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Spaces of Radical Possibility: Resisting Criminality and Carceral Punishment in Contemporary American Prison Literature

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UNIVERSITY OF MIAMI

SPACES OF RADICAL POSSIBILITY: RESISTING CRIMINALITY AND
CARCERAL PUNISHMENT IN CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN PRISON
LITERATURE

By

Carolina Villalba

A DISSERTATION

Submitted to the Faculty
of the University of Miami
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for
the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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SPACES OF RADICAL POSSIBILITY: RESISTING
CRIMINALITY AND CARCERAL PUNISHMENT IN
CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN PRISON LITERATURE

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Carceral Punishment in Contemporary American Prison Literature

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This project looks at the prison narrative as an important sub-genre of contemporary American autobiography, one that reclaims the margin as a space for counter-hegemonic subversion and highlights criminality as a social construct. Comparatively studying Assata Shakur's *Assata: An Autobiography* (1987), Leonard Peltier's *Prison Writings: My Life Is My Sun Dance* (1999), and Jimmy Santiago Baca's *A Place to Stand* (2001), I consider how these works manipulate the literary representation of imprisonment to establish a correlation between space and power, and to transform physical, mental, and spiritual confinement into a source of autonomy. I also examine how these works negotiate spatiality in terms of oppression and resistance, while underscoring the broader social connection between criminality and identity. By comparatively reading African-American, Native American, and Latino narratives written from or about prison, I explore how these texts shed light on the racialized criminalization of the American underclasses, while also complicating "freedom" as a literary paradigm. I argue that these writers change the geography of their life stories by transforming spaces of punishment and confinement into what bell hooks calls "sites of radical possibility."

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Chapter 1

Resisting Criminality and Carceral Punishment in Contemporary American Prison Literature

Creating life amidst the virtual death of prison punishment forms a frequent theme in contemporary literature on or about imprisonment. In particular, autobiographical prison narratives like Jimmy Santiago Baca's *A Place to Stand* (2001), Assata Shakur's *Assata: An Autobiography* (1987), and Leonard Peltier's *Prison Writings: My Life Is My Sun Dance* (1999) often illustrate how their subjects transgress prison boundaries by assuming agency over a physical space designed to break them down. These texts link American incarceration not to criminality but to identity, often disturbing the spatial, moral, and ideological binaries through which many of us tend to make sense of prison life. Baca, Shakur, and Peltier extend the prison beyond its accepted boundaries. They depict the prisoner's body as a space for subversion. And they permeate the spaces of collective memory to overwrite American history with critical testimony. Destabilizing conventional borders, these texts transform spaces of oppression into sites of resistance and renewal, or what bell hooks calls "site[s] of radical possibility."¹ By naming what Baca calls his "own dark world," and by undermining its social and political limits, each of these writers changes the geography of their life narrative, transforming sites of destruction into spaces of production and possibility.

In reading *A Place to Stand*, *Assata*, and *Prison Writings* as comparable narratives, my work explores how these texts manipulate the literary representation of

¹ Hooks reclaims marginality as "much more than a site of deprivation...[but] also a site of radical possibility, a space of resistance." She argues that marginal spaces are central locations for the production of counter-hegemonic discourse. My readings of Baca, Shakur, and Peltier illustrate hooks's ideas about the spatial relationship between hegemonic power and subversive possibility ("Choosing the Margin..." 149).

prison life to establish a correlation between space and power, and to transform physical, mental, and spiritual confinement into a source of autonomy. For writers like Baca, Shakur, and Peltier, reform and rehabilitation cannot be achieved through prison punishment. Rather, transformation and true freedom result from resistance or personal struggle *against* the criminal justice and penal systems. Baca, Shakur, and Peltier imagine rehabilitation as resistance, an affirmation against the system and for the self. Their acts of resistance involve seizing control of personal spaces within a larger system that disempowers them. Writing autobiography enables these authors to challenge stereotypes and explode myths about criminalization and incarceration, while performing personal self-recovery work.

I position *A Place to Stand*, *Assata*, and *Prison Writings* within developing fields of cultural and literary criticism that seek to interpret the role of mass incarceration in U.S. society. My work's treatment of the centrality of space in prison narratives like those written by Baca, Shakur, and Peltier is informed by the work of Michel Foucault and Michel de Certeau, which examines the relationship between hegemonic strategies of spatial configuration and the possibilities of tactical resistance. In *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (1977), a founding work in the field of prison studies, Foucault historicizes the transnational development of the prison system and examines its regulation of punishment, surveillance, and torture. To Foucault, prisons are more than physical spaces—they are also ideological instruments of power that mete out punishment through the limitation of space, the control of time, and the brutalization of the prisoner's body and mind. He touches on the importance of fixed spatial

configurations in the prison system's regulation of discipline when he describes the architectural apparatus of the Panopticon:

This enclosed, segmented space, observed at every point, in which the individuals are inserted in a fixed place, in which the slightest movements are supervised, in which all events are recorded, in which an uninterrupted work of writing links the centre and periphery, in which power is exercised without division, according to a continuous hierarchical figure, in which each individual is constantly located, examined and distributed among the living beings, the sick and the dead—all this constitutes a compact model of the disciplinary mechanism....It lays down for every individual his place, his body, his disease and his death, his well-being, by means of an omnipresent and omniscient power that subdivides itself in a regular, uninterrupted way even to the ultimate determination of the individual, of what characterizes him, of what belongs to him, of what happens to him. (197)

Foucault's analysis of the Panopticon shows how the prison seeks and is designed to be a totalizing structure, working not only to punish the prisoner for his crime, but also to re-make him into a submissive being without agency.²

My analysis of spaces of resistance in *A Place to Stand*, *Assata*, and *Prison Writings* couple Foucault's ideas about the spatial and ideological configurations of the prison system with de Certeau's theories about strategies of power and tactics of resistance. In *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1984), de Certeau uses the language of space and place to distinguish hegemonic strategies from popular tactics:

I call a *strategy* the calculation (or manipulation) of power relationships that becomes possible as soon as a subject with will and power [...] can be isolated. It postulates a *place* that can be delimited as its *own* and serve as the base from which relations with an *exteriority* composed of targets or threats [...] can be managed....By contrast with a strategy [...], a *tactic* is a calculated action determined by the absence of a proper locus....The space of the tactic is the space

² Foucault also argues that the dehumanization of the inmate forms the ultimate objective of the prison's disciplinary mechanisms, a point that I will corroborate in my readings of Baca, Shakur, and Peltier's texts. His extension of "the carceral" into society at large is replicated in the narratives I will study: "The carceral texture of society assures both the real capture of the body and its perpetual observation; it is, by its very nature, the apparatus of punishment that conforms most completely to the new economy of power and the instrument for the formation of knowledge that this very economy needs. Its panoptic functioning enables it to play this double role. By virtue of its methods of fixing, dividing, recording, it has been one of the simplest, crudest, also most concrete, but perhaps most indispensable conditions for the development of this immense activity of examination that has objectified human behavior" (305).

of the other. Thus it must play on and with a terrain imposed on it and organized by the law of foreign power. (35-37, emphases in original)³

Here, de Certeau positions tactics within or upon the spaces of hegemonic strategy.

According to his ideas, tactics contest strategic authority, working to “poach” spaces of power since they have no space of their own. Joined to Foucault’s conception of the prison space as a signifier of social control, de Certeau’s ideas about tactical resistance within spaces of authoritarian power will establish a theoretical framework for my understanding of strategies of oppression and tactics of resistance in the selected texts.

In addition to grounding my readings of Baca, Shakur, and Peltier in an interpretive methodology that engages the important work of Foucault and de Certeau, I also consider ways in which prison narratives like these serve as contemporary adaptations of older literary traditions born out of legal disenfranchisement and racial subjugation, such as the slave narrative and neo-slave narrative.⁴ In “Doing Time in/as ‘The Monster’: Subject Identity in African-American Prison Literature” (2008), Kimberly Drake connects prison space to identity, arguing that the prison-industrial complex factors into a larger social system that “replaces an individual’s identity and narrative of development with a uniform institutional identity” designed to limit his ability to thrive (122). Drake contends that, for African-Americans, the prison system resembles the

³ This definition depends on de Certeau’s distinction between “space” and “place,” which will also inform my own deployment of these terms. He refers to a “place” as an order in which “elements are distributed in relationships of coexistence,” and a “space” as an intersection of distinctly mobile elements, “actuated by the ensemble of movements deployed within it.” For de Certeau, therefore, “place” implies stability, while “space” depends on mobility or vectors of movement and direction (117).

⁴ In addition to the ever-expanding study of U.S. prison literature, a parallel body of ongoing work claims that African-American prison narratives cohere to a literary tradition that thematizes confinement and resistance. A collection of essays on confinement literature, entitled *From the Plantation to the Prison* and edited by Tara T. Green, links contemporary African-American prison texts to earlier forms like the captivity narrative, slave narrative, and segregation narrative. The essays in Green’s collection examine works of varying genres to consider how African-American literature depicts confinement as a physical and spiritual state sanctioned by the U.S. legal system, or a Foucaultian economy of suspended rights that shapes the psyche of the disenfranchised.

American social and legal apparatuses that threaten to merge the individual with the abject and submerge him “in the zone of non-agency,” where he can be reductively portrayed as inhuman or even monstrous (131). It is this institutional identity and non-agency that the writers I discuss strive to resist.

The Prison Polemic

In the summer of 2009, Harvard professor Henry Louis Gates, Jr. was arrested for breaking and entering into what turned out to be his own Cambridge, Massachusetts home. Days after the arrest, Gates spoke on CNN how the incident exemplified the scripting of criminality as black, a social practice that began with the black codes and other slave-era legislation: “What it made me realize was how vulnerable all black men are, how vulnerable all people of color are, and all poor people, to capricious forces like a rogue policeman” (Themantes). Many argued Gates’s arrest was not shocking but mundane. Statistics illustrating the racially skewed rates of incarceration in the U.S. were levied to support an idea the Gates case symbolized: that in our supposedly post-racial nation, criminality remains nearly synonymous with blackness.⁵

The Gates incident became one of a long series of high-profile cases that fueled and modernized a historically controversial polemic surrounding the criminalization and mass incarceration of people of color in the U.S. In late February 2012, 17-year-old Trayvon Martin was shot and killed by George Zimmerman in Sanford, Florida, after a brief and unclear altercation. Zimmerman was acquitted of Martin’s death under

⁵ Although African-Americans make up around 13% of the national population, they constitute 40% of our prison population, which currently stands at approximately 2.3 million inmates (U.S. Department of Justice). The NAACP reports that African-American males have nearly six times the rate of incarceration as their white counterparts. And according to a 2013 Sentencing Project study submitted to the United Nations, entitled “Racial Disparities in the United States Criminal Justice System,” “one of every three black American males born today can expect to go to prison in his lifetime.”

Florida's "Stand Your Ground" Law.⁶ During Zimmerman's five-week trial, state prosecutors questioned the kind of deadly threat Martin could have posed, carrying candy and canned iced tea, but no actual weapons. The case became another lightning rod for debate about self-defense gun laws, profiling, and especially, race-based perceptions of deviant behavior in the U.S. (Burch, Benn, and Ovalle). Scholar and activist Cornel West publicly compared Stand Your Ground laws like Florida's to slave-era legislation that sanctioned white-on-black violence and "armed white [Americans] to keep black people under control."⁷

Martin became a symbol of racial martyrdom, compared to Emmett Till in the national media. The image of his youthful face, haloed by a hoodie, grew ubiquitous as a visual representation of both his presumed guilt and actual innocence. His hooded sweatshirt, which was both critiqued as a marker of criminal suspicion and replicated by protestors marching against the Zimmerman verdict, was also re-imaged as a symbol of Martin's ordinary teen-ness. This common article of clothing, found in many American closets, offered a reminder that Trayvon Martin could have been any African-American teenage boy (Burch and Isensee). During and after the Zimmerman trial, "I am Trayvon" resounded as a national chant against racial profiling echoed even by President Barack Obama, who identified with Martin by saying, "Trayvon Martin could have been me 35 years ago," and famously proclaimed, "If I had a son, he'd look like Trayvon."

⁶ Considered a standard defense in the state, Stand Your Ground holds that one may use deadly force when under the threat of deadly harm.

⁷ West's critique was familiar to scholars of African-American history and culture. Parallels between the racially codified legislation and law enforcement practices of the contemporary U.S. to those of the antebellum slave era have been drawn in the writings of civil rights advocates like Malcolm X, Angela Davis, and Assata Shakur. More recently, writers like Douglas Blackmon and Khalil Mohammed have underscored similar parallels to the Reconstruction and post-Reconstruction eras.

On August 9, 2014, another black teenager, Michael Brown, was gunned down on a Ferguson, Missouri street after a brief and unclear altercation with a white man, police officer Darren Wilson. Even more than Martin's wrongful death two years before, Ferguson ignited a polemical firestorm that spotlighted major national divides in attitudes about race, criminality, and law enforcement practices. Debate about the incident also revealed a pattern of racist law enforcement practices in Ferguson, where two-thirds of residents were black yet all but three out of 53 officers on the police force were white ("What Happened in Ferguson?"). Though testimony in the case varied, some witnesses reported seeing Brown walking toward Wilson with his hands in the air just before Wilson fired his gun ("Tracking the Events in the Wake of Michael Brown's Shooting"). When a Missouri grand jury decided not to indict Wilson, the decision sparked national protests, some of which turned violent. "Hands Up, Don't Shoot!" became a new rallying cry, signifying powerlessness in the face of law enforcement violence ("Tracking the Events in the Wake of Michael Brown's Shooting").⁸

To scholars and critics of the War on Drugs and modern prison-industrial complex,⁹ the discussion provoked by these cases was far from new. The War on Drugs

⁸ The "Hands Up, Don't Shoot!" movement is particularly relevant to my own reading of Assata Shakur as a political prisoner. Shakur reportedly had her hands up (a pose that showed she was unarmed) when she was shot by police and apprehended on the New Jersey turnpike in 1973. After the Michael Brown shooting, Angela Davis wrote about the parallels between Ferguson and Shakur's case, which took place over 40 years earlier, remarking, "Those who resist are treated like terrorists" ("From Michael Brown to Assata Shakur").

⁹ Although popularly known as the title of a recorded speech given by Davis in 1997, the term "prison-industrial complex" was first used by scholar Mike Davis in his essay, "Hell Factories in the Field: A Prison-Industrial Complex," to indicate the resemblance between the development of the contemporary prison industry and the military industry that drives war. Eric Schlosser also penned a 1998 article entitled "The Prison Industrial Complex" in which he deconstructed the political implications of the term. In *Are Prisons Obsolete?*, Davis explains, "Each new prison spawned yet another new prison. And as the U.S. prison system expanded, so did corporate involvement in construction, provision of goods and services, and the use of prison labor. Because of the extent to which prison building and operation began to attract vast amounts of capital—from the construction industry to food and health care provision—in a way that

strengthened links between crime, punishment, and race, and these cases merely exemplified that fact. The 2010 publication of Michelle Alexander's *The New Jim Crow* arguably galvanized this debate, delineating parallels between contemporary mass incarceration and earlier forms of racially skewed legislation (like the black codes of the nineteenth century or the segregation statutes of the twentieth) that solidified and criminalized a socio-economic underclass consisting predominantly of people of color.¹⁰ *The New Jim Crow* reinvigorated ongoing discussions about modern-day mass incarceration and its implications on U.S. society's treatment of cultural minorities and the working classes.¹¹ According to Alexander, mass incarceration has replaced the Jim Crow laws that once replaced slavery, in order to continue enforcing racial segregation.¹²

recalled the emergence of the military industrial complex, we began to refer to a 'prison-industrial complex'" (12).

¹⁰ Stating her central argument, Alexander writes, "Rather than rely on race, we use our criminal justice system to label people of color 'criminals' and then engage in all the practices we supposedly left behind. Today it is perfectly legal to discriminate against criminals in nearly all the ways that it was once legal to discriminate against African Americans. Once you're labeled a felon, the old forms of discrimination—employment discrimination, housing discrimination, denial of the right to vote, denial of educational opportunity, denial of food stamps and other public benefits, and exclusion from jury service—are suddenly legal. As a criminal, you have scarcely more rights, and arguably less respect, than a black man living in Alabama at the height of Jim Crow. We have not ended racial caste in America; we have merely redesigned it" (2).

¹¹ These ongoing debates about the U.S. prison-industrial complex are exemplified by (but in no way limited to) the work of Mark Mauer, Eric Schlosser, and Glenn C. Loury. A 1995 report by Mark Mauer uncovered racial inequities in the U.S. criminal justice system, prompting federal and state investigations. Mauer's groundbreaking book, *The Race to Incarcerate*, originally published in 1999 and revised in 2006, showed how sentencing policies that targeted racial and ethnic minorities led to the unprecedented expansion of the U.S. prison system in the 1980's and '90s. An article by Schlosser in the December 1998 issue of *The Atlantic Monthly*, titled simply "The Prison-Industrial Complex," investigated the sources and consequences of overcrowding in U.S. prisons, and helped galvanize current debate about the economic viability of the incarceration business. The work of economist Glenn C. Loury, published throughout the 2000's, has linked public policy regulating the prison system to the continuing problem of racial inequality in the U.S.

¹² Alexander notes, "Any candid observer of American racial history must acknowledge that racism is highly adaptable. The rules and reasons the political system employs to enforce status relations of any kind, including racial hierarchy, evolve and change as they are challenged. The valiant efforts to abolish slavery and Jim Crow and to achieve greater racial equality have brought about significant changes in the legal framework of American society—new 'rules of the game,' so to speak. These new rules have been justified by new rhetoric, new language, and a new social consensus, while producing many of the same results. The dynamic, which legal scholar Reva Siegal has dubbed 'preservation through transformation,' is the process through which white privilege is maintained, though the rules and rhetoric change" (21).

Alexander echoes the earlier of assertions social activist and self-described prison abolitionist Angela Davis¹³ when she notes, “Indeed, the stigma of criminality functions in much the same way that the stigma of race once did. It justifies a legal, social, and economic boundary between ‘us’ and ‘them’” (18). As a place that houses a large number of criminals and social undesirables, the prison helps enforce the boundary Alexander mentions, arguably safeguarding American racism. In “Race and Criminalization: Black Americans and the Punishment Industry” (1997), Davis makes a comparable claim: “Because of the tendency to view it as an abstract site into which all manner of undesirables are deposited, the prison is the perfect site for the simultaneous production and concealment of racism” (67).

The debate about race and criminalization dovetails with long-running discussions about the prison system, fascination with prison space, and questions about whether prison can transform or rehabilitate inmates into productive members of greater society. One of the most culturally significant images in our national imagination, the prison has become such a normalized place of punishment that it is difficult to imagine our legal system (or society) without it. As Davis writes in *Are Prisons Obsolete?*, “The prison has become a key ingredient of our common sense” (18). The prison is so deeply entrenched as our national method of punishment, the cornerstone of legal consequence, that it is hard to believe that our modern penal system is actually a contemporary

¹³ Davis also explores how the symbolic menace of the criminal of color imaged by the War on Drugs reinforces American structural racism. In a 1997 essay, she writes, “Fear has always been an integral component of racism. The ideological reproduction of a fear of black people, whether economically or sexually grounded, is rapidly gravitating toward and being grounded in a fear of crime....The fear of crime has attained a status that bears a sinister similarity to the fear of communism as it came to restructure social perceptions during the fifties and sixties. The figure of the ‘criminal’ – the racialized figure of the criminal – has come to represent the most menacing enemy of ‘American society’” (65-66).

construction, the product of late-twentieth-century laws that swelled the prison population.¹⁴

The influx of discourse on mass incarceration in the wake of the War on Drugs has helped the prison space gain greater infamy in the American cultural imagination. Popular films like *The Shawshank Redemption*, *Dead Man Walking*, *The Green Mile*, and *Monster* make American prisons a central setting for storytelling. Documentaries like Werner Herzog's *Into the Abyss* and Eugene Jarecki's *The House I Live In* aim to expose the realities of the prison-industrial complex and provide a first-hand view inside prison walls. And television programs like Netflix's popular *Orange Is the New Black* or MSNBC's enduring *Lockup* attest to public fascination with criminality and the prison space. Furthermore, prison literature has gained greater popularity and reader interest in the past two decades. Numerous anthologies of contemporary prison literature have been published since the mid-'90s, some of the more prominent ones edited by Bell Gale Chevigny, H. Bruce Franklin, and Wally Lamb. Prison writings have been included in recent anthologies of American literature as well, such as *The Heath Anthology of American Literature* and *The Best New American Voices* (Miller 1). These cultural examples demonstrate an increasing concern with the ways in which mass incarceration defines U.S. society, as well as a growing curiosity about how criminality has been increasingly linked to race, ethnicity, and class over the course of a centuries-long historical trajectory.

¹⁴ Alexander notes, "Most people imagine that the explosion in the U.S. prison population during the past twenty-five years reflects changes in crime rates. Few would guess that our prison population leaped from approximately 350,000 to 2.3 million in such a short period of time due to changes in laws and policies, not changes in crime rates. Yet it has been changes in our [drug] laws – particularly the dramatic increases in the length of prison sentences – that have been responsible for the growth of our prison system, not increases in crime" (93).

To supplement the expanding body of work on, about, or from U.S. prisons, scholars from various disciplines have analyzed the relationship between imprisonment and cultural production. Often drawing from the work of legal scholars and entering into debates about the viability and morality of the prison-industrial complex, literary and cultural critics like H. Bruce Franklin, Michael Hames-Garcia, Daniel Quentin Miller, Caleb Smith, and Regina Kunzel have illuminated some of the ways in which U.S. prison literature speaks to these debates. Frequently referred to as one of the leading experts on prison literature, H. Bruce Franklin steered attention toward this literary genre with his breakthrough text, *Prison Literature in America: The Victim as Criminal and Artist*. Though first published in 1978 and expanded in 1982, Franklin's work remains one of the most expansive analyses of American prison literature's history and varying contexts.¹⁵ More recently, scholars like Hames-Garcia and Miller have expanded on Franklin's enterprising work, reading contemporary prison literature against the backdrop of developing social theories and the evolving concept of ethics. In *Fugitive Thought: Prison Movements, Race, and the Meaning of Justice* (2004), Hames-Garcia argues for an approach to studying prison literature that foregrounds "postpositivist realism," which as he explains, "contends that accounts of causal features of the social world can yield accurate, reliable, and *revisable* understandings of reality" (xxv). He reads narratives like Shakur's *Assata* and Piri Thomas' *Seven Long Times* with an eye toward multiplying the

¹⁵ Franklin looks at the importance of criminality and imprisonment in literature since Miguel de Cervantes' *Don Quixote*. He reads contemporary accounts of prison life against the transnational transport of convicts to the Americas, the forced internment of American slavery, and the overall development of the prison system in the U.S. The bulk of Franklin's text, however, is dedicated to the analysis of prison literature published in the latter half of the twentieth century, which includes creative fiction, poetry, autobiography, and polemic. Dennis Massey's *Doing Time in American Prisons: A Study of Modern Novels* (1989), another highly regarded text in the field, continues Franklin's work but focuses solely on novels published from prison, such as Chester Himes's *Cotton Comes to Harlem* and Malcolm Braly's *On the Yard*.

meaning of the terms “justice” and “freedom,” in attempt to “ask how different forms of perspective, subjectivity, and partiality bring about different ideas about what *freedom* or *solidarity* can be” (xxvi, emphases mine). Miller, moreover, begins to consider the importance of space in his readings of prison narratives. He edits the collection *Prose and Cons: Essays on Prison Literature in the United States* (2005), which contains several pieces examining the relationship between political power and the spatiality of the prison system. His own essay in the text, entitled “‘On the Outside Looking In’: White Readers of Nonwhite Prison Narratives,” touches on how the text forms an intersubjective space that produces acts of connection between ethnic writers and non-ethnic readers.

