precisely because it has become a generic trope of those genres. Likewise, while literary examples of abolitionist speculation are present in every historical period, they are more common in some than in others. In the present period, for example, abolitionism has been thrust into mainstream political debates precisely because the US state is experiencing a crisis of legitimacy. This crisis is reflected in a growing body of creative work (poetry, fiction, film, comic books, and scholarship) that lodges an abolitionist critique of the PIC and imagines abolitionist alternatives. In the crisis of the long 1960s, we similarly find openings for radical alternatives being exploited in popular culture.

Mass media during this time was replete with anti-capitalist themes and radical new notions of space and time, which were crystallized in new musical sounds, new styles of film

---

editing, and newly resurgent modes of literature, such as the utopian form. Mark Fisher calls this blend of class consciousness and psychedelic consciousness acid communism, a historical movement that promised “a new humanity, a new seeing, a new thinking, a new loving.”649 The heart of this cultural-political movement, in other words, was a new mode of consciousness. I contend that this speculative consciousness was structured in opposition to prisons and police. Indeed, we find this movement against policing and imprisonment animating and orienting numerous novels from this time: science fiction like The Dispossessed, Trouble on Triton, The Female Man, Woman on the Edge of Time, but also more realist speculative fiction, such as The Spook Who Sat By the Door. We even find it in more generally canonical novels, such as Gravity’s Rainbow and Beloved. Further still, abolitionist speculation emerges in other literary forms: epistolary texts, such as George Jackson’s Blood in My Eye; poetry, such as Diane Di Prima’s Revolutionary Letters; and in mixed-media texts, such as Larry Mitchell and Ned Asta’s The Faggots and Their Friends Between Revolutions.650 Within this historical moment of cultural production, two authors stand out amongst the others for the detail of their vision and the force of their provocations: Ursula K. Le Guin and Octavia Butler. I turn now to their work, reading it as a theoretical intervention in the abolition of prisons and policing. In doing so, I hope to offer a more robust account of abolitionist speculation, demonstrate how recognizing it in literature enables new readings of canonical texts, and analyze the ways in which abolitionist


650 Though a full investigation of how this historical moment of cultural production was operative internationally falls outside the scope of this dissertation project, it is worth pointing out that we can identify a similar anti-prison orientations in non-US literatures during this period, including Boris and Arkady Strugatsky’s Noon: 22nd Century (1962, first translated into English in 1978) in the Soviet Union and, in Japan, Izumi Suzuki’s “Women and Women” (1978, untranslated until 2021).
speculation has been critically and textually obscured as anti-prison and anti-capitalist movements were repressed across the long 1970s.

**The Dispossessed**

Ursula K. Le Guin begins thinking about the abolition of prisons as early as her 1973 parable, “The Ones Who Walk Away From Omelas.” There Le Guin describes a seemingly perfect city. It features all the hallmarks of modern life, but it secures these amenities “without the stock exchange, the advertisement, the secret police, and the bomb.” Explicitly formulated as a thought experiment, the text is an exercise in imagining the most perfect society—however the reader may define that. “Omelas,” Le Guin writes, “sounds in my words like a city in a fairy tale, long ago and far away, once upon a time. Perhaps it would be best if you imagined it as your own fancy bids, for certainly I cannot suit you all.” Omelas may even feature “marvelous devices not yet invented,” including a cure for the common cold, “or they could have none of that: it doesn’t matter.” What matters is that readers understand Omelas as a perfect society. As the story approaches its end, Le Guin juxtaposes this seeming perfection with one imperfection:

In a basement under one of the beautiful public buildings of Omelas, or perhaps in the cellar of one of its spacious private homes, there is a room. It has one locked door, and no window. A little light seeps in dustily between cracks in the boards, secondhand from a cobwebbed window somewhere across the cellar. In one corner of the little room a couple of mops, with stiff, clotted, foul-smelling heads, stand near a rusty bucket. The floor is dirt, a little damp to the touch as cellar dirt usually is. The room is about three paces long and two wide: a mere

---


broom closet or disused tool room. In the room a child is sitting. It could be a boy or a girl. It looks about six, but actually is nearly ten. It is feeble-minded. Perhaps it was born defective, or perhaps it has become imbecile through fear, malnutrition, and neglect. It picks its nose and occasionally fumbles vaguely with its toes or genitals, as it sits hunched in the corner farthest from the bucket and the two mops. It is afraid of the mops. It finds them horrible. It shuts its eyes, but it knows the mops are still standing there; and the door is locked; and nobody ever comes, except that sometimes—the child has no understanding of time or interval—sometimes the door rattles terrible and opens, and a person, or several people, are there. One of them may come in and kick the child to make it stand up. There others never come close, but peer in at it with frightened, disgusted eyes. The food bowl and the water jug are hastily filled, the door is locked, the eyes disappear. The people at the door never say anything, but the child, who has not always lived in the tool room, and can remember sunlight and its mothers voice, sometimes speaks. “I will be good,” it says. “Please let me out. I will be good!” They never answer. The child used to scream for help at night, and cry a good deal, but now it only makes a kind of whining, “eh-haa, eh-haa,” and it speaks less and less often. It is so thin that there are no calves to its legs; its belly protrudes; it lives on a half-bowl of corn meal and grease a day. It is naked. Its buttocks and thighs are a mass of festered sores, as it sits in its own excrement continually.654

Separated from family and friends, the small child confined to the broom closet is subject to extraordinary violence. This violence is evident in the space the child is forced to inhabit, the loneliness and alienation they are meant to live with, and the deprivation of sensual experiences. The child’s pleas for mercy, for help, for an end to its suffering fall largely on deaf ears.

Published just two years after the Attica rebellion, it is worth noting how Le Guin’s description of what she calls “the scapegoat” bears remarkable similarity to the account of prison offered by people like George Jackson.655 “We are the totally disenfranchised,” he writes in one passage of Soledad Brother, ”the whipping boy, the scapegoat, the floor mat of the nation.”656 In another passage, he describes the ways that long-term prisoners “have no past, no future, no goal other

655 In her prefatory note, Le Guin notes that this story is predicated on “this psychomth, the scapegoat” (“Omelas, 251).
656 Jackson, Soledad Brother, 184.
than the next meal. They’re afraid, confused, and confounded by a world that they did not make, that they feel they cannot change, so they make these loud noises so they won’t hear what their minds are trying to tell them.”657 Using the same language and offering strikingly similar descriptions, it is as if Le Guin and Jackson are speaking in one voice: a common tongue, which is shared across gender, race, geography, time, and prison walls. If Le Guin goes to great lengths to illustrate this scene with nuance of detail and depth of expression, it is, I imagine, because she hopes that her reader will be moved by this figure, shocked by the depredation it has been subject to. I have quoted the passage in full in order to preserve that intention to move my reader. The child and what has been done to it are terrifying sites to behold. We should be disgusted by what we see and hear.

As Le Guin goes on to write, the condition of the child is known to all of the citizens of Omelas. Indeed, the citizens of Omelas know that “their happiness, the beauty of their city, the tenderness of their friendships, the health of their children, the wisdom of their scholars, the skill of their makers, even the abundance of their harvest and the kindly weather of their skies, depend wholly on this child’s abominable misery.”658 The plenitude of the city requires and is built upon the enormous suffering of an individual who has committed no harm, broken no formal or informal rule. They simply occupy a structural position of subordination, and by occupying this position they uphold a society predicated on domination and violence. In a prefatory note, Le Guin likens her fable to an anecdote from the philosopher William James, who asks whether otherwise utopian societies would be tolerable if their goodness was predicated on violence and domination. Le Guin makes explicit this question’s relevance to her readers, insisting that “[t]he

657 Jackson, Soledad Brother, 154.

dilemma of the American conscience can hardly be better stated.”659 If the price for its composition is paid in coercion and blood, in other words, is utopia worth living in? If it requires prisons and jails, is America worth keeping?