In *The Prison and the American Imagination* (2009), Caleb Smith notes that since its early inception in the 1790s, the American penitentiary has been governed by a narrative of rebirth, critical to its project of reforming or rehabilitating criminals. Such a narrative requires “the convict’s virtual death” (6). Referring to the first-wave prison reform movement of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Smith explains:

The prison adapted ancient myths of resurrection to the demands of a post-Revolutionary social contract. It was a “living tomb” of servitude and degradation as well as the space of the citizen-subject’s dramatic reanimation. Its legal codes divested the convict of rights; its ritualized disciplinary practices stripped away his identity; it exposed him to arbitrary and discretionary violence at the hands of his keepers; it buried him alive in a solitary cell. But it also promised him a glorious return to citizenship and humanity. It mortified the body, but it also claimed to renovate the soul. (6)

The word “penitentiary,” of course, derives from conceiving the prison in Christian terms as a place of penitence, contrition, and atonement. In *Criminal Intimacy: Prison and the Uneven History of Modern American Sexuality* (2010), Regina Kunzel examines how the modern American prison was conceived as an “architecture adapted to morals,” and

confirms that the “idea of incarceration as a way to redeem as well as to punish criminals was the invention of the early nineteenth century and of a Christian, reformist, and even utopian imagination” (15). Kunzel shows that when labor entered into the matter—especially through the practice of convict leasing—reformist initiatives were overshadowed by states’ economic objectives. In a space constructed for the performance of penitence, the convict became dehumanized, divested of his rights to his body, and made to labor soullessly for the benefit of those in power. In other words, the convict’s virtual death was achieved.

History of a Haunted Form

American prison autobiography comprises its own literary genre that evokes strong ties to the slave narrative tradition and parallels the historical development of the prison itself within the U.S. Through the handful of nineteenth-century prison autobiographies known today, we catch a glimpse of the ways in which American carceral spaces have enacted punishment over time. The history of the prison narrative genre is only beginning to be excavated, which is why examining the form through the lens of critical literary studies remains important. The first-known African-American prison narrative, originally titled *The Life and Adventures of a Haunted Convict or The Inmate of a Gloomy Prison With the Mysteries and Miseries of the New York House of Reffuge* [sic] and *Auburn Prison Unmasked With the Rules and Regulations of Auburn Prison - from 1840 up to the present time - and the Different Modes of Punishments* was written by Austin Reed¹⁶ in the 1850’s, and was only authenticated in 2013 by Smith at Yale University. *The Life and the Adventures of a Haunted Convict* remained

¹⁶ The author wrote under the pseudonym Robert Reed.

unpublished, and its author anonymous, until a rare-books dealer rediscovered the manuscript at an estate sale in Rochester, New York in the early 2000s. The family selling it knew little about the historical importance of the text, which at that time had never circulated beyond upstate New York (Bosman). The narrative was formally published in January 2016, while the original manuscript remains housed at the Yale University Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library.

In the summer of 2014, on a research trip to the Beinecke Library, I visited with the original Reed manuscript to gain some historical perspective on the prison narrative genre, a form that today highlights the racial imbalances of the post-War-on-Drugs American prison, but which has been linked to political resistance for over a century and a half (*Prison Literature in America* 55). Reed's manuscript - handwritten in skinny cursive, its sepia pages browned and slightly torn at the edges – served as a physical reminder that the genre has its own literary history closely tied to the important American theme of liberty. I read Reed's handwritten prose while simultaneously researching the carceral spaces he inhabited in the antebellum era, learning about the early development of our modern systems of punishment and reform. Reed's text also helped me note significant parallels between the prison narrative and slave narrative genres, which I reference in my reading of Shakur's *Assata* and which underscore the significance of this form to captivity and resistance literature. Through imagery that likens the terror of the prison to that of indentured servitude and the work-farm, Reed's manuscript exemplifies the continuum between slavery and mass incarceration.

Although Reed was never a slave, his written testimony reveals that even free African-Americans in the North fell prey to a punishing criminal justice system that

deployed the racist ideologies of the slave system in the South. Born free in Rochester, NY, Reed did not experience slavery first hand, but he lived through the antebellum era of political crisis that problematized “our peculiar institution.” Inhabiting both a reformatory and one of the U.S.’s first modern penitentiaries, he was whipped by white overseers and put to work all day without wages. In the early American penal system, Reed “saw slavery encroaching, only half-disguised,” as Smith writes in his introduction to the published text (xix). Even as they legally abolished and publicly disavowed slavery, Northern states reinvented new systems of indentured servitude, new forms of punishment targeting blacks, and new patterns of inequality that continue to undergird our legal and penal systems. Through carceral confinement that closely resembled slavery in its unpaid labor practices, brutal corporal punishments, and systems of securing order through terror, Reed learned that enslavement was not solely reserved for African-Americans in the Southern states (“Editor’s Introduction” xx). As Reed’s work makes clear, few places blurred the boundary between Northern and Southern slavery as noticeably as the penitentiary.

In his memoir, Reed narrates three experiences living and laboring within New York’s interlocking systems of legal captivity: first as an indentured “apprentice” on an Avon Springs farm, second at the infamous NY juvenile reformatory called the House of Reform,¹⁷ and third as an inmate at Auburn State Penitentiary.¹⁸ Writing of these

¹⁷ The New York House of Refuge became the first facility networked into what later became our modern juvenile justice system. Its opening in 1825 inspired the founding of a proliferation of similar institutions beginning in the Northeast and spreading into the rest of the country by the 1840’s. For the first half of the nineteenth century, Houses of Refuge were the primary institutions where an increasing number of poor, delinquent youths were confined. These facilities claimed to reform youths with criminal inclinations, or at least seclude them from greater society until they reached adulthood. Apart from falling short of fulfilling their tenets of reform, Houses of Refuge also quickly confronted the same problems that often plagued adult jail and prisons, namely overcrowding, deteriorating conditions, and staff abuse (Center on Juvenile and Criminal Justice).

interrelated carceral experiences, Reed experiments with various literary forms and styles. He demonstrates his knowledge of popular literary genres and develops his own style by emulating forms like crime fiction or the confessional autobiography. As Smith confirms in his study of the text, “Reed played with various genres and styles. He began in the mode of the confession. He would draw from popular traditions like the rogue’s tale and the sensational exposé. Outlaw ballads and temperance sermons would intermingle in his pages, and he would copy a few passages from published works of fiction” (xx). Reed also evokes the traditions of slave narratives when he describes his own legal vulnerability as a black man in the U.S., denied the personhood of real citizenship or the legal protection of the law.

Unlike most authors of slave narratives and nineteenth-century confessional autobiographies, however, Reed opens his story not with the factual circumstances of his birth, but with an announcement of his father’s death, the signal event that begins to challenge Reed’s liberty at the young age of six. From his title page, Reed refers to himself as a “haunted convict,” whose criminality is informed by his father’s death and whose text is haunted by numerous literary genres. Through his deliberate choice of introductory scenes, Reed traces his autobiographical origins to loss and death. In his text, his life begins with a death, and with the trauma of losing his primary authority

¹⁸ New York’s Auburn State Penitentiary was one of the first modern prisons constructed in the U.S., which purported to incorporate into criminal punishment the Quaker principle of reform through penance. The “Auburn System,” as it came to be called, deviated from the original “Philadelphia System” instituted by Quakers in Pennsylvania’s Eastern State Penitentiary, by adding hard labor to inmates’ daily routine of prayer, meditation, and introspection. Unlike the “Philadelphia System,” based on solitary confinement and spiritual self-reflection, the “Auburn System” allowed inmates to labor alongside, but never engage in conversation with, one another. The “Auburn System” predates many of our contemporary prison practices: prisoners performed compulsory labor, which garnered profits that helped maintain the facility; they were segregated according to security-risk levels, or the types of criminal offenses of which they had been convicted; and they were issued uniforms that corresponded to their crime. Furthermore, the traditional American prisoner’s uniform of black-and-white horizontal stripes originated at Auburn, as did physical practices of separation during chain-gang labor (*Prison Literature in America* xxi-xxii).

figure and source of economic security. Later in his narrative, he recounts occasions when he is able to return to his hometown and remains painfully aware that his father's grave awaits him there. He writes, "Where may I go that I may shun that voice? It comes a pealing upon my ear like a heavy clap of thunder, and the voice of my father is haunting me tonight, and his advice and prayer seems to prick my very heart" (174). Reed's first stories in his narrative show how he was drawn to delinquent mischief after his father's death, attributing his criminal status to the loss of a strong paternal figure in his life.

Reed's mother sends him to live on the Ladd farm in Avon Springs (his first place of captivity) after he and a friend trespass onto a local man's orchard and cut down several fruit trees, hoping to sell them in town. Smith notes that these early stories in the narrative indicate a literary hauntedness of their own that enriches any discussion on the history of Reed's book:

Reed's early chapters echo the language and imagery of many other convict autobiographies. Since colonial times, enterprising American printmakers had been peddling execution sermons and gallows speeches, turning the news of crime into a vibrant, lucrative popular culture. The earliest published confessions reduced the rich complexity of autobiography to the crude form of didactic allegory. Some crime narratives were attributed to black authors, but they were usually written, or heavily edited, by the white ministers and lawyers who ran the penal system....The rules of the genre required the authors to justify the powers that condemned them....They were supposed to accept their punishment and warn readers to obey the law....The genre had its limits, but it also provided a rare opening into the public sphere of the printed word. (xxiii)

By the mid-nineteenth century, when Reed was writing his book, authors of what was then popularly called "criminal autobiography" were breaking away from the strict expectations of the genre that Smith delineates above. Instead, they were concomitantly upholding and subverting the form's traditions in order to turn their texts into "something other than propaganda for the penal system" ("Editor's Introduction" xxiv). These

subversive tactics find a contemporary complement in modern prison narratives like those written by Baca, Shakur, and Peltier, which both draw upon and directly challenge the rehabilitative ideology of the American penal system.

After his mother bounds him out to work on the Ladd farm as an “apprentice,” Reed’s indoctrination into criminal punishment begins. Mr. Ladd frequently whips him for “whining and not working” (22). When he runs away, he is returned to his mother’s home and quickly sent back to the Ladd farm. Just before returning, Reed’s sister gives him a gun to use against Mr. Ladd if he is whipped as punishment for his escape. When Mr. Ladd predictably whips him, Reed retaliates by trying to shoot him. When he misses, he runs away again, only to return and burn down Ladd’s home and barn. For these crimes, he is sentenced to the House of Refuge, the original American juvenile detention center, until he turns 21.¹⁹

After it enters this space of legal punishment and confinement, Reed’s narrative evokes numerous parallels with contemporary prison autobiographies. Reed details the process of initiation and walks readers through the “departments” into which the House of Refuge is divided (59). He describes the authority of the overseers and their methods

¹⁹ In the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries, courts punished and confined youth in jails and penitentiaries. Since few other options existed, young people of all ages and genders were often indiscriminately confined with hardened adult criminals and the mentally ill in largely overcrowded penal institutions. Many of these youths were confined for noncriminal behavior due to the lack of alternative youth-centered facilities. At the same time, American cities were confronting high rates of child poverty and neglect, which pressured government leaders to fashion a solution to this emerging social crisis. According to the Center on Juvenile and Criminal Justice, “pioneering penal reformers Thomas Eddy and John Griscom [responded to this crisis by organizing] the Society for the Prevention of Pauperism, which led to the establishment of the New York House of Refuge in 1825...”. The House of Refuge, where Reed was sentenced to live out the remainder of his adolescence, became “the first institution designed to house poor, destitute and vagrant youths who were deemed by authorities to be on the path towards delinquency...” (Center on Juvenile and Criminal Justice). Furthermore, with the rise of the compulsory education movement in the U.S., “social reformers began arguing for a new type of institution that placed greater emphasis on education” (Center on Juvenile and Criminal Justice). This movement made the reform school an integral part of our national juvenile justice system (Center on Juvenile and Criminal Justice).

of punishment and explains the prisoners' daily routines (66). Discussing the ways inmates are corrected for breaking institutional rules, Reed hones in on the fraught symbol of the "rattan," an instrument of corporal punishment used to maintain order through terror both on the Ladd farm and in the House of Refuge. In this penal space, Reed encounters an intensely rigid and precise system of rules that augment his sense of criminality and make routine punishments nearly unavoidable. He admits, "I had been there nearly a year before I could learn all the little rules and regulations of the house" (82). Reed's early sentencing to the House of Refuge symbolizes his youth spent in the system, presaging a writer like Baca by imparting a sense of how institutional identities developed in nineteenth-century America. Reed shows how institutionalization begets criminality, mentioning that by living with other youths branded delinquent or criminal, "I now became hardened in vice and crime in the course of time" (76). At the House of Refuge, where juvenile inmates are meant to be educated and reformed, literacy is held as bait for manipulative purposes and only when it reflects positively on the warden and his staff are inmates taught to read and write. Reed's attempts to seize control of his own literacy are met with further physical punishments. He recalls an incident when "I had such a greedy appetite for reading that I was called up before Mr. Williams the school teacher one day and laid across the stool, where I got fifteen cuts with the rattan for having more than one book in my desk" (87). He continues to sneak books throughout his time there, reading as much as he can. He also escapes from the House of Refuge and is returned four times.

As an adult during the 1840s and '50s, Reed is sentenced to serve time for larceny at Auburn State Penitentiary. By the time he reaches Auburn, his institutionalization has

already schooled him significantly in criminal behavior, mainly by compelling him to learn how to defend himself against abusive staff. At Auburn, Reed keeps hidden knives to protect himself against the death-defying torture of the guards after he is put in the “dungeon” and roped in place for three weeks straight (141). He details horrifying punishments for routine rule-breaking. For instance, he is handcuffed and tied to a barrel for hours at a time, placed in an iron yolk, and fitted with an iron cap, which he calls a Christ-like “crown,” for days-long stretches. Significantly, for conspiring escape with other prisoners, he is also hung on a swing in spread-eagle pose and given a “showering bath.” In a memorable chapter, called “*The Author in the showering bath,*” Reed directly addresses readers to impart the horror of this form of punishment, administered only by upper-level prison staff: “Reader, I hardly know what to say or what to call this little water craft—I think I must call her the conquerer....this little craft is conducted by the Warden of the prison and he has the whole control of her nor no captain darest take a passenger on board of her without his consent or without his astanding by” (148). His description of the “showering bath” make it seem like a precursor to modern “waterboarding,” an interrogation technique used on war criminals that frequently has been called torture. During his “showering bath,” Reed recalls in his text, eleven barrels of water are dumped on him, preventing him from breathing almost to the point of death.

In his written testimony, which enables readers “outside” to vicariously enter the penitentiary, Reed presages many of the tropes that will define prison literature in the late-nineteenth and twentieth centuries: for example, his humble autobiographical introduction focusing on death and neglect in his youth, the intake scenes that mark his “initiation” into carceral institutionalization, his cataloguing of the daily routines of

officers and inmates in the penal space, and his documenting of prison life and the regulations that shape it. Moreover, in his conclusion, Reed equates prison with death, an analogy that Smith calls central to the prison narrative form. Like many subsequent prison writers (like Baca), Reed compares being imprisoned with being hidden away, forgotten, or removed from greater society. He notes that prisoners are like the walking dead and prison is like a grave for living yet unwanted members of society (210). Again strategically choosing when to ascribe to the conventions of the “criminal autobiography,” Reed ends his narrative on a note of warning, telling readers to take his story as a cautionary tale showing how the prison is a place they should dread and painstakingly avoid: “Reader be careful and take warning from one who has passed through the iron gates of sorrow and trouble. Take warning lest you also come to this place of torment and become the inmate of a dark and gloomy prison” (218). This concluding statement can also be read as a didactic note, telling readers to take lessons from Reed’s experiences and remember his story should they ever end up imprisoned themselves.

My research at the Beinecke Library, which included working with the original manuscript of *The Life and the Adventures of a Haunted Convict*, informed this study by lending breadth and historical context to my reading of contemporary American prison literature. At the Beinecke, I studied not only Reed’s manuscript but also the first edition of Hannah Craft’s *The Bondwoman’s Narrative*, one of the first African-American novels of the nineteenth-century, dated to sometime between 1853 and 1861, which discusses how strategies of hegemony play out on the black woman’s body in language comparable to Shakur’s *Assata*. I also studied the original letters and papers of Chester Himes, a

former inmate of the Ohio State Penitentiary who became a major American writer of the twentieth century and frequently explored themes involving racism and the American prison. These texts helped inform my subsequent chapters, but it is Reed's manuscript (and its recent publication) that lends the most historical significance to my work.

Examining this work revealed much about the history of the prison literature genre, and especially the importance of captivity and resistance as important themes that continually resound in our national discourse. Through my archival research, I learned that prison narratives possess historically rooted literary traditions, which remain notable in contemporary works like *A Place to Stand*, *Assata*, and *Prison Writings*. Like Reed, these modern authors try to resist the deadly effects of the American prison by affirming life in and through autobiographical writing.

Resisting Death, Realizing Possibility

While valuable work is being done to publicize the problem of the prison-industrial complex and the social construction of criminality, far too little scholarship has yet been dedicated to exploring how contemporary literature speaks to such problems. Many studies of the American prison system, and the role of literature within it, have engaged the fields of history, sociology, and political science, but they have less often included that of literary studies. Writers like Baca, Shakur, and Peltier can be said to share a common thematic concern with confinement and resistance that echoes the literary agenda of a writer like Reed. Long-term incarceration provides a vantage point that enables them to examine how prison resembles the nation at large, threatening to

marginalize, limiting available options, and establishing a permanent “undercaste,”²⁰ propelled into an abject state of reduced agency. Like earlier literature of enslavement, protest, and resistance written by African-Americans, the work of Baca, Shakur, and Peltier intends to grant subjectivity, voice, and artistic power to the American underclasses—women, racial and ethnic minorities, and the disenfranchised or “othered” figures perpetually relegated to social margins. These texts reclaim the margin as a “home” space for the disempowered, both literally (since prisons exist on the fringes—geographically within and socially apart from American society) and metaphorically (since many who inhabit the prison space consider themselves socially ostracized on the basis of race, culture, or class). Thus, they lend particular significance to bell hooks’s statement that “To be in the margin is to be part of the whole but outside the main body” (qtd. in “Choosing the Margin...” 149).²¹ By comparatively reading *A Place to Stand*, *Assata*, and *Prison Writings*, my work demonstrates how these narratives contribute to the ongoing tradition of American confinement and resistance literature.

In my second chapter, I examine how Baca reclaims his subjectivity by gaining literacy to thwart the system, performing memory-work to help cast off institutional identity, and engaging in acts of nonviolent resistance. In *A Place to Stand*, Baca manipulates his text’s representation of prison space in order to call attention to the moral

²⁰ In *The New Jim Crow*, Alexander argues in part for the acknowledgement of the American “undercaste,” which she calls “a group so estranged from mainstream society that it is no longer in reach of the mythical ladder of opportunity” (12).

²¹ Hooks relates this conception of marginality to the experiences of African-Americans living in the Jim Crow era, but her reflections could have been written about American prisoners: “Living as we did—on the edge—we developed a particular way of seeing reality. We looked both from the outside in and from the inside out. We focused on the center as well as the margin. We understood both. This mode of seeing reminded us of the existence of our whole universe, a main body made up of both margin and center. Our survival depended on an ongoing public awareness of the separation between margin and center and an ongoing private acknowledgement that we were a necessary, vital part of that whole” (qtd. in “Choosing the Margin...” 149).

binaries that codify it. Like Shakur and Peltier, he explains mass incarceration in terms of identity, not criminality: “I was sure I was convicted mostly because of who I was, expunged from a society that didn’t want people like me in it” (102). He portrays prison as an alternative society, whose “intricate network of homeboys, messengers, porters, trustees, and corrupt guards” parallels the America he knew on the outside. In this way, he represents the secluded Florence State Prison as not unlike the public spaces from which it means to be estranged. He shatters the illusion of difference and upsets the moral binary the prison system claims to uphold. *A Place to Stand*’s focus on the study and production of literature also helps transform prison space into a site of production and creativity. When he remembers his earlier life or sits down to write poetry, Baca finds himself in “two different worlds.” By dedicating himself to literacy, Baca also fashions a method of border-crossing and connecting to the outside world that transcends geographical boundaries and social limits. He begins writing to pen-pals, seeking advice from other poets, and sending out his work for publication. His ability to bear stories from within the prison-industrial complex to the outside world proves that the rigidly policed physical and moral boundaries between “us” and “them” are far from absolute. Examined in relation to his conception of prison space as socially and creatively productive, the freedom that Baca finds in literature while “inside” forms another tactic by which he resists the limits that have been imposed upon him from “outside.” As I argue in Chapter 2, Baca transforms prison into an impermanent “home” space, a site for gaining self-knowledge and strengthening subjectivity.

Chapter 3 explores how Assata Shakur’s *Assata: An Autobiography* images the body as a site for spectacular punishment and politicized resistance. *Assata* places the

(female) prisoner's body at the center of the prison system's interstices of domination, punishment, and dehumanization. In the way it represents Shakur's acquisition of limited power over her own body, however, the text explores the possibility of defiance amidst the violence of prison punishment. Shakur portrays intentionally getting pregnant while incarcerated as an act of resistance and redress. She proves that pregnancy and motherhood can become tactics of rebellion when they involve the disempowered subject's attempt to humanize and regain control over her brutalized body. Shakur's tactics recall some of Saidiya V. Hartman's theories about "redressing the pained body" that has been reduced to an abject state by systemized violence and brutal punishment (50-51). According to Hartman, subtle acts of defiance enacted within the context of forced subservience challenged the existing power structure and "create[d] a space for action not generally available" during slavery (8). Furthermore, she asserts, "[s]ince acts of resistance exist within the context of relations of domination and are not external to them, they acquire their character from these relations, and vice versa" (8). Thus, analyzing tactical resistance even in its most subtle forms can reveal the nuances of strategic power as they are negotiated either in a slave narrative or a contemporary prison memoir like *Assata*. Drawing on Hartman's theories, my third chapter delineates how *Assata* foregrounds physical torture as imperative to the making of the prisoner and highlights how counter-hegemonic tactics involving the body can generate empowerment. This chapter focuses on how motherhood tactically transforms Shakur's body into a productive, self-defined space, enabling her to retaliate against the prison system that sanctions her abuse. Moreover, in its reclamation of the body as a site for resisting abusive power, *Assata* participates in a tradition of African-American women's

writing dating back to the nineteenth century. The text represents Shakur's pregnancy as an act of rebellion, a way of counteracting and healing the devastation caused by incarceration (Hartman 50-51). As Hartman writes of black women's bodies in nineteenth-century slavery, "Redressing the pained body encompasses operating in and against the demands of the system, negotiating the disciplinary harnessing of the body, and counter-investing in the body as a site of possibility" (51). Shakur first depicts her body as a space upon which the prison system brands her identity as a criminal through physical torture and deprivation. Her choice to become a mother while in prison can thus be read as a willful act of optimism that reaffirms her power over her body and generates more positive identifications.