Although Le Guin’s “nasty little fable” strikes Fredric Jameson as “counterrevolutionary anti-utopianism,” she concludes her story by turning readers’ attention to those who refuse the social contract of Omelas, refuse the happiness predicated on another’s suffering.660 In contrast with those Omelans who come before the child in the broom closet, who fret over its condition before justifying its necessity to themselves, there are those who walk away from the city. “They leave Omelas,” Le Guin writes, “they walk ahead into the darkness, and they do not come back.”661 Though there has been some scholarly debate regarding whether or not we should focus on Omelas or the ones who walk away from it, Le Guin herself emphasizes the latter for her reader.662 In addition to titling her story “The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas,” she structures her narrative so that it leads up to their introduction, which punctuates the story with

660 Jameson, 293n11.
662 This debate is best encapsulated by the 1991 issue of Utopian Studies, which was dedicated to Le Guin’s story and which remains the most prominent scholarship on Le Guin’s story to date. Every contribution offers a different answer to the question of who critics should focus on—a dissensus that has been reflected in more recent discussions between myself and my colleagues Will Roudabush, Cole Ryberg, and Kendall Dinniene. While all of us have taught the story (and been taught the story by others), we have honed in on different figures in the story: the Omelans, the ones who walk away, the child in the broom closet. This is merely evidence that discourse around the story has historically been marked by this failure of consensus. To be sure, there is much to be said for this failure—especially in the context of Le Guin’s relationship to the anarchist intellectual tradition, which has historically given dissensus a privileged role—but doing so falls outside the scope of this project. Accordingly, I do not seek to produce a consensus, but merely to stake out a position within this discourse and argue the case for that position.
an exclamation. They break away from their social world, which Le Guin insists we understand as America itself, and this break is embodied by a refusal of their conditions of life and a striving towards a society composed without domination. It is this break and the uncertainty of its destination that Le Guin lingers on.

In contrast with readings that treat the story as a plea to literally walk away, I contend that we should understand walking away figuratively, as a double-faced gesture: a refusal of exploitative social conditions on the one hand; and, on the other, an act of world-making principled on non-domination.\(^663\) Le Guin ends her story, writing that “The place they go towards is a place even less imaginable to most of us than the city of happiness. I cannot describe it at all. It is possible that it does not exist. But they seem to know where they are going, the ones who walk away from Omelas.”\(^664\) From this perspective, walking away does not mean simply abandoning society and heading into the wilderness. Rather, it means refusing to accept happiness and prosperity if it comes at the expense of another. It means building something new, with others, according to different principles. It means not knowing what that new society will look or feel like, and it represents this uncertainty as unavoidable: scary, but the very thing that makes possible a future different from the present. Moreover, it represents this ideal as something worth pursuing even if it cannot be realized. “Walking away,” in other words, means

---


the abolition of confinement: the refusal of captivity as a means of ordering society and the founding of a social order principled on non-domination. From this perspective, we can read “The Ones Who Walk Away” as a work of abolitionist speculation that features both critical and constructive aspects.

Though the critical dimension of “The Ones Who Walk Away From Omelas” may be more readily apparent, its constructive dimension comes into clearer view when read in conjunction with Le Guin’s other work. When it was first collected in Le Guin’s 1975 collection *The Wind’s Twelve Quarters*, “The Ones Who Walk Away From Omelas” was directly followed by “The Day Before the Revolution,” which concerns an impending general strike lead by a woman named Odo. The story serves as a prequel to Le Guin’s 1974 novel, *The Dispossessed*, which examines a society founded by Odo and based on her philosophy of Odonianism.

“Odonianism is anarchism,” Le Guin writes in a prefatory note to “The Day Before the Revolution”:

Not the bomb-in-the-pocket stuff, which is terrorism, whatever name it tires [sic] to dignify itself with; not the social-Darwinist economic “libertarianism” of the far right; but anarchism, as prefigured in early Taoist thought, and expounded by Shelley and Kropotkin, Goldman and Goodman. Anarchism’s principal target is the authoritarian State (capitalist or socialist); its principal moral-practical theme is cooperation (solidarity, mutual aid). It is the most idealistic, and to me the most interesting, of all political theories.

For Le Guin, anarchism represents a rich political tradition that rejects coercion and domination whether it be effectuated by the state or the market. Anarchism’s critique of economic coercion distinguishes it from libertarianism, which rejects the state in favor of the market. This critique of domination in all its forms is underwritten by a belief in the capacity of human beings to labor

---

collectively for each individual’s mutual benefit without recourse to law, and this belief contrasts strikingly with the commonplace belief that, in the absence of law, humans wage a war of all against all. Le Guin places Odo in a history of anarchist thinkers such as Paul Goodman (to whom the story is dedicated), Peter Kropotkin, and Emma Goldman, and like many of these thinkers, including Kropotkin and Goldman, Odo develops her anarchist ideas in response to her experiences of imprisonment. Foregrounding the prison as a mechanism of class war, Le Guin identifies it as a site of domination that produces resistance. As was the case in “Omelas,” prisons here catalyze anti-prison political struggle. In the story, this anti-prison struggle manifests as a general strike and the founding of a new, anarchist society composed by and through a communist mode of production, which lacks prisons, police, and law altogether. Although they are rarely read in conjunction with one another, doing so allows us to better recognize “The Day Before the Revolution” as a story about the abolition of prisons and private property.

Describing Odo as “one of the ones who walked away from Omelas,” Le Guin directs readers’ attention to her new society as an example of walking away. As I noted above, Le Guin develops this society more fully in her novel The Dispossessed, where she offers a robust account of what an anarcho-communist society might be like. Like its utopian forerunners, The Dispossessed follows a character as he encounters and explores a new society, one whose principles of social organization differ from his own. This protagonist is Shevek, a physicist from Annares who has come to study on A-Io: one of two states on the planet Urras. A-Io is a “propertarian” society, in the language of the novel, which Le Guin contrasts with Annares’ anarcho-communist society. Far more abundant than the desert-like Annares, Urras features lush,

verdant landscapes and forms of plant and animal life that Shevek has never before encountered. This abundance and natural beauty has made possible a prosperous life, and A-Io convincingly presents itself to Shevek as a utopian society. However, this utopian edifice is unraveled when Shevek finds himself confronted by the hidden labor that makes life in A-Io possible: the work performed by those who don’t own property, and the strict division of power along lines of gender. This differs sharply from Shevek’s own society, in which work is organized by need and capacity, food and housing is accessible to all, children are raised communally, and sex does not determine your social function or choice in romantic partners. Le Guin draws out these contrasts between Shevek’s world and the stand-in for our own by alternating between Shevek’s time on A-Io and his time on Anarres. Readers thereby encounter a stand-in for their world as experienced by an alien to it, and experience an alien world as though it were their own.

As in “Omelas” and “The Day Before,” *The Dispossessed* foregrounds prisons and defamiliarizes them for its reader. In the book’s second chapter, and its first set on his home of Anarres, Le Guin lays out Shevek’s consciousness of prisons. She writes that he and a number of other children had picked up the idea of “prisons” from episodes in the Life of Odo, which all of them who had elected to work on History were reading. There were many obscurities in the book, and Wide Plains had nobody who knew enough history to explain them; but by the time they got to Odo’s years in the Fort in Drio, the concept “prison” had become self-explanatory. And when a circuit history teacher came through the town he expounded on the subject, with the reluctance of a decent adult forced to explain an obscenity to children. Yes, he said, a prison was a place where a State put people who disobeyed its Laws. But why didn’t they just leave the place? They couldn’t leave, the doors were locked. Locked?...But what did they do inside one room all the time? Nothing. There was nothing to do...Sometimes prisoners were sentenced to work. Sentenced? Well, that means a judge, a person given power by the Law, ordered them to do some kind of physical labor. Ordered them? What if they didn’t want to do it? Well, they were forced to do it; if they didn’t work, they were beaten. A thrill of tension went through the children listening...none of whom had ever been struck, or seen any person struck, except in immediate personal anger.667

As Le Guin writes, most of the children had only ever heard of prison through their reading of Odo’s *Prison Letters*. It was an archaic thing for them, something that once existed somewhere in the past—and on a different planet no less—but that no longer exists in the present. It was merely an idea to them, and a fuzzy one at that. This fuzziness is a function of the fact that their lives bear no resemblance to those social worlds structured by prisons and jails. Or, in other words, the students cannot grasp the *idea* of prisons because they are unfamiliar with the social relations and practices that are congealed in prisons. It is precisely for this reason, however, that they make compelling interlocutors. Because the prison is alien to them, they ask questions with answers so obvious to the reader that the reader themselves wouldn’t even think to ask them.