Chapter 4 studies how Leonard Peltier's *Prison Writings: My Life Is My Sun Dance* aims to exert some degree of control over the way Native Americans have been narrativized in the American historical record. Peltier performs memory-work to recuperate past events and challenge commonly accepted collective memories. His narrative becomes an attempt to testify for a marginalized cultural group and overwrite official history. This chapter draws upon the work of historian Pierre Nora to interpret shifting sites of memory in *Prison Writings*. Nora developed the concept of "*lieux de memoire*" in response to what he saw as a prevailing shift in Western attitudes about remembering the past. In "Between Memory and History: *Les Lieux de Memoire*," Nora argues that "true memory"—the spontaneous memory generated only by living traditions—has gradually come to be replaced by recorded and archived history. A break with the past occurs when "*milieux de memoire*" (contexts of memory), the "real environments" that link the present to the past through tradition, are exchanged for "*lieux*

de memoire” (sites of memory), which break from lived tradition and display “nothing more in fact than sifted and sorted historical traces” (284-285). Throughout his narrative, Peltier pluralizes the significance of geographic places and what Nora calls the “grand narrative” of history, prompting readers to question what they think they already know (Nora 285). Like Baca and Shakur, he transforms public spaces by turning them into extensions of prison. Using de Certeau’s terminology, he “poaches” the spaces of the oppressor in order to create surprising possibilities within them (37).²² Furthermore, Peltier recasts historical events like Wounded Knee, the “reign of terror” at the Pine Ridge Reservation, and “the incident at Oglala” in a more human, sympathetic light so as to problematize the way these events were portrayed in the press and exert some degree of control over sensationalistic narratives that often misrepresent his community. He takes back recorded events and overwrites them with “true memory.” His text thus underscores the instability of memory and history, showing how they too form spaces of strategic power and provide opportunities for tactical resistance.

In their narratives, Baca, Shakur, and Peltier deploy the language of oppression and resistance to negotiate the prison space, claiming marginality as a central site for counter-hegemonic transgression and assuming control of geographical, cultural, physical, and metaphoric spaces designed to dehumanize them. Looking at the text itself as a space for subversion also illuminates how narratives like *A Place to Stand*, *Assata*, and *Prison Writings* contribute to the tradition of American autobiographical writing.

²² Peltier’s treatment of historical events and sites of memory illustrates de Certeau’s argument that a tactic “takes advantage of ‘opportunities’ and depends on them....[The nowhere space of a tactic gives it mobility], to be sure, but a mobility that must accept the chance offerings of the moment, and seize on the wing the possibilities that offer themselves at any given moment. It must vigilantly make use of the cracks that particular conjunctions open in the surveillance of proprietary powers. It poaches in them. It creates surprises in them” (37).

The genre provides a space in which the writer can be, as Baca writes in *A Place to Stand*, "...a witness, not a victim" (244).²³ Since the autobiographical subject is the hero of his own memoir, the African-American or ethnic writer can embody the subjectivity often denied him by the dominant culture in his life narrative, which empowers him to "give voice to the voiceless and hope to the hopeless" (Baca 244). Moreover, within the space of the text, writers like Baca, Shakur, and Peltier have the freedom to challenge notions of "Americanness" and authenticity. Manipulating space in their texts helps these writers redraw borders meant to alienate members of the American undercaste.

²³ Baca could be speaking for all working-class, ethnic-American autobiographers when he asserts, "I was a witness for those who for one reason or another would never have a place of their own, would never have the opportunity to make their lives stable enough because resources weren't available or because they just could not get it together. My job was to witness and record the 'it' of their lives, to celebrate those who don't have a place in this world to stand and call home....My role as witness is to give voice to the voiceless and hope to the hopeless, of which I am one" (244).

Chapter 2

Redrawing Prison Boundaries and Reclaiming *A Place to Stand*

In his 2001 prison memoir, *A Place to Stand*, Chicano poet and writer Jimmy Santiago Baca describes a stint in solitary confinement at Arizona's Florence State Prison as a prolonged struggle against the maddening effects of internment:

To keep from going insane, I started to do sit-ups, push-ups, and jumping jacks. I'd splash cold water over my naked body and sleep on the cool concrete floor, with no blanket, mattress, or sheet. I was constantly clawing at itches in my growing beard. Here in my own dark world, I had control only over the cold button on the sink, and I pushed it a hundred times a day, gulping until I was bloated, bathing until I was drenched. (125)

Baca's experience in lockdown corroborates Foucault's understanding of modern imprisonment as the complete denial of autonomous rights and privileges. Unlike antiquated penal spectacles like floggings or public executions, Foucault notes, modern punishment relies on an "economy of suspended rights" that aims not only to curtail the prisoner's personal freedom and spatial mobility but also to estrange him from his own human agency (11). In solitary, lack of space and human contact challenge Baca's humanity, threatening to turn him into a monster. Rather than accept such brutalization, however, Baca creates space and affirms his own agency through movement and activity. He fills the emptiness of his confinement by honing in on and seizing control of the only resources available to him—namely, the cold-water button and his own restless energy. By maintaining limited control over his own dark world, by remaining in constant motion within a space that denies all mobility, and by asserting the only means of decision-

making available to him, Baca makes a statement about tactical resistance within the prison system's economy of suspended rights, turning punishment into possibility.²⁴

The politics of institutionalized spaces and their connection to identity form a central concern in *A Place to Stand*. In his text, Baca charts his path toward prison, dividing the America of his childhood and adolescence into punishing spaces that narrowly pave the way toward the prison. The institutional homes he occupies— orphanages, detention centers, foster homes, urban streets, jails—reinforce his marginal status and help shape his sense of being outcast. Though Baca is forced to live and survive in them, these spaces emphasize the fact that he has no real place to belong in the larger world. They act as antitheses of “home” spaces, providing little sense of security and helping to cultivate criminality by limiting options. As a repository for the undesirable exiles of society, prison is the ultimate anti-home. Baca and other inmates view prison not as a place of penitence or reform, but as an institution that seeks to extinguish subjectivity and agency. *A Place to Stand* indicts the criminal justice system for its unjust treatment of the underclasses and faulty execution of paradigms like freedom, justice, and citizenship. By linking criminality to identity rather than illegal activity, the text also works to disturb the outside/inside, good/evil, us/them binaries through which many of us tend to make sense of the prison system. Baca debunks myths often attached to incarceration by depicting Florence as a place that can be both/either a punishing space marked by violence, terror, and dehumanization, and/or a home-space

²⁴ In *The Practice of Everyday Life*, de Certeau compares subjectively stylized movement within restricted space to the “possibilities” of tactical resistance. He explains that if “a spatial order organizes an ensemble of possibilities (e.g. by a place in which one can move) and interdictions (e.g. by a wall that prevents one from going further), then the walker actualizes some of these possibilities” (98). Baca’s incessant movement within a spatial order that seeks to absolutely deny mobility can be considered an act of tactical resistance or subversive possibility because it signals an alternative choice within a strategic system that restricts all available options.

and site of cultural production. He also creates parallels between prison and the outside world for Americans (like himself) who have no home or place to stand unless they create one for themselves.

This chapter examines how punishing spaces fuel processes of criminalization and victimization that contribute to anti-social deviance in *A Place to Stand*, shaping cultural perceptions that strengthen the link between poverty and crime. I also discuss how the prison space forms the ultimate signifier of spatial oppression, both like and distinct from the America outside. In the narrative, prison hones criminal behavior and creates violent tendencies in inmates, helping them internalize their criminality. As a space where survival skills are required and strengthened, prison requires its own standard of living, which Baca refers to as the “convict code.” While the code helps a convict negotiate his place within the prison’s social hierarchies, it prevents him from getting in touch with his own humanity and steels him against emotions that need to be released before they become destructive. Beyond the convict code, prisoners need to develop heart, or *corazón*, which can only result from refusing to assume the role the prison system has determined for them. I also analyze how Baca turns literacy into a commodity that holds material value within the prison space. As both a tool to communicate with the outside world and a method of delving deeper within himself, the ability to write helps Baca overcome the criminal label. Writing helps Baca develop a kind of “*corazón*” that contrasts against the broken hearts of those he left outside, since he is able to access and deploy a language routinely wielded against him. Through writing and creative expression, Baca gains the tools to identify, value, and give voice to his own unique cultural perspective. He also learns how to undermine prison boundaries through tactical

forms of transgression and border-crossing that can only be achieved through literacy—writing to poets and publishers outside, and eventually getting his work published in literary magazines while he remains in Florence. In his narrative, Baca positions himself as part of a larger socio-historical narrative about America’s abandoned youth—the vagabonds, runaways, and delinquents who exist on the margins and often become community castaways (in institutions, foster or group homes, and prisons). Giving voice to their invisible experiences, Baca writes them (and himself) into a place of dignity and social value.

Institutional Identity: The Making of a Victim and Criminal

From its prologue, *A Place to Stand* preoccupies itself with punishing spaces and the politics of transcending them. The work begins in prison, relating Baca’s memories of seeing his father in the local jail’s drunk-tank for the first time. Recounted as a framing device for Baca’s own experiences, the memory is cloaked in fear, confusion, and a sense of enduring powerlessness. Jail is not only a place Baca visits frequently as he grows up, but it also marks one of several spaces of oppression and neglect that threaten to turn him into his worst fear: “a ward of the state” (4). He makes incarceration the central thread of his autobiography by observing early in his prologue, “Whether I was approaching it or seeking escape from it, jail always defined in some way the measure of my life” (3). From the onset, Baca (the narrator) separates himself from Jimmy (the young protagonist) by gesturing toward his character arc in the text, from deviant to poet (from “him” to “me”), which occurs in/through imprisonment. Through the character of his father, Damacio Baca, a man “swallowed up by the darkness” (2), who “always wore a pained expression and kept his head down, as if he couldn’t shake

what was bothering him” (7), an image of Latino masculinity emerges that Baca fights to correct and counteract via the autobiographical Jimmy. His father is imaged as an abusive and largely absent alcoholic who repeatedly runs from responsibility. However, he is also portrayed with compassion as a man whom society emasculates and disenfranchises—a man who never stood a chance due to his background, illiteracy, and poverty. Jimmy is carefully constructed to personify how social perceptions of Latinos as lazy, worthless, and irresponsible help contribute to their criminalization. Though both Jimmy and his father possess criminal records, the difference between them lies in how much they each internalize the deviant label or allow it to define them. Baca contends, “The person I have become, who sits writing in this chair at this desk, has been forged by enormous struggle and unexpected blessings, despite the dehumanizing environment of a prison intended to destroy me” (5). He credits language and literacy, tools of which his father was bereft, for offering “a way to keep the chaos of prison at bay and prevent it from devouring me” (5). Furthermore, writing poetry and participating in a literary community give him a sense of purpose and “a belief that I belonged” (5).

When Jimmy and his mother stand outside his father’s jail cell in the opening scenes, she points inside and cries, “Stay away from us!”, emphasizing how the space itself entrenches its inhabitants in undesirability. The scene reinforces prevalent spatial conceptions that locate the villains “inside” and the victims “outside.” However, Baca soon starts to disturb such conventional notions of spatiality, particularly by stressing the marginality of social spaces to which Latinos like his family are relegated. Such “home” spaces are depicted as imprisoning and dehumanizing, and as Baca observes early in the text, they often remind him “of the misery of the jail” (3).

Beginning in early childhood, physical spaces assume qualities of safety or threat for Jimmy. His family's both/neither status, augmented by the fact that his father is Indo-Mexican, while his mother is Mexican-American and longs to pass as Anglo, highlights the in-between-ness of the world the family inhabits. Jimmy's mother, Cecilia, is fair-skinned and green-eyed, first encouraged to marry a gringo with a big ranch, and then forced to marry Damacio, a Mexican peasant from a neighboring village who rapes and impregnates her (10). The first "home" Jimmy remembers is a cold-water shack they refer to as La Casita, where the family sleeps in "two tar-papered cardboard rooms" (11).²⁵ The family's poverty, which worsens as Damacio sinks deeper into chronic alcoholism, isolates them and brands them charity cases in their community. Christian neighbors drop by with groceries to preach and proselytize, causing Jimmy and his siblings to feel further alienated (12). The family moves constantly between Santa Fe and Estancia, their desultory wanderings preventing the children from regularly attending school, maintaining friendships, or experiencing any lasting sense of stability. Amidst the borderlands geography of his early childhood, Jimmy learns to divide the larger world into smaller worlds marked by different degrees of belonging. He fears the "white world" of Anglo-Americans who speak flawless English, but does not entirely understand or identify with the "different world" of the Mexican-American borderlands.²⁶ Baca's childhood memories serve to demonstrate his growing feelings of un-belonging, based

²⁵ Interestingly, La Casita provides Jimmy with his first opportunity to transform an isolating space into a comforting one. In order to gain some privacy in the overcrowded shack, he learns to belly into the crawl space underneath the shack to "be alone in [his] own world" (7). As he learns to do again in solitary confinement, he turns the limited and punishing La Casita into a "peaceful refuge" by closing his eyes and "drifting in a reverie" of the stories his Grandfather Baca has told him (7-8). This dissociative technique foreshadows the ways he will transcend the demoralizing space of solitary in prison.

²⁶ Baca's ambivalence mirrors his parents' differing attitudes toward each other's cultural experiences: his mother feels trapped and longs to belong in the white world; his father sees the borderlands as "home" and is suspicious of the dominant culture.

not only on his family's mixed ethnicity and class status, but also on the shame that poverty inflicts on them. The world to which the Bacas are relegated socially marginalizes them, inspiring an increasing sense of alienation and mistrust of the mainstream. Their itinerant instability—always moving, never settling—further entrenches them in the feeling that they are unwanted and don't belong. With no safe space to call home, everything seems scarier and less secure to the Baca children.

“Home” continues to generate negative connotations as Damacio's alcoholism and Cecilia's desire to pass as white eventually lead to the family's deterioration. Abandoned by both parents and left indefinitely at the home of their paternal grandparents, the children's lack of place in the larger world is reinforced. Jimmy eagerly awaits his parents' return, innocently certain that they will come to rescue him and his siblings. Instead, however, their beloved Grandfather Baca dies, dissolving the last remaining strand of stability the children have in their lives. Their grandfather's death causes the Baca siblings to be further dispersed, and Jimmy and older brother Mieyo end up at St. Anthony's Boys' Home in Albuquerque. At this point in the text, “home” assumes its first institutional meaning for Jimmy. St. Anthony's becomes an anti-home not unlike the prison space of his young adulthood: “We were not coddled or given any special treatment at the orphanage, nor did anyone tell us anything about our parents. In the snap of a finger I found myself in a different world, among hundreds of strangers, with each minute planned out for me” (18). He spends every Sunday—visiting day—waiting for his mother by the front gate, though she never appears. He suffers brutal beatings at the hands of the nuns, later recounting one incident when “Sister Anna Louise is over me, screaming that she told me not to leave the dining room. She slaps me

until my cheeks go numb, saliva forming at her thin lips, her eyes narrowed with rage. But even after the beating, when she drags me back to the dining room and leaves, I cut out again” (173).

At first, Jimmy seeks comfort and connection with Mieyo, who cradles him as he weeps in his bunk at night and lets him cling on “as if we were one person” (18). Attempts at placing the brothers in a foster home fail and when prospective parents visit St. Anthony’s, Jimmy and Mieyo “are never chosen. Our hair, our color, our speech—everything is wrong about us” (174). Soon, the brothers fall victim to the orphanage’s rigid scheduling system (based on age), which prevents them from spending time together or even seeing each other regularly (19). St. Anthony’s, Jimmy’s first anti-home in the narrative, solidifies his perception that larger society is divided into “worlds” hierarchized according to varying degrees of social acceptability and belonging.

By the age of seven, Jimmy already aligns notions of identity and “home” with institutionalization. As the nuns at St. Anthony’s become his guardians, he loses a significant part of his citizenship. Moreover, the adults and authority figures in his early childhood serve to merely police or neglect, rather than support or nurture him: “I felt lost and confused around grown-ups. They never told the truth. They were always hiding something that would eventually hurt me” (19). Though he runs away from St. Anthony’s at least “a dozen times,” his aunts or uncles consistently return him to the orphanage (20). As a young child, Jimmy perceives that he is unwanted even by his own family. When his Aunt Charlotte must sign papers relinquishing custody, he observes, “I knew she didn’t know what the words *relinquishing custody* meant, but I felt her relief at getting rid of me when she hurriedly put pen to paper and signed” (20). The lack of

connection that stems from rootlessness and being unwanted by his family deepen Jimmy's isolation until he finds himself "happiest when I was by myself playing in the dirt under an elm tree" (19). Homeless and left with no family structure, parental guidance, or place to belong, Jimmy begins to harden into the kind of marginalized youth shaped by the "youth control complex" (Rios 40).²⁷

Eventually, his repeated escapes from St. Anthony's land Jimmy in a detention center for boys, colloquially known as D-Home, where juvenile inmates are detained for "murder, grand theft auto, or drug possession" and are usually "headed for Springer, a prison for teenagers" (23). D-Home is imaged as an alternative space for young members of society not wanted in greater America. Jimmy realizes, "In the end, as always, a cell is the only place they have for kids without families (174). At D-Home, as in adult prison, social undesirability becomes solidified. As D-Home's director reminds Jimmy upon intake, "...you're not here because you did something wrong. It's only because you don't have a home" (20). Boys like Jimmy are relegated to D-Home because not having a home is branded deviant or outside social norms. And as Jimmy observes in his first days at the detention center, "The bars weren't really there to keep us in so much as to remind us that we weren't really wanted anywhere else" (20).

At D-Home, Jimmy stumbles upon his first community outside of his family of origin. His cellmates are like him—having no place to belong in the larger world has already begun to harden them emotionally, causing them to fear vulnerability. Even

²⁷ Victor Rios defines the "youth control complex" as a "system in which schools, police, probation officers, families, community centers, the media, businesses, and other institutions systematically treat young people's everyday behaviors as criminal activity" (xiv). A social complement to the prison-industrial complex, the youth control complex helps fuel processes of hypercriminalization via a "ubiquitous system of criminalization molded by the synchronized, systematic punishment meted out by socializing and social control institutions" (40). The youth control complex forms a social extension of Foucault's Panopticon.

while eager to bond with them, Jimmy characterizes these boys as socially hopeless and contrasts them against earlier childhood friends:

Estancia kids...had a kindheartedness that invited spontaneous participation in play or idle talk. Even the kids at the orphanage generously included you in games and asked you to play; they hadn't lost hope. These boys worried about revealing any information that others might take as a weakness or use against them. Suspicion helped them to survive, as did denying their feelings, especially fear. (21)

The boys routinely engage in acts of aggression that highlight their emotional numbness. On his second day at D-Home, Jimmy recounts, "Hardly anyone blinked...when a kid in the dining room leaped across one of the long stainless-steel tables with a fork and stabbed another kid in the neck" (21). This grisly act of violence is not so shocking as the victim's lack of perceptible reaction, for even as blood runs through his fingers and down his body, "his eyes announced that it didn't hurt, it was nothing, he had no feelings" (21). In this institutional setting, violence grows normalized, compensating for the boys' internal detachment. Jimmy fears, "If I stayed here long enough, I too would be trained to feel nothing" (21). As in adult prison, violence is often encased in performativity, requiring an inmate to embody and exploit a predefined form of masculinity. He learns through conversations with his cellmates that, in order to survive, an inmate at D-Home must "act tough," so the element of performing masculinity through physical aggression becomes critical to surviving and gaining respect in this environment.²⁸ Jimmy feels forced to "assume an attitude of fearlessness, walk the walk," even though inside he feels insecure and vulnerable (22). He notes that the

²⁸ Foreshadowing advice Jimmy will later receive as an adult in maximum-security state prison, a D-Home detainee nicknamed Low-Blow captures the element of masculine performativity necessary for institutional survival when he warns, "Never talk to guards. If anybody looks at you wrong, tries to touch you, mess him up" (22). According to Low-Blow, preventative violence of this sort helps an inmate maintain his veneer of impenetrability and toughness, enabling him to gain the respect of his peers.

inmates at D-Home remind him of Mieyo, who shortly after their parents' abandonment had "started on a process of change" that involved stealing food, cheating in school and at play, and beating on Jimmy. Later, criminal activity and violence become Mieyo's only available forms of resistance: "Determined not to be a victim, he'd lie, deceive and steal" (21). For Mieyo, as for the forgotten boys at D-Home, surviving the youth control complex requires developing a hardened brand of masculinity that estranges them from their own emotions: "After being stripped of everything, all these kids had left was pride – a pride that was distorted, maimed, twisted, and turned against them, a defiant pride that did not allow them to admit that they were human beings and had been hurt" (21). This pride, the hallmark of the boys' institutional identity,²⁹ soon hardens into anti-social aggression, manifested in retaliatory violence. Already the victims of a system of social control, these marginalized boys start to become enmeshed in punishment.

In a 2011 sociological study of African-American and Latino youth gangs in Oakland, California, entitled *Punished: Policing the Lives of Black and Latino Boys*, Victor M. Rios writes extensively on how hypercriminalization and punitive social control form crucial underpinnings of the youth control complex. Rios's research aligns well with Baca's depiction of his gang-like community at D-Home and youth spent in the system, illuminating the ways he is already embroiled in a process of punishment though he has not yet been incarcerated. Rios writes of the boys in his study,

[For them,] criminalization occurred beyond the law; it crossed social contexts and followed young people across an array of social institutions, including school, the neighborhood, the community center, the media, and the family....Punishment...[is] the process by which [these] individuals [came] to

²⁹ Kimberly Drake writes of institutional identity as a breach of subjectivity, by which an institutional label overshadows a person's agency and understanding of himself (132). Drake discusses the term's relevance to incarceration, but it remains applicable to boys like Baca, who have long-term experiences in punitive social control institutions before ever being convicted of any crimes.

feel stigmatized, outcast, shamed, defeated, or hopeless as a result of negative interactions and sanctions imposed by individuals who represent institutions of social control. (xiv-xv)

Like the young people Rios refers to here, Baca, Mieyo, and the D-Home boys have been absorbed into a system that treats their everyday behavior as deviant or criminal. The social contexts they navigate already fuel hypercriminalization with “the micropower of repeated negative judgments and interactions” (Rios xiv). Furthermore, any transgression or disrespect of authority on their part, no matter how minimal, merely contributes to this process.

The rare moments in *A Place to Stand* when Jimmy must learn to negotiate identity outside his institutionalized world underscore his sense of marginalization. To Jimmy, public school feels far more alienating than places like St. Anthony’s or D-Home, which he has learned to navigate. When Jimmy is sent to Harrison Junior High at thirteen, the experience becomes his first (and last) at a traditional public school. His brief time there highlights how Jimmy has already been transformed into a hardened adult whose institutional identity exiles him from mainstream adolescence. At Harrison, he finds himself lost and hopelessly out of place, intimidated by his academically advanced classmates and daunted by even rudimentary social interaction. After years spent institutionalized at an orphanage and detention center, Jimmy finds the relative freedom confusing and frightening: “I was out of place here. The students were not from my world and I was not part of theirs” (27). Feelings of inferiority prompt him to hide his illiteracy, submit no schoolwork, and distance himself from his classmates. When the other students laugh at his shyness, his instinct is to retaliate with violence, a commonplace tactic at D-Home that further isolates him at school (24).

The faculty's attempts to bolster Jimmy's self-esteem and encourage him to participate in school activities merely accentuate his difference and lack of belonging. When the affable and paternal Coach Tracy invites him to join the football team, Jimmy skeptically acquiesces. However, "once on the field, my discomfiture evaporated as I tackled and crushed my teammates into the grass" (25). For the first time in the narrative, he receives praise from an authority figure, as Coach Tracy bellows to the rest of the team, "That's how you linemen should be hitting!...Jimmy, show them how it's done" (25). Although Jimmy is an excellent football player, it remains important to note that in his moments of glory in the field or practice, he is mostly celebrated for his aggression and ability to perform violently. Significantly, one of the few times that Jimmy feels wanted, needed, or accepted into a mainstream space in his childhood involves a celebration of violence, indicating the kind of social role he is not only allowed but encouraged to play.