What is prison? “A place where a State put people who disobeyed its laws.” Why can’t prisoners leave? The doors are locked and the guards have weapons. These are not radical critiques of prison so much as they are descriptions that nearly anyone in contemporary life would assent to. Unlike her characters, however, Le Guin’s supposed reader is someone whose form of life has been conditioned by prisons, someone for whom prisons are fully naturalized things. By depicting them in this banal way, Le Guin allows her reader to glimpse the function of prison anew.

Expanding this linkage between consciousness and experience, Le Guin goes on to describe how these students, having encountered the idea of prison, want to rehearse its actualization for themselves. “I want to see what it’s like,” says one of the children, and the rest of them agree.\(^{668}\) They take turns playing at being prisoners in a small room that recalls the broom closet of Omelas, as described above. As the would-be prisoner Kadagv notes, however, it

\(^{668}\) Le Guin, *The Dispossessed*, 36.
is merely playacting if he gets to decide what conditions he’ll experience and when he’ll be released. To really experience unfreedom means to have his life and wellbeing determined by an unaccountable group of others. He demands to be locked inside and left there for an indeterminate amount of time. Shevek relents, and the group forces Kadagv to spend two nights in the basement room with little air, no light, and no food. Shevek, however, grows increasingly worried about Kadagv’s wellbeing. “Every time he looked into his mind there was Kadagv in it,” Le Guin writes. “It was disgusting.” Unable to tolerate what he has done to his friend, Shevek frees him and finds Kadagv doubled over, covered in his own feces. What unfreedom produces, we are to understand, is degradation, obscenity, vulgarity. We ought to be disgusted by these sights, disgusted that a person could do this to another.

As Samuel Delany writes in an otherwise ambivalent review of the book, this scene “is a good place for a critic to stop. This is the best place for a reader to pause–then begin rereading.” If this is true, it is because these passages open for their reader the broader concerns and overarching ideas of the novel: consciousness, time, experience, society, domination, property, and prison. The scene begins by conjuring up the presence of Odo, the former prisoner and anarchist who discovered firsthand the violence of a society that wields captivity as a weapon. It then goes on to narrativize Shevek’s own experience of incarceration, and how it mutilates those subject to it. Kadagv never quite processes his ordeal, but the boys who played jailer move on quickly, refusing to speak of the event. Prison is depicted here as something that we ought to abolish for the way it produces harm, which transforms both the do-

---

669 Le Guin, *The Dispossessed*, 39

er and the done-to for the worse. Further, Le Guin figures the abolition of prison as a metonym for both the abolition of capitalism and for the founding of non-capitalist life. By introducing this depiction so early in the novel, Le Guin foregrounds this metaphor as a lens through which we might make sense of the rest of the novel. From this perspective we can come to recognize the anarcho-communist institutions, practices, and attitudes that it depicts as being produced through the abolition of prisons: forms of life made possible by abolition and forms of life that make abolition possible. The novel models these forms of life, which is to say, the novel offers experimental models of infrastructure, practices, modes of organization, and attitudes that its readers can take up, participate in, and compose for themselves.

Even though this grand work of abolitionist speculation defamiliarizes everyday life for its readers and naturalizes another form of life, literary critics have tended to treat it as insufficiently radical and therefore a failure. “Because it does not sufficiently break with the limits of the phallocratic-capitalist system in its own formal practices,” writes Tom Moylan in his influential critique of the book, “the novel ensures that the enclosure of life by the dominant system is preserved more than it is negated.” More recently, however, Moylan has since revisited this “overly harsh (callow? ultra?) criticism” of the novel and insisted that the perspective offered by Darren Jorgensen more closely aligns with his mature interpretation. Rather than treating Le Guin’s novel as a failed revolution, Jorgensen treats it as being about the failure of revolution. He writes that “the model of narrative presented here argues that narrative structures are always counter-revolutionary, and that the true revolutionary content of a novel

671 Moylan, 114.

672 Moylan, xxi.
lies elsewhere." The consensus, then, is that the novel is a political failure; the dissensus is how self-conscious Le Guin is of that failure. In any case, the novel is minor work, an aesthetic misfire. Consequently, the novel has not received the scholarly attention commensurate with the complexity, intensity, or force of its vision.

Like the philosopher André Gorz, Le Guin’s novel is “[t]he most striking description I know of the seductions—and snares—of self-managed communist, or in other words, anarchist society.” This is to say that the novel deals seriously with an anarcho-communist society: not a world that purports to be perfect, whatever that may mean, but as one with its own tensions, dynamics, and banal disappointments. The ambiguously utopian lives that Le Guin depicts are characterized by the same complexity, contradiction, tension, desire, frustration, and failure to actualize their ideals that characterize readers’s own lives. In one of the book’s chapters set on Anarres, for example, Shevek considers his intellectual mentor, Sabul, noting that “Sabul wanted to keep the new Urrasti physics private—to own it, as property, a source of power over his colleagues on Anarres.” The tendency to accumulate power is not something that can be permanently and completely overcome, Shevek realizes, and the hoarding of resources will persist as a practical and appealing means of accumulation so long as those resources are finite or

---


674 The only major work on *The Dispossessed* (and the only scholarship to take Le Guin’s anarchist politics seriously without denigrating them) remains *The New Utopia Politics of Ursula K. Le Guin’s The Dispossessed*, ed. Laurence Davis and Peter Stillman (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2005), which arrived thirty-one years after the book’s publication and is nearly twenty-years old.

675 Gorz, 97.

can be made finite. No principle of organization can prevent a society from hardening; anarchism in theory does not guarantee anarchism in practice. While this realization contributes to Shevek’s decision to travel to A-Io, it is not his only experience with the ossification of Anarenes. People constantly rearticulate their ideological commitment to freedom, individuality, and spontaneity, Shevek observes, but they nonetheless perform their routine functions: going where they’re told, doing what they’re told, behaving how they’re expected. When discussing work postings with his romantic partner Takver, Shevek notes that “We keep our initiative tucked away safe in our mind, like a room where we come and say, ‘I don’t have to do anything, I make my own choices, I’m free.’ And then we leave our little room in our mind and go where PDC posts us, and stay till we’re reposted.”677 The ideals to which Shevek remains committed produced social infrastructure that revolutionized the lives of those initial Anarenes. However, this social infrastructure has not been transformed in response to those changes its founding brought about. It has not remained dynamic. Anarenes must, therefore, be revolutionized.

At the novel’s end, Shevek returns home with the hopes of revolutionizing his society according to the revolutionary ideas that founded it. This revolution is the kind of permanent, natural, self-revolutionizing revolution as described by We author Yevgeny Zamyatin in his essay, “On Literature, Revolution, Entropy, and Other Matters.” “Revolution,” he writes, “is everywhere, in everything. It is infinite. There is no final revolution, no final number.”678 As Zamayatain conceives it, revolution is exemplified by the dead stars that collapse and thereby produce a new star; the molecule that breaks off from its atomic orbit and “gives birth to a new

---

677 Le Guin, The Dispossessed, 329
Revolution, in other words, is a radical or fundamental change to a system that emerges from but cannot be anticipated by the logic governing that system. The same physical laws that keep a molecule in its atomic orbit are the same laws that cause it to, at some point, break off from those orbits. The scholar who revolutionizes a field of study begins from the premises prevailing in that field. They take its logic to its limits. These are, to Zamyatin, examples of the same thing: an interminable revolution which is operative at every scale and register of existence and which is as natural in its social manifestations as it is in its celestial and atomic ones.

Philip Wegener has made a compelling argument for understanding Le Guin as a reader of Zamyatin and of this essay in particular. Indeed, we can identify this conception of revolution in *The Dispossessed*, which depicts Shevek’s commitment to the ideals of his society as the very thing that leads him to revolutionize it. “That the Odonian society on Annares had fallen short of the ideal did not, in [Shevek’s] eyes,” Le Guin writes, “lessen his responsibility to it; just on the contrary…The Odonian society was conceived as a permanent revolution, and revolution begins in the thinking mind.” Although revolution is a practical activity, that activity passes through consciousness: through experience, knowledge, ideas, and speculation. It arises under a set of conditions, is constrained by perceptions and knowledge, and is oriented toward certain ends. Revolution is always the revolution of a particular and material state of affairs: a specific society, organization, practice or field at a specific historical moment.

---

679 Zamyatin, 107.
In keeping with this perspective, Shevek’s revolution takes the form of knowledge, an idea that he figures as a book. “Well,” Shevek tells an interlocutor, “we think that time ‘passes,’ flows past us, but what if it is we who move forward, from past to future, always discovering the new? It would be a little like reading a book, you see.” From this perspective, the universe is, from some imagined outside, eternal: past, present, and future all present simultaneously as a unified totality. In this way, the universe is like a book insofar as its contents are simultaneously present between the covers. However, reading the book, like experiencing the universe from within it, is an experience of passing through its contents sequentially; they appear as if they were not simultaneously present. Time is both an arrow and a circle, to use Shevek’s metaphors, and what he seeks is a way of resolving this paradox, of recognizing time as both a sequence and simultaneity at one and the same time. At the novel’s conclusion, Shevek has resolved this antinomy, which will make possible the ansible, a piece of technology that will appear throughout Le Guin’s body of work. This device allows for simultaneous communication across expanses of space so vast that there would ordinarily be delays. If one society were to keep this technology for themselves, they would gain a competitive advantage against others both economically, militarily, and diplomatically. In keeping with the spirit of his homeworld, Shevek plans to circulate his ideas as a book, which he will disseminate simultaneously to a league of inhabited worlds. Then, the knowledge will be shared equally, and people could innovate their lives without one society gaining an existential advantage over another. Like many other aspects of the novel, books are thereby operative at both the literal and figurative levels. For Shevek, books are both representations of his ideas, which help render his speculation more explicable to others, and a means of sharing those ideas. Books are tools, in other words, that may be used to

682 Le Guin, The Dispossessed, 221.
imagine something that does not (yet) exist and contribute to its becoming real. They serve as a means of circulating ideas: casting seeds with the knowledge that many of them will not germinate.

We can understand The Dispossessed to function in a similar manner for its readers as an intervention in the experience of their ordinary lives, as something that makes the abolition of prisons and police desirable and practical Although this has been overlooked by literary critics, the title itself is derived from a passage that makes this explicit. Disillusioned with A-Io, Shevek encounters a growing movement of workers who look to him as a living embodiment of the possibility of revolution. Before many of them are killed by the police, they ask Shevek to describe his home. What he describes is depredation and struggle, and he concludes that “We have nothing but [home], nothing but each other.” He then contrasts this condition of people having nothing but one another with what he’s scene on A-Io:

Here you see the jewels, there you see the eyes. And in the eyes you see the splendor, the splendor of the human spirit. Because our men and women are free—possessing nothing, they are free. And you the possessors are possessed. You are all in jail. Each alone, solitary, with a heap of what he owns. You live in prison, die in prison. It is all I can see in your eyes—the wall, the wall!

While a world structured by prisons and jails has made possible a world of certain luxuries for certain people, it has produced humans who understand humans, including themselves, as commodities: things to be bought and sold. You are possessed by your possessions, Le Guin exclaims at her reader. The unqualified freedom to buy and sell is merely the freedom to consume and exploit, which is to say, it is no freedom at all. Rather, it is the degradation of the experience of being human, the impoverishment of life, the overdevelopment of repression at the

---

683 Le Guin, The Dispossessed, 228.
684 Le Guin, The Dispossessed, 228-229.
expense of every other capacity. Le Guin hereby transfigures dispossession from something negative to something positive, transforming it into the very condition of freedom. Moreover, Le Guin once again conceives of prisons and jails as metaphor for this general condition of unfreedom. Becoming free means abolishing this prison: a challenge to readers that has proven difficult for literary critics to swallow.

**The Alienated**

In contrast with Ursula K. Le Guin, who writes openly and explicitly about prison abolition, Octavia Butler’s abolitionist speculation is far more opaque. This is owing to the fact that, as her biographer Gerry Canavan notes, she “is no utopian; in fact, she tended to reject utopian thinking in the strongest possible terms.”\(^{685}\) “I don’t like most utopia stories,” as Butler herself puts it, “because I don’t believe them for a moment. It seems inevitable that my utopia would be someone else’s hell.”\(^{686}\) This line appears in Butler’s afterword to her own attempt at utopian fiction, “The Book of Martha.” In this story, which first appeared in 2003, Butler tells the story of the titular Martha, who is visited by god and tasked with helping “humankind to survive its greedy, murderous, wasteful adolescence. Help it to find less destructive, more peaceful, more sustainable ways to live.”\(^{687}\) Martha proposes a number of solutions but is told that each will have its own set of unforeseen, negative consequences. Martha eventually settles on a solution: giving every person “the only possible utopia,” “[p]owerful, unavoidable, realistic

---

685 Gerry Canavan, *Octavia E. Butler* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2016), 150.


dreams that come every time people sleep.”

Though God assures Martha that her choice will “almost certainly do more good than harm,” God and Martha both recognize that there will indeed be harm—the nature of which is not entirely foreseeable. Martha, for example, worries that these dreams would prove so compelling an experience, so satisfying an outlet for desire that people would lose interest in reading and writing fiction—“the only career” that Martha herself has “ever cared about.” Nonetheless, Martha makes the change and, in so doing, acquiesce to the premise of the story: disbelief that “it’s possible to arrange a society so that everyone is content, everyone has what he or she wants.” If utopia can exist at all, we are to understand, it can only do so as a dream or wish, something internal, individual, unrealizable.

However, despite “The Book of Martha’s” anti-utopianism, as well as Butler’s other, more explicitly dystopian fiction, more recent literary criticism has fashioned Butler into a utopian writer of sorts. “The contribution of Octavia Butler’s fiction to utopian studies is becoming more widely recognized,” writes Philip H. Jos—a development that he attributes to a 2008 special issue of Utopian Studies dedicated to Butler. This issue was co-edited by political scientist Claire Curtis, who, in her own contribution to the issue, reads Butler as a “realist utopian.” More recently and in regards to “The Book of Martha” specifically, cultural critic

---


690 Octavia Butler, “The Book of Martha,” 140.


Tarshia Stanley has argued that Butler’s individualization of utopia is precisely her radical intervention in it. “For Butler’s Martha,” Stanley writes, “the final projection of utopia is not a world in which one vision has been created for the collective, but it is a personal experience.” For these critics, and others like them, Butler eschews and critiques the utopian literary tradition while preserving the utopian impulse. Stanley, for instance, argues that “‘The Book of Martha’ gives us an opportunity to see literary utopias not as blueprints or destinations, but as a necessary step in the desire for and the theoretical practice to obtain the good place.” From this perspective, Butler is a utopian writer but only insofar as she understands utopia as a process and practice rather than a fixed point. Although I have some serious misgivings about these uncritically utopian readings of Butler and “The Book of Martha,” I follow these critics by emphasizing Butler’s emphasis on process and activity.

Reading her work from this perspective brings into focus Butler’s consideration of power and freedom, as well as her tendency to work through these ideas with metaphors of captivity. Indeed, our attention is drawn to the first line of “The Book of Martha,” which reads: “‘It’s difficult, isn’t it?’ God said with a weary smile. ‘You’re truly free for the first time. What could be more difficult than that?’” As Butler works out over the course of the story, being free is difficult precisely because it includes the freedom to make mistakes and, what’s more, it entails being responsible for those mistakes. That responsibility grows proportionally with the power

---


**695** Stanley, 256.

being wielded: the degree to which an action can affect others. Martha senses this great responsibility, and understands that her actions will have unforeseen consequences, which is precisely why she remains trepidatious to make any decision whatsoever. In fact, this trepidation is precisely why God chose her. Thinking of people who would covet the power she’s been given, the narrator notes that “There were people like that. Martha knew people like that,” and they terrified her. Elsewhere, Martha concludes that it’s time to cede her power precisely because she was growing to enjoy it. Butler hereby suggests that Martha understands the desire for power as something to be warded off—an understanding derived from her own experiences. Over the course of the story, Martha’s consciousness changes, which is reflected in her perception of God, who begins the story as a glowing, twelve-foot tall, bearded white man and ends it as an average-sized black woman. Figuring the unconscious preconceptions that lead her to initially perceive god as a towering white man as a “mental cage,” Butler narrates Martha’s coming to consciousness as passing out of confinement: “‘If it were truly a cage,’ God said, ‘you would still be in it, and I would still look the way I did when you first saw me.’” This is to say that Butler depicts the developing capacity for freedom and its exercise as passing out of a cage.