Jimmy's shell, the protective exterior he has built out of pride, anger, and aggression, merely hardens as a result of his brief schooling at Harrison. He laments that temporarily occupying the mainstream world only reinforced his institutional identity: "I was ashamed to admit that I was a ward of the state, a piece of property with official papers attached. At any time, I could be swept up by the state, put in handcuffs, and given over to a stranger" (27). Abandoned by his family and disenfranchised by the state, he internalizes his marginalization to the point that he feels undeserving of a place to belong or even a stable foster family. He remarks of a potential foster family, "These were the people I'd assumed didn't care about us street kids. They were a part of the white world that had helped to destroy my family, made my father suffer, made my grandpa and

grandma work in their fields from dawn to dusk. If I lived with them, wouldn't I be betraying everything I had been taught to believe in?" (28). Unable to reconcile his institutional identity with how he is expected to perform at school, Jimmy drops out for good in the eighth grade.

Jimmy's rejection of what he calls the "white world" is far from surprising when considering his experiences up to this point. In *Punished*, Rios discusses the process by which the young men he interviewed, who were hypercriminalized in their local community, began to mistrust authority figures and institutional spaces: "For the boys, the school represented just another space where they were criminalized for their style and culture. The school, in the eyes of the boys, was indistinguishable from the police officer stationed at McDonald's, the adults in the community who called the police on them, or the community-center staff who ousted them" (82). By the time he abandons his schooling, Jimmy already *feels* like a criminal, although he has not been imprisoned or convicted yet. Turning his back on Harrison, Coach Tracy, and his team, Jimmy expresses a desire "to apologize" or talk things out, but gives up because "I didn't know how to explain myself" (30). He writes, "I wasn't strong enough to admit that I felt worthless and was nothing but a troublemaker" (30). Feeling like criminality is already an immanently embedded part of his character resulting from long-term institutionalization, Jimmy personifies Demico Boothe's assertion that "most crime in itself is not a cause, it is an effect" when he subsequently embarks on a life of law-breaking (77).³⁰

³⁰ In his attempt to analyze and answer the question that titles his 2007 monograph, *Why Are So Many Black Men in Prison?*, Boothe discusses how misperceptions about the relationship between crime rates and incarceration contribute to racialized hypercriminalization. He argues that most crimes result from "preventable societal causes" (77).

The Process of Criminalization

After his parents' abandonment, Jimmy is shuffled among various segregated spaces that marginalize him, brand him "other than" mainstream, and indoctrinate him into what he calls "the process of criminalization" (32). These spaces—which affect his self-perception, the way others interact with him, and consequently his opportunities for social advancement—contribute significantly to his criminalization, script his body in certain ways, and narrow the trajectory of his future to prison-or-death odds. In his narrative, Baca positions his place in the larger America as an indictment of the American dream:

I'd begun to feel early on that the state and society at large considered me a stain on their illusion of a perfect America. In the American dream there weren't supposed to be children going hungry or sleeping under bridges. In me, the state – and society by extension – had yet another mouth to feed, another body to clothe. I felt like a nuisance; I suspected that if basic human decency didn't warrant it, society would gladly dismiss me. (29)

Transitioning into the vagabond rootlessness that will comprise his young adulthood, institutions like St. Anthony's and D-Home come to be replaced by more punishing anti-homes like the streets and jail. Baca writes, "It didn't take me long to graduate to the kind of jails where the bars were meant to keep me in" (31). After he permanently runs away from D-Home with Mieyo's help, jails become recurring fixtures in his life, the "homes" he grows accustomed to and increasingly comfortable in. Unlike the mainstream world of school and football practice, Jimmy instinctually knows how to navigate carceral spaces.

Living with Mieyo again causes Jimmy to see more similarities between his brother and "the homeboys in the detention center" (32). Swaggering postures and overt aggression obscure an internal vulnerability the youth control complex has discouraged

them from expressing. As Jimmy notes, frustrated anger funneled into destructive behavior was “all [Mieyo or the D-Home boys] allowed themselves to express” (32). Moreover, Mieyo demonstrates significant trauma when he confidentially relates that he has been raped while living apart from his brother, an admission that painfully affects Jimmy as well. In the text, rape forms a physical manifestation of the kind of violation both boys have suffered before. Rape is also a disempowering form of humiliation that wounds their burgeoning masculinity. The fact that rape is so shameful for the brothers to even discuss worsens the humiliation of having been victimized this way. Learning of Mieyo’s rape, Jimmy internalizes the shame and grief of the violation, channeling it into aggression and criminal activity. He says he “was willing to do anything to protect [Mieyo],” and so began “to lash out at every opportunity” (33).

After running away from D-Home, the Baca brothers join the ranks of the American borderlands’ lost children, a subculture of homeless youth that comprise part of what Michelle Alexander calls the “undercaste” that helps propel mass incarceration as an industry. Jimmy ruminates, “I don’t know when the process of criminalization began,” but guesses it was bolstered by “the narrowing of life’s possibilities” that involved “living in a society that would never accept me,” cohabiting with “boys who were already well on their way to becoming criminals,” and learning that “I was more like them than the boys outside the cells” (32). He describes his adolescence on the streets as a prolonged period of “fighting, drinking, and getting high, driving around...”, admitting, “My brother and I were alone in the world....[W]e were accountable to no one....I could continue to wander with no direction, going along on a day-to-day basis with any suggestion or impulse a friend might come up with” (35). Anger, shame, and

defiance over not having families or stable homes motivate the boys to create a sort of anti-family established in anti-home spaces. Their gang lives an aimless existence on the margins of society—hanging out outside burger joints, fighting, scoring drugs, vandalizing cheaply rented apartments, and lashing out in general. Living outside society and engaging in destructive (and criminal) behavior become their only means of resistance against the mainstream “white world.” Jimmy’s penchant for street fights now is “fueled by my rage at the world [and Mieyo’s rapists]...I fought for my brother...[who] was hurting in a way that only someone who gets raped can hurt” (33). In return, Mieyo continues the family’s cycle of violence by beating up on Jimmy when the two are alone. Soon, both brothers start to act out in progressively destructive ways; hostility, anger, and violence become “all they [allow] themselves to express” (32). Rather than seek mainstream acceptance, which remains unfamiliar to them, they “refined what they did know to its own kind of perfection” (32).

The Baca brothers and their improvised street family exemplify the material and symbolic criminalization that Rios calls intrinsic to the youth control complex.³¹ Lacking important anchors like extended family, school, or work, the boys (particularly the younger Jimmy) start to see criminality as their prescribed social role. Acts of “racial microaggression,”³² like being followed by police and regularly arrested as suspects in open cases, only deepen their sense of social mistrust and help them identify with the criminal label. As Rios writes of the same acts of racial microaggression, which were

³¹ Rios offers examples of material and symbolic criminalization: “Material criminalization includes police harassment, exclusion from businesses and public recreation spaces, and the enforcement of zero-tolerance policies that lead to detention rooms, school suspensions, and incarceration. Symbolic criminalization includes the surveillance, profiling, stigma, and degrading interactions that young people regularly endure” (40).

³² Chester Pierce coined the term “microaggressions” to describe the myriad ways racialized individuals are impacted by quotidian, cumulatively demoralizing acts of racism (265).

perpetuated on the Oakland boys he studied, “These are microaggressions because at any given moment, the police...can justify their behavior by saying something like, ‘That was not racist; I was following the law.’ If a young person complains and calls this racism, authorities often retort by claiming the youth ‘is playing the race card’” (41). The racial microaggressions he experiences help Jimmy begin to normalize circulating in and out of jail:

The police always accused me and my friends of crimes we didn’t commit. With no money for a lawyer, and no family to challenge the injustice, we were easy targets for the police to hang something on. It gave them the illusion they were fighting crime and winning. Besides, three meals a day and a warm cot with a roof over my head was a vacation. It was often better in jail than on the streets; I didn’t have to worry for a while about surviving. (37)

As in the youths Rios describes, consistent hypercriminalization and racial microaggressions cause the Baca brothers and their friends “to become adversarial toward the system, to lose faith in it, to resist against it, [rather than] build resilience skills to cope” (Rios 41). Their perpetual unbelonging reinforces their identification as outsiders and emboldens their resentment against anyone they consider mainstream. In the midst of rootless wanderings and aimless deviance, Jimmy longs for a solid middle-class life but feels perpetually estranged from one.

By his eighteenth birthday, Jimmy reflects, “All I knew was to keep moving, because then I didn’t have to think about how messed up my life was” (43). As he begins his adult life, Jimmy’s feelings of anger, abandonment, and unbelonging manifest themselves in a series of petty crimes that lengthen his criminal record and result in increasingly longer jail sentences. His time in New Mexico and California jails further indoctrinates Jimmy in the process of criminalization by normalizing criminal behavior. Brief stints on the outside as a plumber and landscaper are quickly jettisoned in favor of a

“get in and get out as fast as possible” plan to delve into drug dealing through a connection forged in jail (71). According to the narrative, this plan involves earning enough money through marijuana distribution to start a licensed landscaping business and get established in middle-class life. Jimmy gets involved with a new cohort, again viewing criminality as a method of belonging, and begins trafficking marijuana in early 1970’s San Diego, moving “eight hundred to a thousand pounds a month” (77). Ironically, his longest and last carceral term results not from these activities but from being in the wrong place at the wrong time. Visiting friends also involved in the drug trade, Jimmy gets caught in an FBI raid and shootout, in which an agent is severely wounded. He flees the scene and becomes a fugitive, calling on a friend who informs him there is a felony warrant out for him. Jimmy realizes, “Now everybody could point and say, I knew it. I told you. He’s no good. He’s nothing but a criminal. It hurt to admit they were right....The sad fact was that there was nothing to keep me in society—no family, no friends, nothing at all. I was utterly alone” (88). His sense of social unbelonging, coupled with the punishing social spaces he has occupied until this point in the text make Jimmy’s prison sentence seem inevitable. To narrator Baca, incarceration really resulted not from criminal activity, but from “having no place to stand comfortably in my own skin” (62).

A critical turning point in *A Place to Stand* occurs after a Yuma, Arizona judge sentences Jimmy to five-to-ten years in maximum-security state prison. Jimmy has been appointed a public defender, who doesn’t notice his illiteracy or incomprehension of the charges against him and advises, “The court’ll be lenient if you waive your right to trial and plead guilty, but if you persist in your innocence, the DA’ll tack on more time” (92).

When the attorney hands Jimmy a list of charges against him, “I stared at the page as if I knew what I was reading” (91). Though he considers himself innocent of the charges against him, he admits his ignorance led him to join the ranks of many (usually of racial and ethnic minorities) who slip through the cracks of the criminal justice system and become its victims by signing away their legal rights: “I was ignorant of court procedure and intimidated by legal jargon. The truth was, I was more panicked by having rights than losing them. Dreading what [my attorney] threatened they might do to me, I felt there was no way out” (92). After pleading guilty and hearing his prison sentence pronounced by the judge, Baca remembers looking down at the armrests on his courthouse chair, studying the layers of cracked paint, wondering, “How many hands had gripped them? ...What lives were attached to those hands, what dreams were shattered, what sorrows were they trying to squeeze out of their souls?” (102).³³ Baca also considers how his legal conviction sanctioned and corroborated a criminal identity that was projected onto him long before this moment:

It was no surprise that the judge had given me the harshest sentence allowed by law. The nuns had always said I was a bad boy, and here was the judge making the same condemnation. I was sure I was convicted mostly because of who I was, expunged from a society that didn't want people like me in it. (102)

In identifying with “people like me,” Baca here begins to position himself as a representative voice for the first time, one of many who personify a troubling cultural condition. Although Jimmy has never considered himself part of a community before, here he sees his place in a larger narrative and understands how he forms part of a stigmatized group, a criminal underclass whose humanity is obscured by the criminal or

³³ He wouldn't have had to look far to see who else gripped the wooden armrests of his seat. In 1972, the year of Baca's arrest and sentencing in Arizona, the state recorded over 3,000 drug-related convictions like his (Beckett and Sasson 146).

prison label. He understands that the process of legally sanctioned criminalization “had a momentum all its own. For it to work, there could be no sentiment or discretion. To [the attorneys and judge], I was a criminal without a soul, heart, or feelings” (101). Though the conviction is not his first, this sentence will serve as his longest and most significant period of incarceration, a time that will teach him to rethink and redefine punishment, reform, and resistance.

Abjection and the “Convict Code”

A Place to Stand portrays prison as exile for society’s disenfranchised, geographically estranged from the outside world. According to Baca, the prison system intends to dehumanize the convict by enforcing brutal punishment and erasing subjectivity. Prison solidifies criminality via isolation and daily violence. It also overwrites freedom with institutionalization and further narrows the inmate’s identity to a handful of easily catalogued markers that fit neatly into his “jacket”—his number replaces his name, his cell replaces his home, and he is socially segregated according to race or ethnicity. The space scripts the prisoner as “other” than a citizen, and “like” other criminals, legally dispossessing him of rights, possessions, and agency. The “convict code” tells him that violence and intimidation reign here, and he must now operate like a criminal in order to survive. As Auli Ek suggests, the prison system needs the criminalized in order to operate as a form of punitive social control. Ek notes that the penal system’s narrative of punishment and reform “constructs the prisoner as the personification of criminality and, thus, as the racial, sexual, and criminal other of America” (109). To use Caleb Smith’s terminology, the prison aims to achieve a “virtual

death” by not only circumscribing the prisoner’s citizenship, but also eroding his humanity and subjectivity.

Baca’s description of the long drive from the Yuma County Jail to the Florence State Prison places the prison far from the reaches of humanity, surrounded by miles of open space (104). He notices how the openness of the land surrounding the prison contrasts against the tight closeness of the prison cell he will soon inhabit. During the drive to Florence, Jimmy experiences a vivid memory that momentarily realigns him with the personal freedom his prison intake seeks to destroy: “Looking out the window, at the open space all around me, I saw myself as a boy on the prairie, my legs pumping fast and sweat beading my forehead. More than anything else, I loved open space. I had always run to the fields” (104). The memory is starkly juxtaposed to confinement: “The reality was that for a very long time I would not have open space to run to anymore” (105). Baca’s imagery coincides with critic Scott Bunyan’s remarks about prisons’ deliberately spaced seclusion, meant to geographically alienate inmates from the outside world and make surveillance an integral part of the architecture.³⁴ As Bunyan notes in his essay, “The Space of the Prison: The Last Bastion of Morality?” (2005), prisons are designed and built so as to appear utterly detached from the public. Its geographical zoning, architecture, and self-contained air of seclusion bolster the prison’s socio-political role as a dispenser of punishment (177). Moreover, as Michel Feith clarifies in an essay about

³⁴ Bunyan observes, “The prison faces inward, turning its back on the outside world in order to maintain a barrier to communication or connection between inmate, and those outside....The prisoners are confronted at every turn with spatiality closed off by steel bars or razor wire. They are also absolutely laid open to the scrutiny of the prison guards. The scrutiny poses a legal threat, as it is the barrels of rifles, as well as the eyes of the prison guards, that are trained on the prisoners” (179). Foucault substantiates these views, linking the prison system to the loss of private space: “The prison, the place where the penalty is carried out, is also the place of observation of punished individuals. This takes two forms: surveillance, of course, but also knowledge of each inmate, of his behavior, his deeper states of mind...the prisons must be conceived as places for the formation of clinical knowledge about the convicts...” (249).

John Edgar Wideman's narrative of familial imprisonment, *Brothers and Keepers*, prison spatiality replicates the moral binary that mass incarceration depends on: "The penal system as we know it is based on a spatial dichotomy, which in turn expresses a moral one. Openness on the outside is opposed to the enclosed inside, as good is opposed to evil" (665). Baca's reflections on prison spatiality and the positioning of convicts within it also corroborate Angela Davis's arguments that prisons are designed to be "[f]ar-flung repositories for malefactors, [based on] the illusion of inaccessibility" ("A World..." xvi).

When the gates open on Jimmy's "new world," he begins to view prison as the ultimate signifier of institutional identity and criminalization. Incarceration cements undesirability and institutional rehabilitation means destroying one's humanity and unique selfhood. Jimmy views Florence as an alternative America inhabited mostly by the social and economic undercaste: "It was a world within a world, the difference being that you lived in a cage with a thousand other caged men" (117). Taken to his cell block, he has an immediate sense of death, as though stepping into the "living tomb" Smith describes: "I'd never heard so much noise compressed into one space....The dark granite was smoked with the ingrained body sweat of decades of caged prisoners. But it was more than that—it was as if their despair and rage had taken on a palpable presence of its own, haunting the shadows in the hollow corners of the block" (118). Jimmy's entry into life at Florence is aided by a fellow inmate on his cell block, Macaron, who becomes his mentor and surrogate brother. Macaron gives Jimmy advice on surviving prison. The key, he says, is to repress emotional connections to the past, suppress hopes for the future, and live in the present according to survival instincts and the "convict code." The

code Macaron delineates requires a performance of masculinity as overtly tough and especially violent, a method of preventing physical and sexual assault by other inmates. Macaron advises Jimmy to script his body as strong and impervious to avoid rape. Jimmy understands the basic tenets of this kind of performativity, remembers them from the days with the D-Home boys and his street family, and although he now assumes them in order to gain respect on his cell block, he later rejects the “convict code” as an erasure of selfhood, a complement to institutional identity.³⁵

Macaron inadvertently reveals that prison entails a death of subjectivity when he tells Jimmy, “Forget everything except survival....There is no future, no past, only the moment; you will do what you have to do. You didn’t exist before coming here; your life before here never happened” (131). As Kimberly Drake notes, “The experience of ‘death’ is part of the central psychological effect of imprisonment, the disintegration of the boundaries between the self and the environment, allowing the abjection of the inmate” (136). Like many inmates, Macaron seems to understand that abjection and the eradication of agency are the central objectives of incarceration.³⁶ Life by the “convict code” requires that Jimmy prove himself through physical violence whenever he feels threatened. This tactic helps him maintain an air of intimidation, but also falls in line with the prison system’s process of “abjection”—moving Jimmy farther away from his subjectivity and agency (Drake 131). When an inmate threatens to rape him, Jimmy

³⁵ Macaron says, in order to survive prison, you must suppress your longing for freedom, but it will be that very longing that will compel Jimmy to create his own kind of freedom as his time at Florence progresses: “[Macaron] advised me not to give the future or past much thought. ‘It’ll drive you crazy,’ he said. ‘Keep your mind on the present, forget about the streets and freedom, and things will work out.’ Yet when we crossed and re-crossed the yard, I sometimes experienced powerful yearnings for freedom; regret at allowing life to pass me by pressed so hard against my heart that I felt it might never end” (116).

³⁶ Drake notes this is common: “...inmates understand abjection, the process of identification with or submersion in the zone of non-agency, as the implicit goal of the prison program” (131).

must “take him down,” in order to avoid being perceived as weak (119). Though Jimmy is scared the assault might get time added to his sentence or cause him to be put in solitary confinement, Macaron warns,

“...In the joint you live by the convict code, no gray areas; fight or get punked, step out or be turned out, cash in the wolf tickets or be eaten—it’s real. Don’t show fear, ‘cause you’ll give your enemy the advantage. Don’t intimidate or mad-dog him—take him out for disrespecting you. Respect is everything. It’s earned. You do what you gotta do.” (119)

As Jimmy prepares to attack his predator with a shiv supplied by Macaron, he deliberates about how the offense might go on his permanent record, realizing that prison hones violence and that his record can never capture the complexity of prison life: “I thought how my jacket, neatly filed away in a cabinet, would never have the true information about me—that I wanted to do right but couldn’t” (121). His thinking here continues to reflect the idea that criminality is not entirely self-governed, that “others had a lot to do with whether you did good or bad” (121). His predicament also highlights the impossibility of rehabilitation through incarceration, which breeds further violence through fear. Jimmy rationalizes his assault on the inmate, convincing himself of its validity, as well as that of the convict code, even during the attack: “A voice inside my head kept yelling the whole time I was hitting him that I was doing this...for my brother, who’d been raped by those two white guys” (123).

As George Jackson remarks in *Soledad Brother* (1970), a collection of his letters from prison, violence is not a “side effect” of carceral control but rather the very channel by which that control is maintained (27).³⁷ Jimmy’s assault on the inmate enables the prison administration to sequester him in solitary confinement for a month and add six

³⁷ Jackson asks, “...how else could a small group of armed men be expected to hold and rule another much larger group except through *fear*?” (27). It is fear—of being beaten, raped, killed, or physically overpowered—that drives the “convict code” Macaron regularly invokes.

months to his sentence. Right after his brutal attack on the inmate, as the door of his solitary confinement cell closes on him, he thinks, “I had proven myself, I thought, and I was proud, but I also felt bad because instead of changing for the better, I was becoming more violent” (124). When another prison gang threatens him soon thereafter, Jimmy defends himself with a butcher knife and badly wounds another inmate. He wonders, “Who was I becoming? I felt lost, a stranger even to myself” (132). Sentenced to another thirty days in solitary for the assault, he begins to see the limitations of the “convict code.” These periods in solitary change Jimmy, helping him meld into Baca the narrator. He realizes that living by the “convict code” in fact contributes to the prison’s so-called rehabilitative project, which implicates him in the eradication of his own agency.

In solitary, Jimmy for the first time comes to terms with what Stanley Cohen and Laurie Taylor would term his “ontological insecurity,” a state common in the incarcerated, in which “one doubts the integrity of self” and fears “turning or being turned from a live person into a dead thing, into a stone, into a robot...an *it* without subjectivity” (109). Macaron echoes this state of ontological insecurity when he shares with Jimmy,

“I was like you—hoping for a better life, working to do right—but that time passed. I remember when it happened....Suddenly I lost hope, and I could never get it back again. My soul broke. It died. That day, I became a criminal. That day I had no more hope. I knew when the punishment was enough, and then it kept going on and on, and from that point it made no sense...

... “It happens to all of us who stay here past a certain time. You do your time; then you do more and more, and the hurt turns to bitterness, freedom turns to vengeance, and you look forward to getting out, not to resume your life but to hurt people the way they hurt you, for punishment that made no sense, for the hurting and hurting, for the day when you couldn’t take it anymore but you had to and lost your humanity, lost your reason for wanting to be a human being.” (131)

Macaron here unwittingly inspires Jimmy's rejection of the "convict code" by encouraging him to have heart³⁸ (*corazón*), the only thing that will help him resist "abjection":

"Remember it's not the size of your muscles or your mouth—here, the heart is all that matters. The mind can't accept being in a six-by-nine cell for years, but the heart understands it has to be done. The mind says, There's no way I can live in prison for years, but the heart says, Deal with it and shut the fuck up. The mind senses your growing brutality, but the heart ignores it. Forget freedom, the heart commands....All you got here is heart—*corazón*. Only *Corazón*. And if you don't have it, every day will be a hell you've never imagined." (131)

Jimmy remembers these words during his time in solitary confinement, turning inwardly, rather than to the convict code, to cultivate the kind of *corazón* that will help him resist Florence's dehumanization.

Cultivating *Corazón*

Solitary confinement ends Jimmy's initiation period and steers him in a more empowering direction. From his first visits to solitary, he begins to fight back against the brutalization of enforced isolation and punishment. The purpose of prison punishment is to deaden the brain, senses, and drive of the inmate, but Baca transforms it into a channel through which to access spiritual memories, reconnect with his senses, and reclaim his subjectivity. From his first stint in solitary, he teaches himself how to make personal, proactive use of the limited space he has been confined to by seizing control over the limited resources available to him—"Here in my own dark world, I had control only over the cold button on the sink, and I pushed it a hundred times a day..." (125). As Simon Rolston suggests in "Conversion and the Story of the American Prison" (2011), Baca's usurpation of the prison space and its resources reflect a tradition of using the master's

³⁸ "Having heart" is a prevalent theme in Latino prison writings. For instance, in both *Down These Mean Streets* (1967) and *Seven Long Times* (1974), Piri Thomas calls "having heart" the necessary ingredient in surviving prison. Thomas famously writes, "If you ain't got heart, you ain't got nada" (*Down These* 47).

tools for new purposes. He engages in numerous acts of non-violent resistance that help him sublimate aggression and get in touch with who he was before he acquired an institutional identity. These acts include memory and visualization, refusing to perform compulsory work, improving his literacy, honing his skills as a poet, and participating in a literary community outside of prison. He learns to thrive intellectually and spiritually, not just through performative violence. Moreover, his self-guided acquisition of literacy grants him a new avenue by which to express himself. Baca portrays literacy as a tool that also helps him tactically transgress prison boundaries and destabilize the binaries we come to associate with prison space. Corresponding with pen pals outside and joining literary circles from prison enable Baca to maintain a foothold outside even while he remains inside. At the same time that he resists the system in these (limited) ways, Baca must also uphold the “convict code” in order to survive. However, his intellectual growth helps him navigate Florence in new, nonviolent ways.

Macaron’s advice about having heart rings in Baca’s ears as the doors close on his second stint in solitary. During this month in isolation, Baca begins performing the memory-work that empowers him to mentally and spiritually transcend the prison space, helping him get in touch with a past, purer version of himself. Rather than forget the past, as Macaron and the “convict code” advise, Baca fully immerses himself in it. He relives moments from his childhood and recalls a youthful joy he’d long since buried. He muses, “I’d never gone into my memories so vividly before, I felt more outside my cell than in it” (134). This memory-work, a kind of transcendental meditation coupled with visualization, bolsters Baca’s self-esteem and helps him remember a time when he wasn’t hypercriminalized. In solitary, memory becomes a way for Baca to recover selfhood

despite prison's "abjectification". He visualizes events and experiences since left unremembered, and realizes that institutionalization (both in and outside of prison) had overshadowed much of his own identity, a phenomenon Drake writes about with respect to incarceration: "...incarceration facilitates the displacement of aspects of identity even to the point of erasing memories of itself" (128).

Baca remembers and mentally revisits the only safe "home" space he has ever known, that of his Grandma and Grandpa Baca's house in Estancia, where he lived as a small child and after his parents' abandonment. He remembers helping his grandfather prepare for work early in the mornings, thinking, "When I'm with [Grandpa] like this, life is beautiful. Nothing in the world can harm me" (137). Interestingly, Baca clung to negative recollections and hostility toward his parents while outside, but the happy, peaceful memories he conjures while in solitary remind him of who he really is. He ruminates,

Those days were almost happy enough for me to forget my parents, and in the hole I returned to Estancia time and time again in my mind, living as if I were there, feeling the sun on my skin, watching hawks glide above the village in the sharp blue sky, just as I had as a child. The vivid reality of my reveries made these imaginary excursions so forceful it scared me. It became much more than idly remembering this or that. I'd play a memory like a song, over and over, adding this or subtracting that, changing something in a scene or re-creating a certain episode and enhancing it with additional details...[W]hatever was happening, I felt a wholesome fulfillment that delighted me, even in this dark pit. Memories structured my day and filled my cell. It was as if all the sorrow, fear, and regret I'd carried in my bones suddenly was swept away and my heart lifted itself into a realm of innocence before all sadness and tragedy happened. In my imagination I was safe and joyous again. (139)

The memory-work Baca describes here becomes a self-determined, healing ritual that depends on the imagination as a safe space to counteract the brutality of time in the hole. His imagination becomes "the other world" Baca inhabits to experience the freedom he

has lost through imprisonment (143). Now, Baca the narrator fully merges with his alter-ego Jimmy, embodying a positive self-perception and ownership of himself: “I felt an affirmation of who I was; the person I’d almost buried forever became stronger in me....I went on like this for weeks, reliving the fable of my life” (143). By mentally recreating his safe childhood “home,” Baca turns a punishing space into a comforting, self-affirming one and gets in touch with his own story for the first time. Most importantly, Baca rediscovers the “serene, communal sense of belonging” that has been missing from his life since before he arrived at Florence, when he existed in a state of aimlessness and alienation (151). Suddenly, he feels part of a larger cultural group:

I felt all my people, felt them deep in the hard work they did, in faint and delicate red-weed prairie flowers, in the arguments over right and wrong, in my people’s irascible desire to live, which was mine as well. I felt their will was growing inside me and would ultimately let me be free as the wind. (153)

In other words, meditation and memory-work help Baca recover crucial aspects of his identity that his prison sentence seeks to overwrite.

Foucault writes that prison is “a machine for altering minds”— Baca strives to counteract the effects of that machine through his meditative work in solitary (Foucault 125). Emerging from a month in isolation, Baca feels an interior sense of well-being out of sync with his externally pained appearance: “Skinnier, unshaven, blinking like a madman, I held my pants up with my hands....I was seeing things as if for the first time because something was different inside *me*. I felt better than I had in months, almost lighthearted” (155). Furthermore, Baca notices the juxtaposition between the prison’s intimidating architecture and his internal aplomb: “The main-yard walls and cell blocks and the main guard tower in the center loomed menacingly, in stark contrast to the freedom I was feeling” (155). His internal feeling of freedom compels him to request

permission to begin schooling, so he may learn how to read and write. When his request is denied by the reclassification committee (one member tells him, “You’re here to be punished.”), Baca responds in an uncharacteristically nonviolent way by refusing to comply with standard prison rules: “Over the next week I quit making my bunk and cleaning my cell. As usual, every time the bull came down the tier, he placed a write-up on the bars for breaking institutional rules....[B]y simply refusing to take them off the bars, I was deflating the importance of what they represented” (165). Importantly, Baca also refuses to do any work he is assigned. He is surprised to find that nonviolent resistance helps him provoke a reaction unlike any prompted through physical violence:

To this day, it still amazes me how taking myself out of the system and refusing to work had everybody in an upheaval, from my friends to the guards. The more I did nothing, the more aggravated everyone became. It was the first time I felt I was accomplishing something, even though I couldn’t see why. Regardless of what little my life meant in the larger scheme of things, at least for the moment it was mine and not the warden’s....It didn’t belong to the state, the judge, the guards or the cons either. (166)

The empowerment brought on by resisting the system through nonviolent action inspires Baca to empower himself in other ways as well. Though refusing to work or follow prison rules earns him another one-month sentence in solitary confinement, his continued memory-work in the hole inspires him to see how the trajectory of his life—the one that led him to prison—has been shaped by hypercriminalization and time spent “in the system” one way or another. He starts contextualizing his criminality, and the significance of his nonviolent resistance, within the larger tableau of his life:

I thought how even as a kid I’d had no options except to take the hurt that came my way. As I grew a little older, I learned to strike back. It had been the quickest way to get rid of the pain, a way to show people I was alive. Until now. This time I didn’t lash out, which short-circuited everyone’s expectation of how a con was supposed to act. Despite the guilt of letting a lot of solid convicts down, not doing what everyone expected turned out to be the most powerful thing I ever did. (169)

Baca here reflects on how reliving memories that preceded his institutional identity helps him become the agent of a kind of rebirth amidst the death enacted by prison punishment. If as Drake argues, prison necessitates a disintegration of the boundaries between the self and his environment, then through non-violent resistance, Baca begins to rebuild those boundaries and reclaim the space of his own subjectivity.

Border Crossings and “The Making of a Poet”

After a man named Harry picks his name from a church list of inmates without family and begins writing him letters, the functionally illiterate Baca begins teaching himself to read and write. Several garbled and grammatically indecipherable letters motivate Harry to send Baca a dictionary, which he uses to help him study and learn new words. When his reading starts to improve, Baca notes, “Reading books became my line of defense against the madness” (214). He begins composing sentimental poems to express the vivid imagery of his memory-work. He initially conceives of writing as another form of tactical transgression—like refusing to work, it becomes a way of not fulfilling social expectations of “how a con [is] supposed to act” and what punishment is supposed to look like. But soon, writing poetry and telling his story become sources of autonomy for Baca that complement and breathe new life into his memory-work. He writes, “I can’t describe how words electrified me....I found myself waking up at 4 A.M. to reread a word or copy a definition....[A] particular word would catch my attention and ignite memories. I would try to recall the memory vividly in language, spending hours crossing out and rewriting...” (185).

Baca’s newfound focus on the study and production of literature helps him transform prison space into a site of cultural production and creativity, filling him with a

freedom that contradicts his living conditions. Again when he remembers his earlier life or sits down to write poetry, Baca finds himself in “two different worlds.” He re-establishes the connection to his own humanity Florence has sought to eradicate. He muses that reading and writing provide protection against the dehumanizing effects of imprisonment, offering an alternative space that he can occupy to mentally escape the physical and spiritual confinement of his sentence: “I couldn’t explain it. However, I knew that my imaginary life was reviving my defenses against the numbing effects of isolation time in the hole, which usually numbed a prisoner’s desire to stay human” (149). Writing becomes what Baca refers to as “the receptacle for my sorrow,” safeguarding his emotions so they don’t erupt in violence. Moreover, Baca’s writing helps him fashion a private space, a personal “home,” within the otherwise punishing confinement of his cell: “I was in my own world, swirling in the magic of language and imagination. Days, weeks, and months went by, but I hardly recognized them. Only my writing marked the passage of time” (197).

In *Prison Writings in 20th Century America* (1998), H. Bruce Franklin discusses the importance of intellectual property to those who are denied all forms of material ownership: “Like slaves, prisoners are denied rights and property; the only right they really have is to create property out of their thoughts, words, and writings” (43). By dedicating himself to his writing, Baca also fashions a method of border-crossing and connecting to the outside world that transcends geographical boundaries and social limits. He begins writing to pen pals, seeking advice from other poets, and sending out his work for publication. His ability to bear stories from within the prison space to the outside world proves that the rigidly policed boundaries between “inside” and “outside” are far

from absolute. Examined in relation to his conception of prison space as socially and creatively productive, the freedom that Baca finds in literature while “inside” forms another tactic by which he resists the limits that have been imposed upon him from “outside.”

Baca transforms prison space into a site for establishing self-knowledge, strengthening agency and cultivating “*corazón*.” Furthermore, just as he begins to see how his imprisonment functions within the larger context of his life, he also begins to conceive of his place within a larger community of “pintos,” or Chicano prisoners who have been historically criminalized and incarcerated. He writes, “Language placed my life experiences in a new context, freeing me for the moment to become with air as air, with clouds as clouds, from which new associations arose to engage me in present life in a more purposeful way” (240). A fellow pinto named Chelo reminds Baca that “...once they make you forget the language and history, they’ve killed you anyway” (224). From his conversations with Chelo, Baca notes, “I began to see who I was in a new context, with a deeper sense of responsibility and love for my people” (225). These newfound insights will inform Baca’s work as a “pinto” poet and writer for the next three decades.

Baca’s description of packing up his cell just before he is released illustrates the self-willed growth and change he has experienced while imprisoned, as well as his mature thinking about his life in a larger context:

...[T]he moving box was troublesome—packed boxes had haunted me since childhood. Everywhere I went, I arrived and left with a box; it reminded me that I had no place in this world, that no one wanted me.... Still, I was comforted by the thought that I was bigger than my box. I lived *out* of a box, not in one. I was a witness, not a victim. I was a witness for those who for one reason or another would never have a place of their own, would never have the opportunity to make their lives stable enough because resources weren’t available or because they just could not get it together. My job was to witness and record the “it” of their lives,

to celebrate those who don't have a place in this world to stand and call home...My role as witness is to give voice to the voiceless and hope to the hopeless, of which I am one. (244)

With Baca's release from Florence and his commitment to becoming "a witness, not a victim" of the system, *A Place to Stand* ends on a redeeming note for its subject.

However, the narrative bears witness to the idea that redemption can only be achieved in opposition to prison punishment, not because of it. Baca makes the larger America complicit in the making of many so-called criminals like himself. As in its opening scenes, the memoir's conclusion depicts an America divided by raced and classed double standards. Inmates are released into the second-class citizenship many held before being sentenced. Most go unacknowledged and unaided—worse, socially condemned—by their immediate community. Therefore, preserving a sense of humanity and selfhood remains nearly as vital as it was inside the prison system.

A Place to Stand revises the conventional prison narrative, as well as ideas about how incarceration can reform criminals, by demonstrating that true rehabilitation is an active struggle *against* the penal system's strategies of reform. At Florence, Baca learns to live by the convict code, but that code often reinforces the prison system's methods of punishment and control. In order to recover agency and subjectivity—and most importantly, get released—Baca must actively resist the hypercriminalization that led him to prison. He finds a pathway toward rehabilitation by refusing to perform compulsory labor and seeking to develop a self-defined identity. Baca becomes reformed and empowered when he stops internalizing the brutality of prison punishment, as well as the inhumanity of the convict code, and starts engaging in transcendental tactics that help him reclaim his subjectivity. These tactics help Baca reconnect with his individuality and

establish a positive self-conception that supersedes his identity as a convict. In other words, Baca illustrates how self-preservation means resisting the system's form of rehabilitation and writing one's own.

Although Baca's memoir reflects a redemptive character arc, illustrating his self-willed transformation from convict to poet, it can be argued that the text usurps the rehabilitative discourse of the American prison system and uses it for the purpose of recuperating a place to stand within a larger social and historical context.³⁹ In his prologue, Baca borrows and subverts the redemptive message of the penal system: "...if prison was the place of my downfall, ...it was also the place of my ascent. I became a different man, not because prison was good for me, but in spite of its destructive forces" (40). Throughout his narrative, Baca pointedly critiques both the criminal justice and penal systems as despotic, unjust, and unfairly prejudiced against minorities and the working poor. He emphasizes that, rather than reform, prison merely works to segregate, dehumanize, and further criminalize inmates. Baca's ultimate redemption in the narrative is portrayed as self-propelled, achieved only by transgressing prison rules and resisting institutional identity, rather than by internalizing the system's teachings.⁴⁰

³⁹ Rolston writes, "What is crucial to both religious and secular expressions of the conversion experience is a complete change from one way of being to another, which is usually described as a bifurcation of selfhood: an old (sinful or unenlightened) self is separated from a new (repentant or enlightened) self – something that Evangelical Christians describe as a process of being 'born again'" (118).

⁴⁰ In his prologue, Baca clarifies his intent to disrupt the traditionally redemptive prison narrative model. He refers to prison as both "the place of my downfall" and "the place of my ascent," emphasizing that he "became a different man, not because prison was good for me, but in spite of its destructive forces....The person I have become...has been forged...*despite* the dehumanizing environment of a prison intended to destroy me" (4-5, emphasis mine).

Chapter 3

Taking Back the Body in *Assata: An Autobiography*

The prison narrative of Assata Shakur—political activist, self-proclaimed revolutionary, and the first woman placed on the FBI’s Most Wanted list—highlights forms of punishment and resistance related specifically to the pained, imprisoned body, which is closely linked to the enslaved black body. *Assata: An Autobiography* (1987) considers what Foucault refers to as the “‘political economy’ of the body” by imagining the body as a site for spectacular punishment and politicized resistance. This chapter examines how *Assata* places the black female prisoner’s body at the center of the prison system’s interstices of domination, punishment, and dehumanization. In the way it represents Shakur’s acquisition of limited power over her own body, the text explores the possibility of defiance amidst the violence of prison punishment. *Assata* foregrounds physical torture as imperative to the making of the prisoner and highlights how counter-hegemonic tactics involving the female prisoner’s body can generate empowerment. In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault argues, “the body becomes a useful force only if it is a productive body” (26). Shakur turns her body into a productive vessel of resistance and radical possibility by managing to conceive her daughter during her incarceration. She thus utilizes its productive potential as a form of rebellion against the rules of her imprisonment. Shakur writes her own version of resistance into her narrative by portraying her pregnancy as a way of taking control over her body, which has been held captive, medically neglected, and brutally abused in prison—all before ever being convicted of any crime.

Assata Shakur was born JoAnne Chesimard in 1947, and joined the Black Panther Party while attending Manhattan Community College in the mid-1960's; she later left the Party for the Black Liberation Army. Growing up both in Jamaica, Queens, and for a time, with her maternal grandparents in the Jim Crow South gave Shakur perspective when it came to segregation and American race relations. She dropped out of school at 17, moved out of her mother's home, and worked at a series of minimum-wage jobs that she describes as alternately alienating or dehumanizing. Like Baca, Shakur portrays herself as estranged from the cultural mainstream in her autobiography, growing up without any real education, awareness, or affirmation of her racial identity. Socially marginalized and objectified as a black woman, she expresses anger and confusion when white coworkers ask her why black Americans "riot" (149). Her response to them reads like a contemporary reflection on the moral outrage and violent outcry sparked by police brutality in Ferguson and Baltimore in 2014 and 2015: "What do you mean, they're burning down their houses? They don't own those houses. They don't own those stores. I'm glad they burned down those stores because those stores were robbing them in the first place! They stood with their mouths open" (150). Shakur feels cheated by the public education she has received when African friends from Columbia University re-educate her on the Vietnam War and its significance for communism, imperialism, and racialized ideology (150). While attending college in New York, Shakur further develops her radical, Afrocentric ideology, joining the black-power movement and officially changing her name to Assata ("she who struggles") Shakur ("the thankful one"). After living underground to avoid what she describes as state-sanctioned surveillance and threats of violence, Shakur was apprehended in a 1973 shootout on the New Jersey

turnpike. During the shootout, Shakur suffered a bullet wound on her right hand, which she sustained while raising her arms. Her account of the shooting invites parallels to the Michael Brown and Darren Wilson case in Ferguson, which inspired a movement called “Hands Up, Don’t Shoot!” (Nagel). For Shakur, surviving the shooting meant having to endure further physical and verbal torture by police guards while she received treatment at the hospital. Scenes describing this abuse form the introductory passages of Shakur’s narrative.

Assata opens with a sensory assault akin to being thrown into a war zone. The language of the introductory sections deliberately mimics the confusion and vulnerability of being arrested and held by police during a critical medical emergency. While already in pain Shakur’s body is shackled, sequestered, and abused. The narrative’s opening sections deliberately spotlight the pained body:

There were lights and sirens....The air was like cold glass. Huge bubbles rose and burst. Each one felt like an explosion in my chest. My mouth tasted like blood and dirt. The car spun around me and then something like sleep overtook me. In the background i [sic] could hear what sounded like gunfire. But i was fading and dreaming....

I felt myself being dragged by the feet across the pavement. My chest was on fire. My blouse was purple with blood. I was convinced that my arm had been shot off and was hanging inside my shirt by a few strips of flesh. I could not feel it....”If i live,” i remember thinking, “i’ll only have one arm.” (3-4)

Here, Shakur’s body becomes the first, principal site of her carceral punishment. After being shot and wounded, she no longer feels free but rather trapped in her body and death feels imminent. Thinking that she probably will lose her arm, Shakur already feels as though a physical part of her is missing. As she does here, Shakur routinely stresses the pained, physically punishing aspects of her apprehension and imprisonment. The body is the central site of her legalized enslavement as a prisoner.

After the turnpike shootings, Shakur is transferred to the all-male New Jersey State Correction Center to await trial. She later endures a twenty-month stint in solitary confinement at Rikers Island, during which she is routinely denied basic needs like food and water. In her narrative, she recalls countless incidents of physical abuse by police officers, investigators, correctional officers, and even prison medical staff. Moreover, she describes deprivation of private space and routine surveillance as particularly punishing aspects of her incarceration. Close physical confinement becomes a source of psychic strife. The conditions under which Shakur is held are particularly shocking considering that for much of the time she was incarcerated, she had not even been formally convicted of a crime, but was being held to await various trials in New Jersey and New York.

“Amerikkka” Is the Prison: Blurring the Inside/Outside Binary

In the first-known African-American prison narrative, written by Robert Reed⁴¹ in 1858 as a memoir entitled *The Life and Adventures of a Haunted Convict, or The Inmate of a Gloomy Prison With the Mysteries and Miseries of the New York House of Refuge [sic] and Auburn Prison Unmasked*, incarceration remains closely linked to slavery through writing that often compares prison and the plantation.⁴² Interestingly, one of the most vivid parallels derives from the image of the “rattan” used to beat both slaves and prisoners by their overseers (25). Reed uses the rattan as a symbol to illustrate how the black body is enslaved both inside and outside the prison space in the U.S. The formal

⁴¹ Robert Reed was a pseudonym; the author’s real name was Austin Reed.

⁴² *The Life and Adventures of a Haunted Convict* remained unpublished, and its author anonymous, until a rare-books dealer rediscovered the manuscript at an estate sale in Rochester, New York in the early 2000s. The family selling it had little background knowledge of the text and it “appeared never to have left upstate New York” (Bosman). Prison literature scholar Caleb Smith helped authenticate and source the narrative, which was formally published in January 2016. The original manuscript remains housed at the Yale University Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library.

structure of *Assata* similarly destabilizes the inside/outside dyad, with alternating chapters describing Shakur's life during and before her incarceration. This non-linear chronology highlights parallels between prison and the America of Shakur's childhood and young adulthood. While a writer like Baca strives to depict the alternative America of the marginalized for whom prison sentences are almost unavoidable, Shakur aims to show how America itself forms a kind of prison for black American women. Recounting her upbringing oscillating between North Carolina and New York provides Shakur with an opportunity to historically contextualize and polemically engage with her life story. While narrating important moments in her early life, Shakur also provides commentary on black respectability politics, segregation, and racism, all of which are described as particularly punishing facets of the America outside prison walls.

Assata is an important example of a neo-slave narrative because it serves as a first-hand account of how the legacy of slavery haunts and shapes contemporary America.⁴³ As Mechthilde Nagel notes, the text illustrates that “[t]here is no genuine experience of political or economic freedom in a country that holds on to the vestiges of slavery” (66). Undercutting the traditional salutation of a slave narrative (“I was born...”), Shakur writes, “The FBI cannot find any evidence that I was born. On my FBI Wanted poster, they list my birth date as July 16, 1947, and, in parentheses, ‘not substantiated by birth records.’ Anyway, i was born” (18). Here, Shakur mocks the legal system that aims to confine her identity to birth records. Shakur also uses her text to

⁴³ Joy James has written extensively about the rich traditions of slave narratives, as well as their connection to the genre of prison narratives. She notes that prisoners (especially those who have been recently freed) regularly compare their experience to slavery in their autobiographical writings (*The New Abolitionists* xii). Since 1865, the genre of the neo-slave narrative emerged to make renewed calls for either emancipation (reform of the current system) or freedom (eradication of the current system) (*Imprisoned Intellectuals* iv). Contemporary American prison narratives like *Assata* often echo these calls and link them inextricably to the penal system.

highlight how African-Americans continue to be enslaved under unjust legal and social conditions. When she tries to refuse compulsory work, a prison guard informs her that she may not withhold labor even in protest because she is not considered a prison worker but a legal slave. The guard asserts, “Slavery is legal in prisons.” Shakur seizes the moment as an opportunity to re-educate herself, as well as readers of her narrative:

I looked it up and sure enough, she was right.⁴⁴ The Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution says: Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, except as punishment for a crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted, shall exist within the United States, or any place subject to their jurisdiction. (64)

Here, Shakur emphasizes the history that undergirds her narrative, arguing that prisons like the ones she inhabits form a lucrative industry that follows in the line of slavery and convict-leasing. She notes, “Prisons are a profitable business. They are a way of legally perpetuating slavery” (65).