While this captivity metaphor recurs throughout Butler’s work, she explores it most robustly in her 1987 novel, Dawn. In contrast with her more popular work, such as the dystopian Parable of the Sower or the neo-slave novel Kindred, which take place during ongoing

698 Octavia Butler, “The Book of Martha,” 139.
cataclysms, *Dawn* begins after the apocalypse. Lilith Iyapo awakens 250 years in the future aboard an alien spacecraft and learns that “[h]umanity in its attempt to destroy itself had made the world unlivable.”

Quickly, the novel establishes Lilith as a carceral subject. “Lilith is first introduced to us as a captive,” Aparajita Nanda notes, “a victim of a controlled society whose administrators have a definite plan for her.” Indeed, in the novel’s opening pages, Lilith awakes and describes her surroundings:

> The walls were light-colored–white or gray, perhaps. The bed was what it had always been: a solid platform that gave slightly to the touch and that seemed to grow from the floor. There was, across the room, a doorway that probably led to a bathroom. She was usually given a bathroom. Twice she had not been, and in her windowless, a doorless cubicle, she had been forced simply to choose a corner.

In addition to her living space, which strikingly resembles the kinds of physical conditions that incarcerated people are subject to, Lilith’s condition reflects the social condition experienced by incarcerated people. She is disempowered and subject to surveillance from an unseen entity, which knows her while remaining unknowable by her. For this reason, she refers to herself as a prisoner and her living quarters as a prison. In fact, the word “prison,” and variations like “imprisoned” and “prisoner,” appear in the novel at least seventeen times. For the characters, their condition is one of literal imprisonment. They are confined, restrained, surveilled, and subject to violation without their consent. For the reader, however, “prison” is a metaphor. It is a spatial materialization of the character’s psychological conditions: their experience of being subject to forces outside of their control and their limits of imagination. In contrast with scholars

---


701 Aparajita Nanda, “Power, Politics, and Domestic Desire in Octavia Butler’s ‘Lilith’s Brood,’” *Callaloo*, vol. 36, no. 3 (2013), 775.

such as Nanda, who recognize the carceral dimension of the text before quickly moving off it, I read the prison as a literal and figurative space within the text, which functions as something its point-of-view character and its reader are impelled to escape.

This prison is operated by the oankali, an alien species that survives and evolves by trading genes with other species: taking on characteristics of a given species while sharing some of their own. While one caste of the oankali will take in some human DNA and continue traversing the universe, another caste will remain on Earth and serve a mediating function in the biological and social reproduction of human life. The oankali will reproduce with humans, in other words. In doing so, they will produce a new kind of oankali that is, at the same time, a new kind of human. It follows that the production of this new kind of human, then, is the novel’s prescribed means of escaping prison and such an escape’s product. This generative process is named by the title under which *Dawn* and its two sequels were originally published: *Xenogenesis*, alien birth. The literary conceit that makes xenogenesis possible is the sexual division of the oankali, which has three sexes: male, female, and ooloi. Ooloi have sensory organs that allow them to take in DNA, study it, assimilate characteristics of it into its own body as well as manipulate aspects of it in others’. Because of this capacity for genetic manipulation, the ooloi play an important role in the sexual reproduction of the Oankali, as well as the species the Oankali trade genes with. In fact, it is only through this mediating sexual function that the ooloi trade genes, passing some characteristics onto future generations of, in this case, Oankali-human hybrids.

By producing these new kinds of hybrid humans, the ooloi hope to eliminate what they believe was the cause of human’s self-destructive tendency: hierarchy. According to the ooloi, the tendency toward hierarchy is a biological characteristic, which humans share with other
evolutionary kin. “It’s a terrestrial characteristic,” as the Oankali Jdahaya tells Lilith. “When
human intelligence did not even acknowledge it as a problem, but took pride in it or did not
notice it at all…That was like ignoring cancer.” In much the same way that the Oankali go on
to rework Lilith’s body so that it no longer produces cancer cells, they claim that they can
eliminate the cancer of hierarchy that ravages the human social body.

Foregrounding hierarchy as the primary social problem to be solved if human beings are
to survive as a species, Butler resonates powerfully with Le Guin and an anarchist dimension of
Dawn comes into focus. At the macro scale, this anarchist dimension takes the form of a choice
that Butler narrativizes for her readers over the course of the novel: a paradoxical choice between
ensuring the survival of the human species by transforming its nature or clinging to human
nature and, in doing so, ensuring that the species dies. Butler works out this dilemma over the
course of the novel by narrativizing the struggle among and between human beings over how to
respond to it. After spending time amongst the Oankali and acclimating to their presence, Lilith
is tasked with awakening a small group of humans and preparing them to survive on Earth,
which, over the last two and half centuries, has been rewilded. These humans will be given a
choice: mate with and through the ooloi or be sterilized and left free to live on as an evolutionary
dead end. These options provoke resistance among a faction of humans, which complicates an
already difficult process. In addition to this resistance and her own ambivalence about the
choices before her, Lilith has to teach those humans willing to mate with the Oankali how to
survive in a world hostile to their survival and bereft of the infrastructure they are accustomed to.
As the title of the book’s fourth part would have it, the humans are thrown onto “The Training
Floor,” which is an area of the Oankali ship that has been made to resemble the new Earth. Here,

---

703 Octavia Butler, Dawn, 41.
the humans will learn how to survive on Earth through the accumulation of practical experience: experimentation, failure, repetition, differentiation.

Defining humans as beings capable of adapting and thereby differentiating themselves from their prior iterations, *Dawn* posits that being human is a verb rather than a noun. Or, as the Caribbean intellectual Sylvia Wynter puts it, “Being human is a praxis.” This formulation emerges from Wynter’s engagement with Frantz Fanon’s concept of sociogeny, which refers to the process of social development. Devised to explain collective experiences that do not necessarily follow from shared biological features, sociogenesis allows us to understand how human communities distinguish themselves culturally and how they understand that distinction as biological. Wynter develops this idea to argue that cultural practices produce a “*sense of self*” that is “subjectively *experienced as if it were instinctual*.” In other words, sociogenesis is the production of second-natures: habits, reflexes, and impulses that are so finely ingrained in an individual’s unconscious that they are perceived to be biological characteristics rather than social ones. For Wynter, Fanon’s innovation here is to articulate a theory of human beings that is not strictly biological. Human beings are re-defined by what Wynter calls the *bios* and the *mythoi*,

---


biology and the values and practices through which that biology is interpreted. On this account, humans are distinguished not by race or gender but by genre, by differences of practice.\textsuperscript{707}

This reformulation of human difference is significant because it means that humans can become other kinds of humans, can alter themselves and thereby solve social problems that once seemed natural and eternal. There is no human nature, or, if you would prefer, humans are characterized by their capacity to change their nature. This means that humanity is alien to itself, produced by and through a process of differentiation and alienation, produced, in other words, through xenogenesis. It is the encounter between genres of being human that produces new genres, which differentiate themselves from one another. Through this alienation the limits of the present social order can be transcended. Contributing an outline of this process, Butler appropriates and reconfigures the concept of alienation in much the same way that Le Guin transvalues the concept of dispossession. On her novel’s account, alienation can have positive characteristics, and it is this positive alienation that is a precondition for freedom. Again like Le Guin, Butler represents this freedom as an escape from the prison.

This escape, the novel insists, this continued survival of human beings, can only be secure by learning and adapting to shifting conditions. “What could she do?” Butler writes. “What could she tell the humans but ‘Learn and run!’ What other possibility for escape is there?”\textsuperscript{708} This refrain, “learn and run,” recurs throughout the novel, most pointedly in its concluding passage. Lilith sends her first cohort of humans down to earth, while she stays to train another. Butler writes that

\textsuperscript{707} Wynter and McKittrick, 31.