Imprisonment radically transforms Shakur’s viewpoint on what she calls “amerikkka,” as well as the way rights and freedoms continue to be racialized by the legal and penal systems. A conversation with a radical fellow inmate helps Shakur realize that the boundary between inside and outside is a blurred one: “The only difference between here and the streets is that one is maximum security and the other is minimum security. The police patrol our communities just like the guards patrol here. I don’t have the faintest idea how it feels to be free” (60). Explaining that statement, Shakur argues that the same holds true for all black Americans forced to live within a system that discriminates against them. She writes, “We aren’t free politically, economically, or socially. We have very little power over what happens in our lives”

⁴⁴ Technically, the guard was wrong. The Thirteenth Amendment’s condition for abolishing slavery, which makes it legal only in the case of convicted prisoners, did not apply to Shakur because she had not yet been convicted of any charges.

(60). She points to the militarization and racism of the police, already a significant problem her story represents, contending, "...a Black person in amerika isn't even free to walk down the street. Walk down the wrong street, in the wrong neighborhood at night, and you know what happens" (60). Her admonition is prescient of a case like that of the unarmed Trayvon Martin, who was fatally shot by George Zimmerman while walking down a residential street at night in Sanford, Florida. Shakur's statement plays on the rhetoric of black criminalization, implying that the streets are dangerous for those who are socially labeled criminals.⁴⁵

The America of Shakur's childhood assumes the properties of a dangerous or punishing space in which freedom remains tempered by racism and segregation. Spending part of her childhood in Wilmington, North Carolina, where her maternal grandparents open a restaurant on the segregated black beach, Shakur is inculcated into a Southern values system that is "big on respect" and involves "becoming 'somebody'" and "having what white people had" (20). Shakur's grandmother especially tries to school her about Du Boisian respectability:

My awareness of class differences in the Black community came at an early age. Although my grandmother taught me more about being proud and strong than anyone i know, she had a lot of Booker T. Washington, pull yourself up by the bootstraps, 'talented tenth' ideas. She had worked hard and had made a decent living as a pieceworker in a factory, but she had other ideas for me. She was determined that i would become part of Wilmington's talented tenth—the privileged class—part of the so-called Black bourgeoisie. (21)

⁴⁵ The link between blackness and criminality in American ideology has been critically studied for over a century. In a 1901 essay entitled "The Spawn of Slavery: The Convict Lease System of the South," W.E.B. Du Bois argues that the entrenched nature of convict leasing "linked crime and slavery indissolubly in [people's] minds" (739). In "Race and Criminalization: Black Americans and the Punishment Industry" (1997), Angela Davis notes, "The ideological reproduction of a fear of black people, whether economically or sexually grounded, is rapidly gravitating toward and being grounded in a fear of crime" (65). She also remarks that the racialized figure of the criminal "has come to represent the most menacing enemy of 'American society'" (66).

Shakur comments on the limitations of her grandmother's dreams for her future, arguing that such ideals merely echo the aspirations of privileged white Americans, rather than setting a new or individual standard of success. She admits that even as a child, "Becoming 'somebody' in life just didn't mean too much to me. I wanted to feel happy, to feel good" (20). Furthermore, she contends, her grandmother's ideas about how she should attain respectability reflect an insidious self-hatred based on lifelong comparisons to white cultural standards. In Shakur's narrative, whenever she internalizes such standards or ideals, she consequently devalues her own tastes, preferences, and cultural experiences:

I was supposed to be a child version of a goodwill ambassador, out to prove that Black people were not stupid or dirty or smelly or uncultured. I carried out this mission as best i could to show that i was as good as they were. I never questioned the things they thought were good. White people said classical music was the highest form of music; white people said that ballet was the highest form of dance; and i accepted those things as true....And everything that they wanted, i wanted. If they wanted poodle jackets, i wanted a poodle jacket. If they wanted a Star of David necklace, i wanted a Star of David necklace. If they wanted a Revlon doll, i wanted a Revlon doll....I saved my culture, my music, my dancing, the richness of Black speech for the times when i was with my own people....It would never have occurred to me to talk about black-eyed peas and rice or collard greens and ham hocks....In many ways i was living a double existence. (37)

Here, Shakur updates Du Bois's notion of "double consciousness" and shows how it remained relevant long past the post-Reconstruction era. Comparing herself to white friends or white characters she sees on television, Shakur's childhood vision of herself is refracted and minimized. She comments on how white culture negatively impacted not only her own youth, but also that of all black children taught to hate themselves based on images of white normativity and privilege: "We had been completely brainwashed and we didn't even know it. We accepted white value systems and white standards of beauty and, at times, we accepted the white man's view of ourselves" (31). Contrasting her own

family life against that which she sees in popular culture, the young Shakur wonders, “Why didn’t my mother have freshly baked cookies ready when i came home from school [like Donna Reed]? Why didn’t we live in a house with a backyard and a front yard [like the family on “Leave It to Beaver”] instead of an ole apartment?” (37). These kinds of comparisons, Shakur argues, help perpetuate white supremacy by upholding an idealized lie. That black children like Shakur believe the lie from a young age is critical to maintaining the American status quo.⁴⁶

In narrating the events of her childhood, Shakur stresses the incompetence of her public education, yet espouses an unconventional view of the segregation that characterized her schooling. She admits that the black schools she attended “were inferior,” but also posits that they nurtured community and provided important support for students like her: “Of course, our school was segregated, but the teachers took more of an interest in our lives, because they lived in our world, in the same neighborhoods. They knew what we were up against and what we would be facing as adults, and they tried to protect us as much as they could” (29). For Shakur, integration divided black communities as much as it ostensibly brought Americans together. She argues, “I’m not saying that segregation was a good system. . . . But Black children encountered support and understanding and encouragement instead of the hostile indifference they often met in the ‘integrated’ schools” (29).

Shakur’s text also serves as a neo-slave narrative by challenging and dialoguing with American history, as well as questioning its construction of blackness. Shakur puts down the education she got in school, stating that it didn’t include “real history”:

⁴⁶ At another point in her narrative, Shakur expands on her ideas about American racial ideology as a lie that the status quo depends on everyone believing: “Everything is a lie in amerika, and the thing that keeps it going is that so many people believe the lie” (158).

The usual way that people are taught to think in america is that each subject is in a little compartment and has no relation to any other subject. For the most part, we receive fragments of unrelated knowledge, and our education follows no logical format or pattern. It is exactly the kind of education that produces people who don't have the ability to think for themselves and who are easily manipulated. (35)

She further resents the ways the educational system implicated her in its misrepresentation of history involving African-Americans: "I didn't know what a fool they had made out of me until i grew up and started to read real history. Not only was George Washington probably a big liar, but he had once sold a slave for a keg of rum. Here they had...me, an unwitting little Black child, doing a play in his honor" (33). Moreover, she frequently reminds readers that they don't have the full story when it comes to events that are memorialized in American history: "We had been taught that the Civil War was fought to free the slaves, and it was not until i was in college that i learned that the Civil War was fought for economic reasons. The fact that 'official' slavery was abolished was only incidental" (33). *Assata's* criticisms of American history as a whitewashed official record, rather than an account that touches on real truths, gives it a commonality with neo-slave narratives like Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987), as well as other prison narratives like Leonard Peltier's *Prison Writings* (1999).

Another way *Assata* draws parallels between slavery and the American 1960s and '70s of Shakur's youth is by emphasizing the double burden of black femininity, negotiating subjectivity under both the white and male gaze. Shakur links the black American woman's double burden, which involves developing a form of "double consciousness" that remains constantly aware of being both raced and gendered, specifically to the body. As Foucault writes, "...the body is also directly involved in a political field; power relations have an immediate hold upon it; they invest it, mark it,

train it, torture it, force it to carry out tasks, to perform ceremonies, to emit signs” (25).

From an early age, Shakur learns that her body is caught up in a system of constraints and privileges that cause it to be read in different ways. Her family and community’s acceptance of white values systems and standards of beauty encourage her to see herself as inferior. This sense of inferiority is closely linked to blackness in the American society Shakur describes: “Black made any insult worse. When you called somebody a ‘bastard,’ that was bad. But when you called somebody a ‘Black bastard,’ now that was terrible. In fact, when i was growing up, being called ‘Black,’ period, was grounds for fighting” (30). Shakur’s own idealization of “young, blond, very prissy, and middle class” women like her third-grade teacher or the redheaded young actress Shirley Temple prompt her to tease her sister about her big lips, calling them “something of a liability” (31-32). She also sees nearly all the women around her performing grooming habits that debase the body in order to force it to conform to white beauty standards:

There was one girl in our school whose mother made her wear a clothespin on her nose to make it thin. There were quite a few girls who tried to bleach their skin white with bleaching cream and who got pimples instead. And, of course, we went to the beauty parlor and got our hair straightened. I couldn’t wait to go to the beauty parlor and get my hair all fried up. I wanted Shirley Temple curls just like Shirley Temple. I hated the smell of fried hair and having my ears burned, but we were taught that women had to make great sacrifices to be beautiful. (31)

Here, Shakur describes a community of women raised to feel as if they have to transform their natural bodies in order to make them socially acceptable or desirable. These methods of changing the black female body reinforce the social “brainwashing” Shakur repeatedly refers to, which links blackness to inferiority and abjection.

Furthermore, in scenes from her childhood and young adulthood, Shakur images her body as a site of vulnerability and predation not unlike that of the black female slave.

As a black woman, her body is sexually objectified and read as aberrant. Running away from home as a teenager (after she has moved back to Queens to live with her mother and stepfather) exposes her to numerous threats of rape and assault that Shakur must guilefully thwart or elude. When a man picks her up and offers her a place to stay until she can find a more permanent home, Shakur learns that raping her forms his ulterior motive and must find ways to foil his plans:⁴⁷ “We got along fine until nighttime. Then it was war—an all-night wrestling match. When he wasn’t attacking me, he was begging and pleading and thinking up a thousand arguments why i should give him some. I told him i was afraid of getting pregnant. He went and got this big jar of Vaseline and told me that, if you used Vaseline, you couldn’t get pregnant” (75). When she gets a job at a factory cafeteria, she is forced to endure routine verbal abuse and physical molestation from her white male boss. She recalls, “I needed the job desperately, but the manager was driving me wild putting his hands all over me....Then he started a new trick. He’d pull the elastic of my panties through the uniform and let it pop like a rubber band....By the time dinner was over i knew i couldn’t take it anymore” (102-103). Faced with the choice of putting up with the abuse or quitting, Shakur resigns after just one day of work. During a brief period living in the West Village, a boy’s invitation to a party quickly turns into a potential gang rape. Shakur arrives at the house to find it filled with the boy’s all-male friends, who keep leaving the room to strategize about assaulting her. Shakur realizes,

I knew it now. They were going to rape me. I had heard people talking about ‘trains’ but i had never thought it would happen to me....I begged and pleaded. I cried and cried. I couldn’t believe they could be so heartless. But they were. The

⁴⁷ Shakur’s anecdotes about evading sexual violence, and how such attempts constituted a routine part of her youth, resemble Harriet Jacobs’s accounts of trying to foil the sexual machinations of her master Dr. Flint in the well-known slave narrative *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861).

boy who brought me there was arguing with another boy about who would be first. I couldn't believe it. It was a nightmare. They were arguing and carrying on as if i wasn't even human, as if i was some kind of thing. (113)

Shakur is able to escape her potential rapists only by making a scene that might draw neighbors' attentions—screaming, grabbing items around the house, and throwing them against the wall (113). Again, she must use ingenuity to prevent sexual violence, which these boys feel entitled to inflict upon her.

Shakur's experiences with sexual assault modernize some of Saidiya V.

Hartman's theories about how redefining rape on black women as consensual depends on constructing black subjectivity as both abject and insatiate. In *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (1997), Hartman argues, "Sexuality formed the nexus in which black, female, and chattel were inextricably bound and acted to intensify the constraints of slave status by subjecting the body to another order of violations and whims" (87). In her text, Shakur positions her body as the central site upon which major strategies of hegemony are played out, particularly in ways that relate to sexuality and female sexual vulnerability. She notes, "Any Black woman, practically anywhere in amerika, can tell you about being approached, propositioned, and harassed by white men. Many consider all Black women potential prostitutes" (106). Like the slave system Hartman describes, Shakur's world is a place in which her body makes her a perpetual victim, one that images the black female body as "both will-less and always willing" (81). She makes the connection to the slave system herself: "A Black woman was fair game for anyone at the time: the master or a visiting guest or any redneck who desired her....She was considered less than a woman. She was a cross between a whore and a workhorse" (116). Shakur's own descriptions of being the victim

of sexual predation in her time outside prison corroborate this parallel between slavery and post-Civil Rights era America. Since her body is often socially read through a white, male dominant gaze, Shakur has to develop tactics to help her outsmart potential predators. In the prison space, these tactics are coupled with new ones that help her overwrite the abusive punishments that have further victimized her body. However, the America of Shakur's youth, as she describes it in her narrative, serves as a veritable rehearsal space for prison in teaching her about negotiating social strategies of hegemony and overcoming the labels that have been written upon her body. Though she has already learned to practice tactics of resistance in order to navigate and survive in the Deep South and urban North of her youth, she hones new tactics in prison that give her renewed agency over her body and enable her to write more empowering meanings on it.

The Pained and Enslaved Body of the (Female) Prisoner

At the Middlesex County workhouse, Shakur quickly learns that prison punishment is closely linked to the body—whether through captivity or confinement, surveillance, torture or abject humiliation. Like the American spaces she has inhabited outside, prison aims not only to extinguish Shakur's freedom but also to eradicate her agency altogether. Delineating the rules of the facility, Shakur emphasizes their inanity; these rules exist simply to prevent prisoners from organizing or fighting back against correctional officers even with ideas: "The workhouse had a hole heap of rules, most of them stupid. No newspapers or magazines were permitted. When i asked why we couldn't read newspapers, they told me that newspapers were 'inflammatory'" (53). Like laws under slavery that prohibited teaching slaves to read, providing them with information about their condition, or allowing them to organize regularly (even for

religious purposes), these workhouse rules are meant to keep the imprisoned ignorant and passive. It does not take long for Shakur to learn that mothers are the most victimized of prisoners, because they have additional rights that can be violated.⁴⁸ For instance, Shakur comments on the way incarceration infringes upon maternal rights by preventing imprisoned women from seeing or visiting with their children: “One of the saddest rules prohibited children from visiting their mothers in jail. I could see the children waiting outside, looking up at that ugly old building with sad, frustrated faces. Their mothers would run to the only window that faced the parking lot just to get a glimpse of their children” (53). The effect of incarceration on motherhood is the very kind of punishment Shakur aims to overwrite with her planned pregnancy, which challenges the prison’s denial of maternal rights and privileges.⁴⁹

Shakur’s narrative also places significant emphasis on the deliberate humiliation of the strip search, a common practice at the prison for new admissions or women returning from court dates. Shakur calls the strip- and body-cavity-searches some of the most violating physical aspects of her imprisonment, an additional form of punishment on her body:

⁴⁸ Claudia Tate and Hortense J. Spillers have written extensively about the double burden of black femininity and its relationship to motherhood under slavery. Both scholars argue that the enslaved condition overshadowed and disrupted conventional meanings attached to words like “woman” and “mother.” Tate observes that for slaves, “...motherhood was an institution to which they had only biological claim” (108). Spillers argues that the ways slavery destabilized conceptions of gender placed the slave woman “out of the traditional symbolics of female gender” (80). In her reflections of imprisoned mothers (herself included), Shakur extends these assertions into the prison space and thus evokes further parallels with slavery.

⁴⁹ Prison activist Laura Whitehorn calls the prison system’s denial of maternal rights and effect on female prisoners’ maternity two of its most punishing aspects. Discussing the demographics of post-War-on-Drugs women’s prisons, Whitehorn states, “I would also say that a huge number of the women are mothers. It means that, on the outside, there are basically a lot of orphans. I consider the prison system today to be a form of genocide....It means that the women, who would form some sort of collective bond when there’s a need for struggle, are gone from the community. And it means that their children may well go to prison themselves” (Buck and Whitehorn 263).

... We were directed to stand in little booths and take off all our clothes. Then we were told to turn around, squat, run our fingers through our hair, lift up our feet and open our mouths.... They put us in shower stalls without curtains, we were told to take a shower, and then were given this stuff which they told us to put in our hair and on our pubic hairs and wash with it... It was humiliating. The last stage was the "search."... Joan Bird and Afeni Shakur had told me about it after they had been bailed out in the Panther 21 trial. When they had told me, i was horrified.

"You mean they really put their hands inside you, to search you?" i had asked.

"Uh-huh," they had answered. Every woman who has ever been on the rock, or in the old house of detention, can tell you about it. The women call it "getting the finger" or, more vulgarly, "getting finger-fucked."

... The "internal search" was as humiliating and disgusting as it sounded. You sit on the edge of this table and the nurse holds your legs open and sticks a finger in your vagina and moves it around. She has a plastic glove on. Some of them try to put one finger in your vagina and another one up your rectum at the same time. (83)

Shakur here suggests that these searches not only mean to penetrate the body but also denigrate the soul of a prisoner. The staged quality of the procedure resembles that of the slave auction (Hartman). In an interview with writer Marilyn Buck, who was charged in aiding in Shakur's 1979 prison escape, activist Laura Whitehorn also discusses the abject degradation of physical searches, calling them the hardest part of being a woman in prison and emphasizing the way these searches are meant to break the inmate down psychologically. According to Whitehorn, "The point is not to locate contraband; it's to reduce you to a completely powerless person.... It reduces you to an object, not worthy of being defended" (Buck and Whitehorn 262).

The reduction of the prisoner into "a completely powerless person" also happens by way of confinement and surveillance. At Middlesex, Shakur is constantly surveilled and prohibited all forms of privacy or personal space. Her confinement has the panoptical quality Foucault discusses, designed to make her feel as though she is always being watched:

Female guards were stationed at the door of my cell twenty-four hours a day. Their job was to sit there and look in the cell at me. They could see every move i made. The first day i moved the bed against the wall, away from the guard's surveillance so that i could have a little privacy while i was sleeping. The guards ordered me to move the bed into the middle of the floor. I refused. The next day workmen nailed the bed to the floor in the center of the cell. They even peeked through the window in the bathroom when i was on the toilet or taking a shower. When i covered the peephole with a towel or a uniform, they ordered me to remove it and threatened to take away all towels and uniforms if i continued covering the window. (66-67)

Her description here illustrates Foucault's ideas about the "body-punishment relation" as it relates to modern imprisonment. Foucault explains that, within the limited spatiality of prison, the body "is caught up in a system of constraints and privations, obligations and prohibitions," which are regulated and monitored by ostensibly omniscient powers (11). Isolation and deprivation of personal belongings help complete this punishment on the body. After long periods spent in solitary confinement or being celled alone without any materials with which to read, write, draw, paint, or sketch, Shakur finds herself unable to organize her thoughts or speak aloud coherently (48). Her social skills deteriorate, and her voice grows more and more silent. Without being able to own or claim a right to anything, she finds herself further estranged from her own agency.

In addition to being confined and surveilled, Shakur's body is also savagely beaten, abused, and medically neglected. Foucault writes about how, as an institution that brands itself civilized, the modern prison tries to maintain an illusory air of power and control without having to resort to primitive violence. When torture against the imprisoned does take place, Foucault notes, it must be hidden so as to not call attention to prison punishment as customarily violent (9). Shakur's accounts of the frequent below-the-neck beatings she received in prison corroborate Foucault's assertions about how hidden violence becomes a way to perpetually remind the prisoner of her physically and

legally abject state. For instance, after detectives are admonished for beating her while she is in the hospital, Shakur writes,

They are more careful where they hit me now. I guess they don't want to leave any marks. One sticks his fingers in my eyes. I don't know what he has on his fingertips, but whatever it is burns like hell. I think i [sic] am gonna be blind forever. He says he will keep doing it until i am completely blind. I close my eyes and hold them as tight as i can. He strikes me a few more times....Burning tears pour down my face and my whole head is throbbing. (8)

Shakur also details the punishing procedures commonly practiced at Middlesex and Rikers Island, which include being held for long periods of time in shackles and chains, being beaten or slapped by correctional officers, and enduring solitary confinement without proper hygienic or dietary conditions for weeks or months.⁵⁰

Shakur also validates Foucault's ideas about prison doctors as agents of hidden punishment (Foucault 9). In her text, prison clinicians and gynecologists are mere torture-artists, whose abuse of the prisoner depends on infiltrating the private space of her body.⁵¹ The bullet wound she suffers in the turnpike shooting causes Shakur to lose nearly all feeling and movement in her right arm. Rather than prescribe physical therapy or proper treatment, her doctor in prison tells her she might as well accept paralysis as her fate. When she tries to demand further treatment, he tells her, "My advice to you is to forget about all of that stuff. You don't need any of it. Sometimes in life we just have to accept things that are unpleasant. You still have one good arm" (48). As the formerly

⁵⁰ In his prison memoir from 1858, Robert Reed also details the punishing procedures routinely used to maintain order at Auburn State Penitentiary, one of the first modern prisons in the U.S. These practices include regular lashings and "a device known as the shower-bath, a kind of precursor to waterboarding that was occasionally fatal" (Bosman). Reed describes an experience in the shower-bath: "Stripping off my shirt the tyrantical curse bounded my hands fast in front of me and orderd me to stand around....Turning my back towards him he threw Sixty seven lashes on meI was then to stand over the dreain while one of the inmates wash my back in a pail of salt brine."

⁵¹ Whitehorn further argues that the punishing facets of prison medical care are particularly difficult for women, who often require gynecological treatment from doctors who don't even consider their personal needs. She says, "I hate my doctor. And that's a problem. For me, but not for him" (Buck and Whitehorn 264).

incarcerated Whitehorn notes, “That relationship of being ‘cared for’ by someone who sees you as their enemy is completely deleterious to your health” (Buck and Whitehorn 264).

Shakur’s text echoes some of Hartman’s theories about “redressing the pained body” that has been reduced to an abject state by systemized violence and brutal punishment (50-51). Hartman credits torture, rape, and brutality with solidifying slave identity. She identifies violence on the body as especially critical to the subjugation of the enslaved, and characterizes it as “an original generative act [in the slave narrative,] equivalent to the statement ‘I was born’” (3). The positioning of violent punishment as an early formative experience is paralleled in *Assata*, its early scenes depicting Shakur in a hospital bed, blinking in and out of consciousness while guards physically assault and verbally harass her (5-7). Throughout her narrative, Shakur writes of being beaten as a way of being reminded of her rightlessness as a prisoner. In her text, Hartman explores how violence enabled the enslaved to identify as enslaved, a concept Shakur also associates with the prison system. She suggests a relationship between the prisoner’s humanity and the violence of punishment, arguing that the more human a prisoner seemed, the more harshly she was beaten by correctional officers or tortured by prison doctors, who sought to break her of her humanity and agency.

Motherhood as Redress

Despite the graphic details of torture and negligence she describes, Shakur refuses to internalize her victimization. By choosing to get pregnant while incarcerated, she transforms her body from a passive receptacle of torture to a space of radical possibility. Motherhood transforms Shakur’s body into a productive, self-defined space while

refashioning her into an agent of tactical resistance. Positioned in contradistinction to the correctional staff's violence, Shakur's pregnancy offers her an opportunity to retaliate against the prison that serves to confine, regulate, and punish her body.⁵² Moreover, in its reclamation of the body as a site for resisting abusive power, *Assata* participates in a tradition of African-American women's writing dating back to the nineteenth century. The text represents Shakur's pregnancy as an act of rebellion, a way of counteracting and healing the devastation caused by incarceration (Hartman 50-51). As Hartman writes of black women's bodies in nineteenth-century slavery, "Redressing the pained body encompasses operating in and against the demands of the system, negotiating the disciplinary harnessing of the body, and counter-investing in the body as a site of possibility" (51). Since Shakur positions her body as a space upon which the prison system brands her identity as a criminal, her choice to become a mother while in prison can be read as a willful act of optimism that reaffirms her power over her body and generates more positive identifications.