\textsuperscript{708} Octavia Butler, \textit{Dawn}, 132.
At least she would get another chance with a human group. A chance to teach them...but not a chance to be one of them. Never that. Never?

Another chance to say, “Learn and run!”

She would have more information for them this time. And they would have long, healthy lives ahead of them. Perhaps they could find an answer to what the Oankali had done to them. And perhaps the Oankali were not perfect. A few fertile people might slip through and find one another. Perhaps. Learn and run! If she were lost, others did not have to be. Humanity did not have to be.709

While they were originally published under the title of *Xenogenesis*, *Dawn* and its sequels have been more recently published under the title of *Lilith’s Brood*. This title is suggestive of birth—both in the figurative sense commonly applied to general processes of generation or production and in the literal sense of giving birth or of reproducing biologically. *Lilith’s Brood*, as a title, underscores the ways in which Lilith is the progenitor of the next stage in human evolution. This is literally the case insofar as Lilith is made to bear the first human-Oankali hybrid. As illustrated by the conclusion of *Dawn*, however, Lilith’s role as progenitor is social as well as biological. It will be her that instructs successive cohorts of humans in a new form of human social organization. Intended to ensure the survival of human beings, this new form of humanity will be principled on adaptation and dynamism (learning and running). It is only by recognizing the shifting nature of life and learning to experiment with new forms of life that human beings will learn to survive. This survival, Butler insists, means breaking free of the form of life that traps readers like a prison, it means breaking of human life as it has come to be defined by prisons. Like Le Guin, Butler suggests this prison break comes with uncertainty and danger—its gains must be defended against from reactionary retrenchment—but that it is nonetheless worth pursuing.

If Butler’s abolitionist speculation from 1987 seems more oblique or indirect than Le Guin’s from 1974, this is due to the historical conditions under which both authors were working. Writing in the wake of an insurgent anti-prison movement, and in a political and cultural milieu more sympathetic to anti-capitalist ideas, Le Guin’s novel arrives on a scene where massive social change seemed more possible than it did by the end of the 1980s. Its initial readers were consequently less cynical about utopia and utopianism. Butler, however, writes from a time in which neoliberalism was no longer ascendant. By 1987, it had become dominant. The movements against prisons, the police, and capitalism and those movements for various kinds of liberation had been repressed, marginalized, and otherwise driven underground. What’s more, China had liberalized its economy a decade earlier and the collapse of the Soviet experiment in socialism was visible on the horizon. It was becoming easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism. In fact, this common sense was beginning to express itself in Butler’s work. In addition to the fact that *Dawn* begins after a nuclear holocaust, and it is, Butler’s work often features libertarian elements: the post-Cold War libertarian skepticism underpinning “The Book of Martha,” or *Dawn*’s reluctance to identify with any specific political ideology. Given that these works emerge in a period increasingly cynical about the possibility of political change and increasingly given over to the neoliberal prioritization of the individual rather than the collective, it should come as no surprise that these works express these attitudes. Nonetheless, Butler practices hope in the capacity of human beings to free ourselves from the social structures that maim and mutilate our lives. Moreover, she identifies prison as the embodiment of those structures, and she represents the end of those structures as human’s only chance for existential survival. That survival, she concludes, will require us and lead us to
become new kinds of humans characterized by new practices, ideas, values, and ways of relating to one another and to the world around us.
Conclusion:          
With love/In solidarity

In 1961, Don Jorgensen found himself in Menard Correctional Center, which is located on the southern border of Illinois: far from his home in Chicago. There, he wrote a number of letters to a family friend, Bea. In one, Don begins with a poem, writing that

Incarceration has no meaning
Except to know the price of crime.
What was done was done in dreaming;
A folly I must admit that’s mine.¹⁰

Though Don never offers his own interpretation of the quatrain, his poem evinces a deep sense that prison functions to punish individuals and, through that punishment, convince them of their own deservingness to be punished. It is, on the one hand, senseless. On the other hand, however, it is sense-making. It exists to compel guilt and confession. Don’s suggestion, that “what was done was done in dreaming” suggests a lack of intentionality to his actions. It suggests a cause outside of and beyond his self: it is a social production, whose products he must, by law, take ownership of. He must, in a sense, assume authorship for his actions. From this perspective, we can understand prison as the privatization of responsibility and the internalization of guilt. It is a process whereby individuals come to be seen as deserving of punishment because they embody social failings. Their punishment serves to displace this collective failure, which is repressed and concealed by way of this punishment. What Don offers us, then, is a theory of the prison, though

¹⁰ Don Jorgensen to Beatrice Fowler, January 8, 1961, personal archive.
not in its more conventional form. Rather, he reflects on his experiences and expresses that reflection in poetry. To discern his philosophy, we have to perform an interpretation.

If I refer to Don by his first name rather than the more conventional habit of referring to authors by their last names, it is because Don is my grandfather, and it is my intention to treat him like a friend, a comrade, a loved one rather than like an author. This is not, however, to treat his ideas unseriously. Instead, it is to bring to bear on his literary output the very seriousness, passion, attention, and care that I bring to bear on loved ones and comrades: studying with them, coming to understand them, trying to make myself comprehensible to them. It is to apply a seriousness that emerges out of that love. In this way, this dissertation has been an effort to understand Don through the minor fragments of his life that persist into the present. The letter from Menard that begins with a poem is, for example, one of just sixteen that still exist. My own father found them in a child’s suitcase, which had been collecting dust in his attic for twenty years. Except for one, which is addressed to “mother,” the letters are all addressed to a woman named Bea. While Don makes references to letters he received from her, none of her letters have survived. We only have his side of the conversation. Nonetheless, this small handful of letters speaks volumes about Don’s sense of isolation, his previous experiences of incarceration, his family relationships, his alienation from his son, my father. They speak of a man who was incarcerated at a young age, which precipitated later periods of incarceration, which alienated him from his parents and his children. As I have tried to tease out, especially in my reading of Austin Reed’s Life and Adventures of a Haunted Convict: this is a common experience among incarcerated people.

Running through Don’s letters, this experience of alienation exceeds him and destabilizes the lives of free-world people as well. The ways in which the alienation of incarceration is a
shared experience is perhaps best illustrated by an anecdote that my father relates to me during an interview recorded for this dissertation. During his last period of incarceration, Don volunteered to be a medical test subject—a “lab rat,” as my dad puts it—in order to secure an early release. This caused a relapse of malaria, which caused Don’s body to begin breaking down from the inside out. As Don was dying, my dad visited his father in the hospital, and the experience he recounted for me was mortifying in its most literal sense:

We went in, and [Don] is sitting in the bed...And I remember his feet were uncovered—and again, I’m a young kid at this stage—I’m about twelve years and ten months old—And...I had seen violence...So I had some experience with real life and “the world’s not pollyanna” view...And I bring this up to let you know that seeing blood wasn’t necessarily a thing that drove me nuts...but I looked in and [Don’s] skin—I remember his skin was yellow or jaundice...But what really stuck out to me was looking at his feet. At this point, [Don’s] kidneys had started going, they already had him on dialysis, and his circulation was going. He was having cascading system failure. And the toes—this was the only time I’ve ever seen this—his toes were black. And it’s hard to describe the first time you see someone who's alive—to see that kind of contrast. It wasn’t a healthy black—it was where the sores were, and things were actually rotting away, alright? That made a really powerful visual image for me...I remember a long quiet pause, and...he leans over and he looks at me and he says “There’s no love there, is there? There’s really no love there, is there?” And I looked at him, and looked at him straight in the eye, and I said “No, there’s none.” And I could see his face change with that a little bit, and I don’t remember anything else about that discussion, other than you could see his face. In hindsight, I think he probably saw it as what he thinks his legacy was...that his life probably had no meaning at all.