Shakur's calculated resistance against the prison punishment being inflicted on her body through confinement, surveillance, medical neglect, and physical abuse begins similarly to Baca's, by deliberately challenging the physical stagnation of her captivity. In solitary confinement, Shakur seizes control over the limited agency her body still possesses by running around her cell repeatedly. She writes, "I was going crazy in that little cell. The only time they let me out was for visits [with my attorney] and to see the

⁵² While the body of the contemporary female prisoner has yet to be comprehensively studied as a site for the manifestation of physical torture and the spectacle of punishment, Scott Bunyan's analysis of male prisoners' bodies as symbols of impenetrability applies to Shakur's pregnancy as well: "In prison, the inmate has no weapons, but he can attempt to make his body a stronghold, a bastion of impenetrability, in the face of prison guards, in the face of prison rape" (187). While Shakur's pregnancy does not make her entirely impenetrable to the correctional officers' abuse, it does serve a defensive purpose in that it deters them from repeating some of the harsher forms of physical punishment they practiced before.

so-called doctor. I have always been an active and restless person, and being locked up in that little cage all day drove me wild. I needed to stretch my legs. I started to run around the cell. I would run in this tiny circle until I was exhausted” (55). Here again, breaking down the mind of the prisoner involves isolating and confining her body indefinitely as a form of punishment. One of the only ways to resist this solitary stagnation is to make dynamic use of very little physical space—in other words, transform that space with movement and activity. Soon, a visit from the warden shows Shakur how much havoc her limited act of resistance against immobility is wreaking. The warden orders her to stop running around her cell, as she is disturbing the administrators in the office below her. Unwittingly, her proscription only motivates Shakur further. Shakur adamantly refuses, later admitting, “If [the warden] hadn’t come in and harassed me, i would have probably given up running around that tiny space in a few days” (56).

While solitary confinement at Middlesex sparks rebellious behavior related to physical mobility, it is a judge’s decision to isolate Shakur and co-defendant Kamau Sadiki from the proceedings of their own trial that motivates her greatest act of resistance and the one that will enable her to achieve a kind of redress over her pained and punished imprisoned body. Because their presence in court triggers loud outbursts and protests from people in the audience, their judge orders the two defendants to spend the entirety of the trial in an adjoining room where they can listen to what is going on, but not participate. There, the two surprisingly learn to enjoy the kind of privacy prison has disenfranchised them of, and they begin to discuss the productive potential of their segregation. Shakur describes their time together as a rare moment of connection and intimacy amidst the alienation of imprisonment: “Talking to Kamau was so good for me.

Solitary had affected me really badly. I had closed up inside myself and had forgotten how to relate in an open way with people. We spent whole days laughing and talking and listening to the courtroom madness in between” (92). After some time together, their relationship turns physical and they begin “to touch and hold each other and each of us was like an oasis to the other” (92). This comforting physical contact stands in stark contrast to the isolation, neglect, and abuse the two have experienced in the prison space. When they deliberate about whether to take their physical intimacy further, Shakur is at first worried about pregnancy, then decides that concern might actually provide her with the kind freedom prison aims to deny her entirely. At that point, her choice to accept pregnancy as a risk begins to gain positive significance. In her narrative, she describes the decision as an affirmation of life, not an irresponsible whim:

“I am about life,” i said to myself. “I’m gonna live as hard as i can and as full as i can until i die. And i’m not letting these parasites, these oppressors, these greedy racist swine make me kill my children in my mind, before they are even born. I’m going to live and i’m going to love Kamau, and, if a child comes from that union, i’m going to rejoice. Because our children are our futures and i believe in the future and in the strength and rightness of our struggle.” (93)

Here, Shakur proves that pregnancy and motherhood can become tactics of rebellion when they involve the disempowered subject’s attempt to humanize and regain control over her brutalized body. According to Hartman, subtle acts of defiance enacted within the context of forced subservience challenged the existing power structure and “create[d] a space for action not generally available” during slavery (8). Furthermore, Hartman asserts, “[s]ince acts of resistance exist within the context of relations of domination and are not external to them, they acquire their character from these relations, and vice versa” (8). In the enclosed and estranged space of the adjoining room at her trial, Shakur manages to get pregnant and metaphorically frees her body from the constraints of a

system that has sought to dominate and disenfranchise her. Her actions validate Hartman's ideas about usurping power through subtle resistance and taking back the body that has been punished by violence.

Upon confirming her pregnancy, Shakur's joy and affirmation of life stand in contradistinction to the morbidity that surrounds her in prison:

I spent the next few days in a virtual haze. A joyous daze. A person was inside me. Someone who was going to grow up to walk and talk, to love and laugh. To me it was the miracle of all miracles. And deeply spiritual. The odds against this baby being conceived were so great it boggled my mind. And yet it was happening. It seemed so right, so beautiful, in surroundings that were so ugly. (123)

Her joy is tempered by the awareness that she is bringing a new life into a world that contains the vestiges of slavery. She laments, "Sometimes i felt so helplessly protective, wondering when my baby would be called nigger for the first time, wondering when the full horror and degradation of being Black in amerika would descend on my baby" (124).

Shakur's pregnancy renews the media's interest in her, helping her garner more public support and slightly less abuse in prison (125). On the other hand, her pregnancy gives the prison medical staff a new avenue by which to enact physical punishments. Visiting the prison doctor for her pre-natal appointments, Shakur is encouraged to terminate her pregnancy, and made to feel as though she is a bad person for wanting to keep the baby. At first, she is denied the chance to be seen by an obstetrician or take prenatal vitamins to supplement the poor nutrition she receives in prison. The prison doctor tells her, "I can't force you to do anything, but my advice is to have an abortion. It will be better for you and for everybody else" (126). Suffering under extreme fatigue and cramping, Shakur worries that she might miscarry but the doctor only offers the following advice: "My advice to you is that you should go to your cell and lie down. Just

lie down and rest your mind. Just lie down and stay off your feet. And if you go to the bathroom and see a lump in the toilet, don't flush it. It's your baby" (126). Shakur thinks, "As far as i could see, they were out to kill my baby" (127).

In addition to the psychological warfare that is perpetuated on her early in pregnancy, Shakur also suffers sadistic forms of medical negligence that could be termed torture, especially when considered in light of her condition. When her lawyers argue in court for her to be taken to Roosevelt Hospital to be seen by her own obstetrician, Dr. Garrett, guards shackle her to her bed⁵³ until the doctor orders that the restraints be removed, "based on the elementary principle that proper treatment, both mental and physical, of a woman threatening miscarriage would not seem to include being chained to a bedpost" (141). Furthermore, the prison medical staff challenges Shakur's doctor and interferes with her prenatal care and nutrition:

At first, they wouldn't even give me milk. Since pork was served as a staple meat almost daily, i began to slowly starve. (In county jails it goes like this: one sheet, one horse blanket, a metal cup; your cell is raided if you have luxuries, like salt.) They did everything they could to try to thwart the care Dr. Garrett was trying to give me. They hired their own doctor and insisted that whenever my doctor saw me, their man had to be present. This meant a severe limitation on the number of visits [my doctor] could arrange because their doctor happened often "not to make it" out to the prison on the days examinations had been agreed to and scheduled. (141)

The facility's neglect of Shakur becomes so egregious that her lawyers are forced to initiate a federal lawsuit against the state of New Jersey, charging medical malpractice

⁵³ In an essay devoted to critiquing the shackling of pregnant prisoners, Priscilla A. Ocen notes that the practice is historically rooted in the systems of slavery and convict-leasing. She emphasizes, "...we cannot understand the persistence of the shackling of female prisoners without understanding how historical constructions of race and gender operate structurally to both motivate and mask its use.... the persistent practice attaches to Black women in particular through the historical devaluation, regulation, and punishment of their exercise of reproductive capacity in three contexts: slavery, convict leasing, and chain gangs in the South. The regulation and punishment of Black women within these oppressive systems reinforced and reproduced stereotypes of these women as deviant and dangerous. these images began to animate harsh practices against all female prisoners" (1239-1240).

and dietary abuse (141). On the day of the hearing, Shakur is suddenly (inexplicably) extradited to Rikers Island in New York, making “the federal court action moot” (141). At Rikers, she is put on a “special” pregnancy diet of powdered milk, juice, and a hard-boiled egg, in addition to the standard prison diet (142). Although provided with a daily iron supplement, she says she remained anemic throughout the full duration of her pregnancy (142). Once transferred to New York, her lawyers must undertake new legal proceedings to get Shakur seen regularly by her own obstetrician. Even with a court order, prison administrators try to prevent Dr. Garrett from entering the infirmary, where Shakur is temporarily “left in a room for three days with a woman who turned out later to have active tuberculosis” (142). As she gets closer to full term, Shakur is housed in what she calls “the psycho ward” of Rikers. Moreover, the prison medical staff takes advantage of the lengthiness of bureaucratic procedures to prevent Shakur from obtaining necessary care:

I also had monilia, a vaginal discharge, which worsened because the Montefiore Hospital doctors assigned to Rikers could not agree about how it should be treated. They refused to treat the condition at all until my culture was returned from Elmhurst Hospital. By the time they managed to get the culture back, the whole inside of my thigh was chapped raw from the discharge, and i could barely walk. (142)

From her descriptions, it appears that Shakur’s overseers use her pregnancy as an additional vulnerability to prey upon. The fact that Shakur’s pregnancy is a veritable act of defiance against her captors further makes her a target of their retaliation. Here and throughout her narrative, Shakur’s detailed account of the prenatal care she received in prison—not as a convicted criminal, but as a defendant being held during her *pre-trial* stages—works as an indictment of the ways the penal system is particularly prejudiced toward mothers.

During her pregnancy, prison clinicians' treatment of Shakur resembles that of the antebellum slave-master, who relished new opportunities for terror and abuse that motherhood provided. In "Reflections on the Black Woman's Role in the Community of Slaves" (1971), Angela Davis expands on this sadistic phenomenon with respect to nineteenth-century American slavery: "Even in the posture of motherhood—otherwise the occasion for hypocritical adoration—the black woman was treated with no greater compassion and with no less severity than her man" (105). However, Davis notes, out of this deformed gender equality "was forged, quite undeliberately, yet inexorably, a state of affairs that could harness an immense potential in the black woman" (105). Davis contends that although "[a]n intricate and savage web of oppression intruded at every moment into the black woman's life during slavery," the single theme that appeared at every juncture involved "the woman transcending, refusing, fighting back, asserting herself over and against terrifying obstacles" (110). *Assata* continues this theme into the contemporary American women's prison, a modern reimagining of the slave system.

It is in recounting the details of her labor and delivery that Shakur offers the most vehement and potent critique of the prison system's treatment of women, as well as one of the most vivid examples of her own resistance. Although her lawyers had obtained court orders (in two separate states) that enabled Shakur to be cared for by her own doctor during her pregnancy, hospital administrators go to court to prevent Dr. Garrett from delivering the baby. Their reasoning highlights the myriad ways prisoners' human rights can be infringed upon once they have entered the carceral space. As a prisoner, Shakur is granted neither maternity rights nor privileges; in fact, any so-called "special treatment" her pregnancy might have afforded her is instead replaced by renewed

opportunities for punishment. According to the text, “Their position was that since i was a prisoner it was not necessary for me to have the doctor of my choice. They also said he was ‘disruptive’ because, when he did manage to see me, he ‘often wrote in my chart,’ which they found very disturbing” (142). When she starts going into labor, Shakur refuses to go to the infirmary or allow any other doctor to examine her. Her refusals are so adamant that the prison staff is faced with no choice than to call Dr. Garrett.

Shakur is motorcaded to Elmhurst Hospital, where Dr. Garrett has privileges. The scene of her arrival is chaotic and again places particular emphasis on the gendered, physically painful and humiliating parts of Shakur’s status as a prisoner:

There was a demonstration outside of Elmhurst Hospital in support of my right to choose the doctor who would deliver my baby, and Evelyn [Williams, Shakur’s aunt and attorney] and Dr. Garrett held a press conference at the hospital to explain the situation. There were actually two policewomen inside the labor room and several outside. I was having contractions every five minutes. Finally, i let one of their doctors, a resident, examine me to see how the labor was progressing—which turned out to be a terrible mistake. When he finished, i was bleeding. After that, there was no way i would let any of them touch me again. I ordered them to bring me a stethoscope (to see if the baby’s heart was beating normally) and a few other instruments i would need because, i said, “I am delivering the baby myself.” (143)

This is a key scene in *Assata* that not only illustrates the penal system’s punishing effects on the body, but also shows Shakur seizing hold of a limited opportunity for resistance and fighting back against the indignity of being refused her own doctor, the humiliation of having guards at her labor, and the overall dehumanization of childbirth as a prisoner. Here, she collects the instruments she will need to furnish her defiant threat to deliver her baby herself. Earlier as well, she describes preparing for labor as though she were a soldier preparing to face combat: “I got out of bed, took a shower, braided my hair, and packed....i was sure i was on my way” (142). This moment positions the hegemonic

strategies of the carceral system, carried out not only by the court that negates prisoners' rights but also by the very correctional officers inside this hospital room (who are making Shakur's childbirth part of the panoptical experience) directly against the tactical will of the prisoner. The scene also portrays Shakur as she wants most to be seen in her autobiography—as a revolutionary neo-slave. Interestingly, the scene also communicates (perhaps inadvertently) that the critical purpose of the criminal justice and prison systems involves not just reducing, but rather eradicating the agency of the prisoner. Shakur's threat to take matters into her own hands and resist the medical care being inflicted upon—rather than offered—her, causes the guards and doctors to begrudgingly back down, although she must still give up rights in order to get her way. She recounts, “They told me that if i signed a release statement absolving them of all responsibility, they would let Dr. Garrett deliver my baby” (143). Even though Shakur's prenatal medical care was routinely negligent and outright abusive, and even though being under such traumatic distress has already impacted her childbirth experience up to this point, those with the power to make decision about her treatment during pregnancy and labor still manage to avoid future legal action.

Shakur's threats of agency and acts of resistance enable her to assume some degree of control over childbirth. Dr. Garrett is allowed to deliver the baby, and he administers pain management Shakur would have been otherwise denied. Under Dr. Garrett's attention, Shakur describes her daughter's birth as “peaceful and beautiful—out of sight” (144). She notes, “It's very important for a woman to go through the birth experience with people she trusts,” which implies that women prisoners are regularly denied this arguably basic human right. The fact that Shakur experiences such an

empowering and serene birth in the midst of prison torture and abuse on her body makes an important statement in her narrative. It is significant that this moment, perhaps one of the most physically challenging of her life, provides an opportunity for radical possibility. Childbirth is “peaceful and beautiful” for Shakur not because it is physically painless, but because she is able to assert agency over how it is handled. The moment conveys the notion that it is not the physical pain of prison punishment that Shakur finds distressing, dehumanizing, or disempowering, but its rightlessness and removal of agency. The physically pained body symbolizes its legally enslaved status.

Once Shakur has given birth, her limited agency is rebuked once more, as she is quickly taken out of the maternity ward and placed in the hospital’s psychiatric unit. Even her maternal right and desire to nurse her baby is impeded. Her daughter is kept in the nursery, and nurses ignore Shakur’s requests to have her brought to her hospital room so she can breastfeed. When Dr. Garrett, who returned home to rest after the delivery, returns to the hospital over 12 hours later, he must intercede and remind the nurses that Shakur’s baby needs to be breastfed. Again using bureaucratic procedures as a weapon, the nurses inform him that he never wrote a prescription for breastfeeding, so the baby has been held in the nursery and given formula (despite her mother’s repeated requests to the contrary). Under the doctor’s stressed orders, nurses finally begin to bring Shakur the baby every four hours to be nursed. In these early moments of her life, Shakur’s newborn daughter is imaged as a prisoner, whose rightless condition (like that of slave children) follows her mother’s. The hospital staff, like those of the prisons she has inhabited, has little concern for the fact that Shakur’s body is still recovering from childbirth, and

continue treating her like a criminal, though she still has not been convicted of any charges. Shakur's recovery is as punitive as her experiences in the carceral space:

They allowed me only one shower a day. No toothbrush or toothpaste, only mouthwash. They don't furnish it, a friend can't bring it, and the prison won't allow it. I had to beg them for a bra while i was nursing. The prison refused to let me bring one. Many strange doctors tried to examine me to hasten my discharge and get rid of me. I came close to physically brawling with a couple of them because i refused their examinations. Finally, they discharged me anyway, without the consent of my doctor. The Commissioner of Corrections, Benjamin Malcolm, had signed a paper taking all responsibility for my discharge.

They put me in an ambulance, chained me to a stretcher, and brought me back to the Women's House of Detention at Rikers Island. They took me straight to the infirmary and said, "You will have to stay here and be examined." I was really depressed having been separated so abruptly from my baby. I said, "I don't want to be here. I won't be examined here. Send me to PSA [punitive segregation area: solitary confinement], anywhere. I don't care. I just have to be somewhere by myself. (144)

This point in Shakur's tactical resistance is tragic. Because she is so physically pained and weak, she only wants prison staff to leave her alone—she requests not that they help, support, or care for her, but that they let her be. Even in the midst of postpartum physical and psychological discomfort, Shakur attempts a moment of resistance against the punishment she is receiving. In the face of this resistance, the system only retaliates with more abuse and torture on her body—depriving her of the medical care she needs and contributing to her further physical decline. The correctional officers' retaliation reads like a description of an attempted murder, or the barbarous act of a master on an insubordinate slave.⁵⁴ Shakur's account continues as follows:

⁵⁴ Deborah Gray White discusses the brutality of punishments on slave women in the plantation South, while Barbara Bush-Slimani historicizes similar practices (most notably, on slave mothers) in British Caribbean slave societies. Both scholars mention the prevalence of solitary confinement and long-term restraints in plantation punishment. Bush-Slimani comments on how these methods were used on pregnant slaves and those who had recently delivered children: "Women still had to endure the public humiliation and discomfort of the 'hand and foot stocks' or solitary confinement, sometimes with the additional debasement of wearing a collar. Punishments lasted from a few hours up to three days, occasionally longer in serious cases. Pregnancy [or recent childbirth] did not guarantee immunity to such harsh punishments....Pregnant women were often kept at field work up to the last few weeks of pregnancy and

When i refused examination, i walked out of the infirmary and they called the goon squad (several large female officers). They all jumped on me and started beating me. They had me on the floor—eventually my arms and legs were chained. They dragged me by the chains to PSA and stopped only when a nurse asked them to please stop. So they put me on a mattress and dragged the mattress. They took me to the observation room and left me, hands and feet cuffed. I had no sanitary napkins, no means to wash myself. The cuffs cut into my skin (the scars are still visible), and my wrists were bleeding. Later i found out that i had received an infraction for slapping an officer in the face while they were beating me.

I still refused their medical examination. They finally brought me napkins. I was left on a mattress, on the floor, no bed and no shower. I was there for two weeks. I continued to refuse all their medical attention, insisting that Dr. Garret examine me. I refused to eat, so eventually my breasts, which were full of milk, stopped hurting. They offered doctors of all kinds and drugs (mainly tranquilizers)...The Disciplinary Board met in front of my cell and gave me an additional sentence of fourteen days in PSA. All other inmates were cleared out of PSA. During this time i was still refusing most food. I was so weak i fainted a couple a couple of times. (144-145)

In this excerpt, punishment and resistance are once again closely linked to the body. At a physically challenging time, Shakur's body is brutalized yet she continues to maintain her limited agency by protesting the violence of her imprisonment. Every nonviolent act of resistance on Shakur's part meets a violent counterpoint with corrections staff. Her refusal to be examined leads to being savagely beaten by correctional officers a mere 48 hours after giving birth, continued refusals lead to further infractions and solitary sequestration, while a hunger strike prompts a longer sentence in isolation. This scene evokes further parallels between incarceration and slavery. The image of a shackled Shakur, whose cuffs cut into her skin, being dragged "by the chains" into solitary confinement mirrors that of slave women being viciously beaten for minor infractions hours or days after childbirth. Left for weeks in solitary, without proper postpartum care or hygiene, Shakur's body loses the empowering strength and vociferousness it gained

were expected to return to work no later than three weeks after delivery. They suffered from many gynaecological [sic] complaints...which could be lifelong" (86). *Assata* illustrates how the same punishing practices, left over from slavery, continue in the contemporary American prison.

through radical motherhood. She undergoes a physical decline, as well as a mental one. Her breasts—“which were full,” Shakur noticeably points out—lose their milk, a development that also occurred in slave mothers whose breastmilk dried up quickly after they were forced to labor in the fields too soon after childbirth.⁵⁵ For Shakur, the loss of her milk symbolizes and complements her atrophying agency at this point in her narrative. No longer nurturing the growing life in her womb, and no longer permitted to nurse or even hold her daughter, Shakur’s body temporarily loses the vitality it retained while it was being utilized as a vessel of resistance. Arguably, motherhood becomes Shakur’s most radical act of resistance in part because it meets the most extreme form of punishment described in her narrative.

It is this brutal, ultimately yearlong postpartum stint in solitary confinement that Shakur credits as playing a role in her eventual conviction. The time in isolation, during which she is not only kept away from her baby but also denied all human contact, leaves Shakur psychologically traumatized and physically broken. Each of Shakur’s seven trials forms its own “theater of the absurd,” but proper representation (which she is quick to point out that most black American defendants do not have the privilege of obtaining) manages to garner her a series of acquittals, until her first trial post-pregnancy (251). After the savage abuse she suffered in solitary, Shakur’s defenses are down. Though she has remained silent at every other trial, she decides to testify on her own behalf in this one, a misguided decision. Her presence on the witness stand resembles that of a trauma victim from her description: “The year of solitary confinement had made me almost

⁵⁵ Davis relates stories about “women who had sucking children [and] suffered much from their breasts becoming full of milk, the infants being left at home...”. Since these women often “could not keep up with the other hands,” it was not uncommon to see “the overseer beat them with raw hide so that the blood and the milk flew mingled from their breasts” (“Reflections” 105).

mute. As i testified, i held on to a small picture of my child” (252). Under the posttraumatic stress of having spent the past year in solitary confinement, Shakur’s usually sharp tongue and eloquent voice have been significantly dulled. Testifying on her own behalf at the murder trial, she is not given a platform to share her version of events but deliberately rattled with a vigorous interrogation from the prosecution. From the viewpoint expressed in her narrative, Shakur’s trial was a “sham” that her participation only legitimized: “By participating, i participated in my own oppression. I should have known better and not lent dignity or credence to that sham” (252). Convicted of the murder of two New Jersey state troopers, Shakur is placed in maximum-security prison.⁵⁶

Freeing the Body

Arguably, choosing motherhood amidst imprisonment is the most radical act of resistance described in *Assata*. However, a scene toward the end of Shakur’s narrative shows that her affirmation of life amidst the death of prison punishment is not entirely unproblematic. In one of her last recollections of prison, Shakur writes,

My mother brings my daughter to see me at the clinton correctional facility for women....I am delirious. She looks so tall. I run up to kiss her. She barely responds. She is distant and standoffish. Pangs of guilt and sorrow fill my chest. I can see that my child is suffering. It is stupid to ask what is wrong. She is four years old, and except for these pitiful little visits...she has never been with her mother....I try to play....It does not work. My daughter refuses to play baby elephant, or tiger, or anything....