Don died shortly after at just thirty-four years of age, and this premature death was a direct experience of his incarceration. What my father describes is the ways in which this premature death was materialized: the way it encroached slowly, taking a person bit by bit; the way Don physically inhabited a state between living and dying; the way his body was a sign of socialized degradation. Perhaps even more importantly, however, are the ways in which my father’s

---

711 Shane Hennum, interviewed by author, October 6, 2022, 0:34:06.

712 Shane Hennum, interviewed by author, date, 0:37:00-0:43:51.
recollection speaks to the familial alienation produced by incarceration. My father didn’t just watch his own father die, his father was, in a sense, dead to him before then. This living death is experienced as an absence of love, an absence of care. For my dad (as he has put it to me over the years), Don was his “father” rather than his “dad,” a biological progenitor rather than a caregiver: a distinction conditioned by alienation and expressed in ordinary language. This is not to judge my father’s response, nor is it to judge the way he has internalized these experiences of alienation. It is, rather, to underscore how his feelings and perceptions were shaped by an experience of captivity, isolation, and brutality even if he himself is not conscious of it.

In part, this dissertation has been an effort to study and understand these intergenerational experiences and the forms of consciousness they have engendered. What’s more, it has been an effort to understand the role that language has played in the composition, expression, transmission, and (re)formation of this consciousness. This is not to say, however, that I have intended to generalize my experience, or to treat that experience as already containing philosophical or political insight. Instead, this dissertation has been an effort to produce philosophical and political insight through an interpretation of that experience. This has necessarily entailed the development and practice of a mode of study capable of grappling with the richness, complexity, nuance, and contradictions that constitute that experience. I have called this mode “abolitionist study,” “abolitionist reading,” and “abolitionist interpretation,” and it begins from a very simple premise: prisons have not always been here and one day they will no longer be. Rather than something eternal, universal, inevitable, or necessary, I treat prisons as historical features of social life, which condition and are conditioned by a particular set of material and ideological conditions. From this perspective, we can begin to recognize the ways in which prisons (and the idea of prison) is bound up in the state, the market, education, geography,
literary and cultural production, conceptions of the nation, public health, chattel slavery, settler colonialism, history, philosophies of work, individuality, masculinity, and morality.

In order to make sense of the complex web of relations and historical processes that reproduce prisons on an ongoing basis, I have tried to sketch out a form of consciousness that I locate in literary texts and in ordinary life. I have called this concept “carceral realism,” which refers to the widespread sense that prisons and the police represent the only realistic response to social disorder. Emerging in tandem with neoliberalism, this form of thinking is both the product and producer of social austerity, which is enforced by violence. Both this austerity and the disciplinary violence that stabilize it are applied unevenly across lines of race, but it affects working, lumpen, criminalized, rebellious people of every color. This unruly, recalcitrant, itinerant mass of people (and those who would otherwise join them) is held at bay by a ruling class of capitalists, which deploys a state apparatus to abandon, incapacitate, disable, diffuse, and recuperate the swarm. Expanding across the vast field of American social life, creeping more and more into public and private life, this apparatus of public-private partnerships works to: corral individuals into tighter and tighter spaces; alienate them from the land and from one another; constrain their access to food, clean air, clean water, etc.; surveil them with increasing intensity and ubiquity; commodify more and more aspects of their existence—all in order to produce human beings capable of little more than consumption and production, human beings who produce nothing but consumption and consume nothing but production. This apparatus and its products are, in fact, the concrete manifestation of austerity and state repression: its symbol and its consequence. Because this program of military shock and economic awe is highly racialized, it is justified in the eyes of white people across class (who are made not to recognize themselves as its victims) and bourgeois people across race (who recognize themselves as its beneficiaries).
It is, in fact, the very application of this violence that inverts those lines of solidarity and conflict between class and race. Working people are disciplined into recognizing their interests as racial rather than class-conflictual. The (petty) bourgeois consents to be governed in this way because racial antagonism lubricates the gears of capital accumulation. They manufacture the consent of people of color (across class) by opening a trade in race: race is minted as a commodity, which racialized people have a monopoly on. In this way, the bourgeois open the way for black and brown capitalists, and thereby cultivate a class of knowledge producers, culture workers, and intellectuals who are incentivized to trade in race and resistance. This black and brown (petty) bourgeois thereby represents the recuperation of opposition, and the redeployment of race in order to stabilize capitalism at the level of culture, knowledge, and belief. It is here that the recuperated opposition is internalized and circulated among working people. It is here that their consent is extracted. In this way, the state’s prescribed modes of knowledge and cultural production represent a function of the state’s power and its condition of possibility. However, the central role of recuperation in this circulation of power requires, as its condition of possibility, the historical movement of opposition, resistance, refusal, dissensus, consent to not be governed. Because this circulation of power is parasitic on its own opposition, it must actually produce this resistance. It must reproduce itself through the production of something in excess of itself. Because this surplus serves as the basis for accumulation and growth, the state and capital are parasitic on it. Because they exploit and extract it, they must denigrate, devalue, and otherwise render this surplus disposable or violable. In this way, the state and capital enclose and feed on resistance to themselves. Nonetheless, some of the resistance produced by these forces eludes them. They produce contradictions that cannot be so easily reconciled and recuperated.
I have called this contradictory tendency within carceral realism, which it both makes and is unmade by, abolitionist speculation. This concept refers to the active imagining of a world without prisons and/or the conditions that would make such a world possible. In contrast with carceral realism, which assumes the permanence of contemporary life, abolitionist speculation represents a fugitive break from the world as it is; it is the act of imagining what is not, but what might yet could be. It is the experience of prison abolition coming into view through the prefiguration of its existence. It is a form of imagination that brings into being the imagined objects. In this way, abolitionist speculation represents a cognitive mode that anyone is capable of engaging, inhabiting, or deploying throughout the course of their ordinary existence. That is because the capacity for subjunction, imagination, and self-reflection inheres in thought itself. It represents the capacity of human beings to philosophize, to consider their world, to study it, to learn and to change—individually and collectively. Historically, the use of this capacity to critique a form of life and imagine improvements to it has been called utopian. This mode of thinking has been best explored in utopian literature, which has generically featured the abolition of prisons and punishment since its emergence in 1516. In this way, abolitionist speculation constitutes a historically durable tendency within utopian thought. Nonetheless, abolitionist speculation is further distinguished from utopian thinking because it is more concretely rooted in a specific set of political demands: the end of capitalism, the end of the carceral order that underpins it politically, and the ordinary relations and reflexes of racism, sexism, and homophobia that reproduce it socially. These texts challenge us to envision new forms of association, reproduction, organization, new values and practices, new relations and new institutions.

As I explored in chapter five, perhaps the best expression of utopian fiction’s historical role in the imagination of new modes of consciousness is Ursula K Le Guin’s The Dispossessed.
Here Le Guin works out what would be required of an anarchist society to function, to maintain itself, to reproduce itself. Like any society, it would need to organize work, it would need to provision food and water, it would need forms of leisure, it would need to produce knowledge about itself and about the universe, it would need to produce children and socialize them into itself, it would be determined by historical conditions, and it would be situated in relation to other societies. Le Guin outlines this society by situating readers within it, by elaborating the form of consciousness that it produces (and that it is reproduced by) and by contrasting it with readers’s own. Commenting upon Shevek’s difficulty in conveying certain nuances of meaning in a language that is not his own, Le Guin underscores how these differences in consciousness are expressed in and by language. We can, therefore, read her novel as an intervention of language in language. This implicit belief in the injunctive efficacy of language, of novels, is reflected in the diegesis of the text itself. It is, after all, an unproduced play that shocks Shevek into revolutionary consciousness. In this way, Le Guin suggests that founding and reproducing a new society entails and implies a revolution in social life and a reconsideration art’s relationship to it.

Indeed, Le Guin elaborates an abolitionist integration of art and life early in the novel, writing that

Learning centers taught all the skills that prepare for the practice of art: training in singing, metrics, dance, the use of brush, chisel, knife, lathe, and so on. It was all pragmatic: the children learned to see, speak, hear, move, handle. No distinction was drawn between the arts and the crafts; art was not considered as having a place in life, but as being a basic technique of life, like speech.

---

713 C.f. “And Tirin’s play. I owe him that. He taught me what prisons are, and who builds them. Those who build walls are their own prisoners. I’m going to go fulfill my proper function in the social organism. I’m going to go unbuild walls” (Le Guin, The Dispossessed, 332).

714 Le Guin, The Dispossessed, 156.
On Anarres, everyone has access to a learning center: a site where people come together to undertake self-directed study. There, individuals learn to craft, write, paint, draw. These are understood as both manual and intellectual pursuits, as well as aesthetic. They have practical application, but they are also enriching for their own sake. Through this process and practice of study, people accumulate skills that are applicable outside of the learning center while learning to apply those “non-aesthetic” skills to creative, expressive endeavors. Individuals grow physically and intellectually, and knowledge is shared freely. Friendly, comradely relations are cemented in practice. Arts and crafts are folded into a single social process of development, which is itself folded into a society’s more general process of development. The anarchist individual is, then, prepared to cultivate a healthy society, because a healthy society cultivates healthy individuals: people allowed to determine their own lives and people who are provided the skills and resources necessary for the satisfaction of their material and immaterial needs, such as the expression of creativity, the sharing of feelings, the cultivation of passions. Art in all its aspects—making it, experiencing it, learning about, talking about it, teaching about it—play an important role in mediating this society. It is a thing around which people gather, commune, share themselves and share in one another. It is at the site of and through the process of study where art is socialized, and where students are socialized into a certain understanding of and relation to art. On Anarres, art is common and ordinary. People do it because they are passionate about it, it offers them a way of expressing themselves, it offers some practical value. It is something anyone can do, and something around which people organize themselves, something they think about, something they process. It is not a means of accumulating capital, or money, or
fame. It is not something people compete over. It is something that enriches life through its embeddedness in life, and that is enriched by life’s embeddedness in it.

Le Guin identifies this abolitionist form of study as one available to the dispossessed: the people who have nothing but one another, people who are rich in their mutuality, people who sustain themselves in and through sharing. In concert with Le Guin, we find a similar practice already underway in Edward Bunker’s *Animal Factory*. In a brief and easy to miss exchange between Ron and Earl, he writes that

Earl…shook his head in mock disdain whenever he found Ron reading frivolous entertainments. Ron quickly ceased to enjoy trash; it could not knead his mind like Dostoevsky, Hesse, Camus, and Celine, who were Earl’s favorites…He liked to listen to Earl talk about books. The old man’s demeanor changed. He became enthused, his grammar precise. He had no interest in art forms other than literature, but he didn’t necessarily like everything accepted as great. He disliked Dickens and Balzac, and thought Thomas Wolfe shouldn’t be read by anyone over twenty-one. In three months Ron read more than he had in his entire previous life. He felt his mind widen, his perceptions become more acute, for each book was a prism refracting the infinitely varied truths of experience. Some were telescopes; some microscopes.715

Depicting Ron’s instruction in literary study, Bunker represents the process as playful yet serious. When talking about books, Earl’s passion is matched only by his rigor and, rather than a specific author or style, he loves reading itself. Consequently, he does not confine himself to a specific genre or period. Instead, he prefers texts that encourage and enable his growth. He likes Dostoevsky, Hesse, Camus, and Celine, we’re told, because these authors knead his mind and develop his consciousness. Part of that process includes the development of discernment, which has to be practiced by reading and evaluating texts for yourself rather than taking others’ word for it. Exercising this skill more intensely and more repeatedly than ever before in his life, Ron encounters the “infinitely varied truths of experience,” which affects his perception of the world,  

thereby altering his preconscious feelings about aspects of the world and, consequently, reshaping his experience of them. Reading, then, is a window into another’s world, an experience of another’s experiences that grows a readers’ very capacity for experience. These experiences are shared and circulated, without recourse to canon, genre, or designations of high and low. Earl reads without prejudice, but he makes up his own mind after reading texts for himself.

These may seem like obvious observations to free-world readers, who easily can and routinely do take for granted the inter-subjective capacity of literature, but it is of monumental significance to incarcerated readers. This is because, as Jack Henry Abbott puts it, “A man is taken away from his experience of society, taken away from the experience of a living planet of living things, when he is sent to prison.”716 Put differently: if incarcerated writers estrange the banalities of literary production from their readers, it is because these things, for them, are not banal. They have been alienated from experience as a feature of incarceration, and these brief moments in which they can share in experience are made into something precious. Here it is the struggle that gives one pleasure and vitality and excitement, it is in the sociality and exchange that one practices freedom. In this process of struggling under and against forces that seek to debilitate and terrorize them, incarcerated people help ensure their survival: building community, collectively producing knowledge, practicing friendship, love, and care in the places free-world people would last expect to find it. Out of this rebellious process of study, a way of reading emerges that is similarly rebellious: a way of reading non-linearly across time, geography, genre, history without reflexive deference to the authority of experts.

716 Abbott, 52.
If I return, at last, to these literary theorizations of abolitionist study, it is because they are, in part, where this dissertation began. As literary critic Barbara Harlow puts it, engaging the forms of study practiced by incarcerated people “functions to undermine the very walls and premises that contain it. It raises the question of the extent to which an academic discourse functions to perpetuate disciplinary structures erected to maintain order and punish transgressions.”\(^7\) Indeed, the abolitionist mode of reading that I have heretofore been experimenting with emerges out of my encounters with Le Guin and Bunker. It emerges in tandem with an effort to grasp these scenes, and comprehend their significance. Through this process, I have had to adopt the abolitionist method they describe, which only reveals itself through the method’s practice. From this perspective, we can recognize abolitionist study as a process whereby the mode of study, object of study, and means of study reciprocally transform one another. Accordingly, an abolitionist reading of Le Guin and Bunker makes their theorizations of art, literature, reading, and study appear obvious, and to appear obviously as abolitionist accounts. The method, which is derived from these scenes, produces these theorizations while making them appear as if they were there all along. Again, abolition frustrates more common sense conceptions of text and interpretation, method and object. From an abolitionist perspective, the two fuse into a dialectical social process. Bringing this perspective to bear on questions of consciousness, the (un)making of Americans, and literature’s role mediating the two, I have tried to offer novel readings of canonical texts and to highlight obscure, ephemeral, popular or otherwise mundane texts. To that end, I have treated those texts’s conditions of production, and their discursive functions, as constituent elements of them. This

has required me to consider the discursive function of this text, this dissertation’s own conditions of production. Because this dissertation has been inspired and propelled by rebellious prisoners, and it stakes out an abolitionist position in relation to them (an elective affinity that has its roots in my own biography), I felt obligated to practice this method as well as theorize it. Through this process and practice, I have intended to offer an abolitionist account of consciousness, literature, and literary discourses. In doing so, I hope to have demonstrated how this abolitionist account reframes and radicalizes common sense ideas of authorship, authority, text and context, knowledge production, identity, social reproduction, race, class, the state, prisons, and the police. I hope to have demonstrated how it radicalizes “common sense” itself.
Bibliography


*Brooklyn Nine-Nine*, season 4, episode 16, “Moo-Moo.”


358


—. “‘What is a Minor Literature?’” *Mississippi Review* vol. 11, no. 3 (1983), 13-33.


Demers, Jason. “‘Prison liberation by association: Michel Foucault and the George Jackson Alliance,’” *Atlantic Studies* vol. 13, no. 2 (2016), 165-186.


*Family Matters*, season 5, episode 15, “Good Cop, Bad Cop,”


J., letter to author, March 26, 2022.


Kaba, Mariame. We Do This ‘Til We Free Us: Abolitionist Organizing and Transforming Justice. Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2021.


—. “Abolition from Within,” The Radical Teacher, no. 91 (2011), 4-15.


—. “Self-appointed arbiters of who gets to speak: As someone who has been writing/filming for the delegitimization of the drug war & resulting mass incarceration for more than two decades, if I thought Defund The Police was a viable political slogan, I'd let it go. But no, it's shit,” 19 Nov., 2020, 3:20 PM, https://twitter.com/AoDespair/status/1329534943903543296. Accessed 22 May, 2023.


Texas Department of Corrections and Justice, “F.A.Q.”

Texas Department of Criminal Justice, “Mail Systems Coordinator Panel,”

Texas Government Code Title 4, Sub. G, Ch. 497, sec. 497.058,

Texas Government Code Title 4, Sub. G, Ch. 497, sec. 497.0581,

The Death Penalty Information Center, “Death Row,” Death Penalty Information Center, 1 Apr., 2022,


Vera Institute,” Incarceration Trends in Montana,”