I go over and try to hug her. In a hot second she is all over me. All i can feel are these little four-year-old fists banging away at me. Every bit of her force is in those punches, they really hurt. I let her hit me until she is tired. “It’s all right,” i tell her. “Let it all out.” She is standing in front of me, her face contorted

⁵⁶ Though she was never convicted of a federal crime, Shakur was transported to the maximum-security federal prison for women at Alderson, West Virginia, due to the interstate compact agreement that enables the U.S. government to ship, like human cargo, any prisoner to any jail in any U.S. territory (regardless of where she is from, where she has been convicted, or where her loved ones or legal representatives live). At Alderson, Shakur is temporarily housed with infamous, self-proclaimed political prisoner Lolita Lebrón. When the maximum-security unit at Alderson closes, Shakur is shipped back to New Jersey, to the Clinton Correctional Facility, where she eventually escapes (Shakur 253).

with anger, looking spent. She backs away and leans against the wall. “It’s okay,” i tell her. “Mommy understands.” “You’re not my mother,” she screams, the tears rolling down her face. “You’re not my mother and I hate you.” I feel like crying too. I know she is confused about who i am. She calls me Mommy Assata and she calls my mother Mommy. (257-258)

Having a daughter while in prison may symbolically allow Shakur to possess a bit of freedom (vicariously, through the child she conceived while inside), but that defiant act in no way protects her from the practical shortcomings of remaining unable to raise her daughter, or even participate much in her upbringing, due to being incarcerated. Moreover, the fact that the only way she can ever see or interact with her child involves bringing her into the intense and emotionally ossifying prison space makes Shakur’s brand of radical motherhood even more challenging for her and problematic for readers of her narrative. When her daughter accuses her of being able to leave whenever she wants to, Shakur suggests she try to pry open the barred door that leads to the visitation room. Shakur recounts, “She pulls and she pushes. She yanks and she hits and she kicks the bars until she falls on the floor, a heap of exhaustion....There is a look of resignation on her face that i can’t stand” (258). Shakur remembers that look of resignation on her daughter’s face as a reverberating punishment—the effect of her imprisonment on her child.

Apart from the “pangs of guilt and sorrow” admitted to here, as well as the fact that the usually stolid Shakur “feel[s] like crying” when her child rejects her, this passage reads not like self-reflection, but rather an indictment of the American criminal justice and penal systems. According to Shakur, these corrupt systems keep her imprisoned for crimes she is innocent of having committed, and also cause her daughter and mother to

suffer indeterminately.⁵⁷ It is the penal system, which punishes Shakur for her political radicalism more than for any particular crime, that overwrites her motherhood in this scene, preventing her daughter from calling her “Mommy” or even seeing her as a stable maternal figure. As prison health practitioner and medical scholar Catherine Fisher Collins notes, these systems “on one hand [want] the mother to have control of her children, but on the other hand [see] her as unfit and not worthy to be a mother” (78). Shakur uses this scene—its images of family life ruptured, mother-daughter relationships fragmented by incarceration—to exemplify her reasons for escaping the Clinton Correctional Facility.⁵⁸ Seeing her daughter leave that day, waving goodbye with a clouded look that combined worry and resignation, and “looking like a little adult,” prompts Shakur to start planning her escape. After that visit, she writes, “I [went] back to my cage and [cried] till I vomit[ed]. I decide[d] that it [was] time to leave” (258).

During a subsequent visitation on November 2, 1979, during which three members of the Black Liberation Army came to see Shakur at the Clinton Correctional Facility, Shakur managed to perform the ultimate act of resistance by escaping prison. Though her narrative does not furnish details about her escape,⁵⁹ it was later revealed that Shakur’s visitors held hostage two correctional officers using concealed weapons, and the

⁵⁷ In a 1997 study called *The Imprisonment of African American Women*, Catherine Fisher Collins comments on the particularly punishing aspects of incarceration on children (and by extension, families) whose mothers are in prison. Collins notes that black women in prison, like their counterparts in slavery, must “delegate and distribute the mother’s role to other family members, most often the grandmother.... Without the help of the extended family members, most children of prisoners would become wards of the state and be placed in the foster care system” (78).

⁵⁸ In an essay on the ways Harriet Jacobs’s maternal identity acts as a form of resistance in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, Stephanie Li argues, “Many female slaves were unable to keep their families together, yet by emphasizing the oppositional action inspired by maternal sentiment Jacobs presents motherhood as a force that resists slavery and its supporters” (15). Shakur’s decision to escape prison, which she presents as “inspired by maternal sentiment” in her narrative, arguably extends such a portrayal of motherhood into the American prison.

⁵⁹ In the narrative of a fugitive slave like Frederick Douglass, the details of the subject’s flight to freedom were also sometimes obscured in order to protect those who had assisted the fugitive in escaping.

group managed to commandeer a prison van. They drove the van out through an unfenced part of the facility and met up with two waiting getaway cars (Hanley). Shakur fled to Havana, Cuba, where she remains to this day, periodically releasing statements to her supporters and scathing critiques of the American criminal justice system through a personal website. She was placed on the FBI's Most Wanted Terrorists list again in 2013. In her postscript, Shakur's descriptions of Havana highlight how different a place it is in terms of race relations: "Blacks and whites could be seen together everywhere—in cars, walking down streets. Kids of all races played together" (269). Shakur's new homeland makes her think about how she experienced freedom in the U.S. as a form of slavery. She issues a reminder of how the legacy of slavery remains a vital undercurrent in American society, and in the incarceration experience she recounts, when she warns, "People get used to anything. The less you think about your oppression, the more your tolerance for it grows. After a while, people just think oppression is the normal state of things. But to become free, you have to be acutely aware of being a slave" (262). In her descriptions of her post-prison life, as well as in her narrative's last scene, which depicts her daughter, mother, and aunt landing in Cuba to visit the free Shakur, we are made to believe that in escaping not only the American prison system, but also the U.S. altogether, Shakur has achieved both emancipation and freedom from an oppressive system. The conclusion of her narrative reads like an affirmation of freedom and life, after the deadly enslavement of prison.

Chapter 4

Overwriting False Testimony in *Prison Writings: My Life Is My Sun Dance*

In addition to highlighting the racialized experience of incarceration and confronting social constructions of criminality, contemporary prison literature also challenges Western literary constructs and destabilizes the parameters of conventional autobiography.⁶⁰ Leonard Peltier, American Indian Movement (AIM) activist and widely proclaimed political prisoner, arguably seeks to radically redefine the textual space of the prison autobiography, and by extension readers' understanding of selfhood, by transforming his narrative into a collective site of memory. Peltier's *Prison Writings: My Life Is My Sun Dance* (1999) is a collection of autobiographical sketches, political and legal essays, poetry, and vignettes about life in the Leavenworth federal penitentiary that resists the Western autobiography's standard form. Rather than celebrate the life of its individual subject, *Prison Writings* transforms him into a model for a collective historical analysis. While offering first-hand accounts of Peltier's youth, political activism, and the events that led to his imprisonment, *Prison Writings* also positions the autobiographical self within a larger historical and political framework concerning the continual oppression of Native Americans in the U.S. The pastiche of alternating forms and genres comprising Peltier's prison narrative contextualizes his incarceration within the larger problem of Native American marginalization and criminalization. Peltier manipulates the textual space of his autobiography in order to resist and revise the false testimony that informed his conviction. He turns his text into a platform for the kind of self-

⁶⁰ Texts like those written by Jimmy Santiago Baca, Assata Shakur, and Leonard Peltier exemplify both Caren Kaplan's concept of autobiographical "out-law genres" and Barbara Harlow's ideas about autobiography as resistance literature by challenging conventions of literature and life-writing as they have been established in the West.

representation he was denied by the American legal system. Deviating from the conventions of Western autobiography, Peltier concerns himself with collective self-representation by turning his own history into a record and analysis of his people's lived experiences. Writing from inside the carceral space helps him transcend the isolation of imprisonment, and as such, resist the penal punishment that seeks to silence him.

Peltier's text challenges socio-historical narratives that cast doubt on the testimony of the convicted and portrays criminality as a racialized construct closely linked to Native identity in the U.S. In its challenge to the evidence and testimony that earned Peltier his conviction, *Prison Writings* also repositions the American government as the real criminal in this case.

A citizen of the Anishinabe/Lakota Nation, Peltier was born on North Dakota's Turtle Mountain Reservation in 1944. During his youth, Peltier's community experienced extreme poverty largely due to the federal government's lack of oversight of the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA), the agency charged with maintaining and supplying resources to lands held in trust for Native Americans in the U.S. In *Prison Writings*, Peltier recalls that one of his first brushes with the law involved an attempt to steal heating oil for his family's home, an incident that helped contribute to his being branded a "hardened criminal" (a term he invokes ironically at various points in the text). He uses the incident to exemplify the measures he and his community members had to resort to just to survive under BIA management of their lands. Peltier's attempted theft, a desperate measure provoked by state-sanctioned scarcity, in turn begins to solidify his socially and legally constructed criminalization (Matthiessen 41). Raised by his Sioux grandmother who spoke only Ojibwa, Peltier learned English when he became one of

hundreds of Native youths forced to attend BIA-run boarding schools outside of their communities. When he dropped out after the ninth grade, Peltier worked as a bodyguard to Dennis Banks, cofounder of AIM. Soon, Peltier rose to a position of leadership within AIM, strategizing acts of protest to call attention to the problems of poverty and inadequate health care on BIA-run reservations (*Imprisoned Intellectuals* 311). Peltier led and participated in numerous sit-ins and protests, so his connection to political resistance was in tact long before his incarceration. He became a symbol of Native American criminalization and political persecution after being sentenced to two consecutive life sentences (plus seven years for an attempted escape) for the murder of two FBI agents who were killed in a 1975 shootout on South Dakota's Pine Ridge Reservation.

Since his arraignment in 1975 and conviction in 1977, Peltier often has been called a political prisoner. Peltier's conviction became the source of much controversy due to the lack of material evidence placing him at Pine Ridge on the day of the incident. It has been widely argued that Peltier was targeted by the FBI because of his involvement with AIM, that he was extradited from Canada to the U.S. based in part on false testimony, and that exculpatory evidence was withheld by the government during and before his trial (Ezzo 97). The case gained worldwide attention and, since his 1977 conviction, many prominent individuals and organizations have pressed for Peltier's release. In addition to many noted scholars, lawyers, and civil-rights activists, his list of supporters includes government leaders, human rights organizations, religious groups, and eight Nobel Prize winners (Ezzo). Amnesty International placed the case on its list of "Unfair Trials" in its 2010 Annual Report. These venerated voices have questioned

and challenged Peltier's incarceration for decades. Peltier has come to symbolize and give voice to social injustices that marginalize, oppress, and hypercriminalize Native peoples in the U.S. and abroad.

Peltier's story and the case that led to his now-40-year imprisonment exemplify many of the inequities in the contemporary American criminal justice system. According to Peltier, he also personifies the hypercriminalization and persecution of Native Americans in the U.S. since the colonial era. In his text, Peltier explains that his life and imprisonment cannot be comprehended apart from his people's ongoing history:

My life is an Indian life. I'm a small part of a much larger story. If I ever have the years of freedom necessary to write another book, I'll appear in it only as a minor character. The personal specifics of my life are unimportant. Being an Indian, that's what's important. My autobiography is the story of my people, the Indian people of the Great Turtle Island. My life has meaning only in relation to them. It's insignificant in and of itself. Only when I identify with my people do I cease being a mere statistic, a meaningless number, and become a human being. (43)

In turning his personal narrative into a collective history, Peltier seeks to be self-effacing, to give his life story greater meaning "only in relation" to the story of his people.

Another "meaningless number" he points to is his birthday, a personal fact commonly found in the introductory passages of most Western autobiographies, but one which Peltier does not feel compelled to mention until 70 pages into his narrative.⁶¹ Much more important to his people's history, he asserts, are "all the other calamitous dates" that preceded his birth and marked the continued oppression of Native Americans. Peltier explains, "My own personal story can't be told...without going back long before my own birth...back to 1890 and to 1876 and to 1868 and to 1851 and...back to that darkest day of all in human history: October 12, 1492, when our Great Sorrow began" (50). In

⁶¹ The conventional "I was born..." statement that opens many Western autobiographies, as well as African-American slave narratives, appears at the beginning of Chapter 16 of *Prison Writings*: "I was born on September 12, 1944, in Grand Forks, North Dakota" (Peltier 71).

carving out a starting point for his autobiography that traces his people's long history of political oppression, Peltier makes the statement that his life narrative encompasses much more than just his own life.

Autobiography as Resistance

Like Assata Shakur's *Assata: An Autobiography* (1987), *Prison Writings* shares formal parallels with antebellum slave narratives and likens the experience of unjust incarceration to slavery. The narrative's preface introduces the idea that Americans remain unfamiliar with their country's true history, or at least would not understand that history from the perspective of a Lakota Indian and convicted prisoner like Peltier. Written by Ramsey Clark, a former U.S. Attorney General and legal counsel to Peltier, the preface validates the veracity of the narrative, much like the authenticating preface of an abolitionist like William Lloyd Garrison endorsed the writing of Frederick Douglass in the antebellum era.⁶² Clark vehemently extols Peltier's innocence and indicts the federal government for his conviction. Implicitly, the presence of this authenticating preface in Peltier's narrative establishes a commonality between the prisoner and the slave. Dispossessed of citizenship and political personhood, each is denied credibility in the public sphere. The inclusion of this preface implies that the endorsement of a white (male) American with some renown helps substantiate and lends greater validity to Peltier's version of the facts, as well as his contextualization of his conviction within a

⁶² Both William L. Andrews and Robert B. Stepto have written extensively about slave narratives, as well as their authenticating devices. Andrews notes, "Typically, the antebellum slave narrative carries a black message inside a white envelope. Prefatory (and sometimes appended) matter by whites attests to the reliability and good character of the black narrator while calling attention to what the narrative would reveal about the moral abominations of slavery." Clark's preface in *Prison Writings* conforms to this formal tradition by seeking to "authenticate the veracity of the [narrative] that [follows]" ("How to Read a Slave Narrative"). Stepto addresses Garrison's preface specifically, establishing another parallel to Clark's, by arguing that in its substantiation of Douglass's narrative, "Garrison's preface stands outside Douglass's tale but is steadfastly bound to it" (Stepto 4).

broader scheme of Native oppression. In his preface, Clark is quick to corroborate

Peltier's innocence and clarifies the context of his incarceration for a non-Native reader:

I think I can explain beyond serious doubt that Leonard Peltier has committed no crime whatsoever....Not a single credible witness said they saw Leonard take aim at anybody that tragic day at Oglala in June 1975 on the Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota. There was absolutely no evidence that he killed anyone – except fabricated and utterly misleading circumstantial evidence. Among the many, many things withheld in his alarmingly unfair trial – a trial that disgraced, and continues to disgrace, the American judicial system – was the staggering violence on the Pine Ridge Reservation that led directly to the events of that day. (xiv-xv)

Clark's preface presupposes that readers will lack familiarity with the routine violence, injustice, and denial of human rights occurring on Native reservations within their own country, but will understand the gross miscarriages of legal procedure that took place in Peltier's case. In other words, Clark insinuates that non-Native readers inhabit another America from the one Peltier and his people know. In Clark's view, Peltier is a victim, because he is subjected to the condemnation, yet denied the protection, of the American government.⁶³ Clark's preface also positions the government as the perpetrator in the Peltier case. By underscoring the lack of evidence against Peltier, Clark suggests the government's investigation was politically motivated and biased. His preface seeks to destabilize readers' preconceptions by giving Peltier's testimony a position of authority over federal prosecutors' questionable "evidence."

Moreover, Clark links the government's persecution of Peltier to colonialism and the state-sanctioned disenfranchisement of Native Americans, writing, "By imprisoning Leonard Peltier, those who keep him locked away from his people continue the

⁶³ In *Social Death: Racialized Rightlessness and the Criminalization of the Unprotected* (2012), Lisa Marie Cacho refers to such a status as "rightlessness," a condition affecting criminalized minority and immigrant populations in the U.S.—the very groups Michelle Alexander calls the American "undercaste" in *The New Jim Crow*—who are "denied the right to have rights" (Cacho 4). These criminalized groups, Cacho notes, fall under the punitive, but not the protective, jurisdiction of our law enforcement and criminal justice systems (5).

government's dishonorable, centuries-old policy of domination over, and oppression of, Indian peoples. Leonard Peltier is the very symbol of that domination and continuing oppression. Is it any wonder he's called a 'political prisoner'?" (xxi). Imaging Peltier as "the very symbol" of government hostility toward Native people transforms him into the martyr of a social (and racial) cause, an image Peltier continues to hone when he takes control of the narrative. This portrayal also helps position Peltier as a representational victim, rather than a criminal. Here again, *Prison Writings* echoes its slave narrative predecessors, which frequently upheld their subjects' commonness as the reason why their stories were exemplary and why readers should support abolition.⁶⁴ Like the formerly enslaved writer, Peltier is not supposed to be a special case but a "painfully ordinary" one; his story is not exceptional, as it merely highlights the myriad forms of oppression against Native Americans in the U.S. Clark's preface makes clear that, as a representative voice, Peltier must also strike a delicate balance between being a credible witness and a common man. In order for his story to motivate readers politically and propel them to protest on his behalf, his incarceration must epitomize grievous injustice in the American legal system. Nevertheless, in order for that injustice to come across as widespread and deeply embedded in the national fabric, his story must appear simultaneously shocking and mundane. Clark points out that Peltier's narrative is an emphatically political testament being written to persuade readers of the government's guilt and Peltier's innocence, as well as to achieve the pragmatic aim of freeing Peltier. In short, Peltier's martyrdom paradoxically forms the fate his writing strives to resist.

Clark lends responsibility and a collective sense of urgency to the implied reader, making

⁶⁴ Andrews refers to this rhetorical strategy as the "exceptional everyman," both degraded by the slave system and "elevated from his 'inferior' condition." He emphasizes, "The reception of his narrative as truth depended on the degree to which his artfulness could hide his art" (*To Tell a Free Story* 3).

his preface the kind of call to arms frequently found in antebellum slave narratives. He argues, “The president of the United States can commute [Peltier’s] sentence in the name of justice any moment he wants to . . . We have to demand that he does it . . . Each of us and all of us must raise our voices in a chorus of millions, of tens of millions” (xxii). This plea to readers, which Peltier continues in his foreword and throughout his text, grants them political power based on their ability to be persuaded and moved by the text. Only by galvanizing the reader can *Prison Writings* accomplish its purported objective, to “educate an unknowing and uncaring public about the terrible conditions Native Americans and all indigenous people around the world continue to endure” (8). Though by seizing control of a textual space that enables him to testify on behalf of his people and self-represent in the manner he was denied in court, Peltier also seeks to overwrite and help overturn his own conviction.

The political circumstances around Peltier’s imprisonment turn his autobiographical narrative into more than an individualized self-study. Peltier’s task as a writer is a demanding one, which entails examining how he symbolizes the exclusion and condemnation of Native voices in American politics, history, and literature. As such, *Prison Writings* is not a conventional American autobiography, depicting personal transformation or the acquisition of material or spiritual successes. The work follows in the traditions of both autobiographical “out-law genres” and resistance literature,⁶⁵ by speaking to the ways Native voices have been ostracized from the historical record and

⁶⁵ In “Resisting Autobiography: Out-Law Genres and Transnational Feminist Subjects” (1992), Caren Kaplan contends that hybrid autobiographical texts like prison narratives “constitute strategic political moves” for women, ethnic, and immigrant writers not wanting to write their lives according to culturally available scripts. Kaplan notes, “Locating out-law genres enables a destruction of the ‘master’ genres, revealing the power dynamics embedded in literary production, distribution, and reception” (119). In *Resistance Literature* (1987), Barbara Harlow makes similar claims about prison narratives written by political detainees, arguing that such texts “are actively engaged in a re-definition of the self and the individual in terms of a collective enterprise” (120).

establishing significant parallels between incarceration and Native identity in the U.S. The text also speaks back to Western autobiographical conventions by disrupting readers' expectations and turning the self into a "collective enterprise" (Harlow 120). Peltier's narrative does not follow a linear, cause-and-effect chronology, nor does it lend personal significance to life events, but rather repeatedly upholds its subject and his experiences as representative of a larger group. The experiences Peltier is concerned with recording and detailing in *Prison Writings* are not his own, but the collective experiences of his people, who have been victimized by hegemonic strategies of racial control. As he clarifies in his text's early sections, "I am ordinary. Painfully ordinary" (9). Although Peltier demonstrates a preoccupation with righting the wrong of his conviction, he also repeatedly points out that he is not special and that his case is but one example of America's hostility toward its Native peoples.

Prison Writings draws upon, and then subverts, the conventions of Western autobiography. As Deena Rymhs notes in "Discursive Delinquency in Leonard Peltier's *Prison Writings*" (2002), Peltier is only interested in offering explanations when they serve to defend his people's actions, and his understanding of spirituality and the afterlife jettisons Judeo-Christian concepts in favor of Anishinabe and Lakota cosmologies. Rymhs argues, "Autobiography, in Peltier's handling, becomes a site of resistance—a medium for disrupting the authority of legal and Christian discourse while simultaneously exploring the development of his consciousness..." (564). Peltier manipulates the autobiographical mode by using it as a vehicle through which to dialogue with history. His writing illustrates scholar Ioan Davies's assertion that "[m]ost prison writing is autobiographical, and yet, like all autobiographies, it is inserted into other

situations, other dialogues. [No] account can...stand by itself, however it is written” (120). Davies makes this point to emphasize that reading texts like prison autobiographies apart from their historical, political, and cultural frameworks means receiving an incomplete impression, uninformed by the role they perform for their imagined communities. Similarly, even in its autobiographical sketches, *Prison Writings* seeks to be read as a collective document, a “personal testament” about a common struggle (Peltier 8). As Rymhs contends, “The text becomes a site of discursive intervention where the literary strategies summoned by the author correspond to the political struggle surrounding the writing” (565). The text articulates a collective understanding of the self, implying that Peltier’s story is part of a longer historical narrative, a mere thread in a larger fabric.

In its opening sections, as well as throughout the text, Peltier adopts the conventions of Western autobiography, like the apologia, in order to later destabilize and revise them. Peltier implies the intellectual superiority of his readers, while at the same time criticizing the political system that governs them. He destabilizes the foundational tenets of the criminal justice system, writing, “Innocence is the weakest defense. Innocence has a single voice that can only say over and over again, ‘I didn’t do it.’ Guilt has a thousand voices, all of them lies” (xxiii). Here, Peltier undermines the traditional stance on guilt and innocence that informs the American legal system. He establishes both guiltlessness and defenselessness within a judicial system that undermines truth (Rymhs 567). His apologia, or formal defense of his actions, subverts the validity of appearing contrite within a system that presupposes his criminality and guilt. He later reinforces these statements, insisting, “This book is not a plea or a justification. Neither is

it an explanation or apology for the events that overtook my life and many other lives in 1975 and made me unwittingly...a symbol, a focus for the sufferings of my people” (9). This proclamation emphasizes collective rather than individual experience. It also further distances Peltier from the standard apologia readers come to expect from prison writings. Here, he makes clear that he will not offer apologies or explanations apart from coming to the defense of Native people (Rymhs 566-567). Elsewhere, he is even more plain-spoken: “I have no apologies, only sorrow. I can’t apologize for what I haven’t done” (13). In rejecting the standard apologia, Peltier creates grounds for what life-writing scholar Leigh Gilmore calls an “alternative hearing,” injecting his testimony with a rejection of justice as “official discourse” (45). His narrative becomes a space for self-representation that overwrites the validity of courtroom justice, offering an opportunity for self-representation apart from criminalization under the law. In its subversion of Western autobiographical conventions and its accentuation of collective rather than individual experience, *Prison Writings* enacts forms of resistance within the textual space that its subject was precluded from executing in the courtroom.

Peltier’s formal introduction also assumes then resists Western autobiographical conventions with its focus on the socially constructed nature of identity. Before identifying himself, Peltier clarifies that he has multiple names, corresponding to the multiple socio-political selves he personifies as an imprisoned Native American. These names and corresponding identities are not self-elected but have been branded onto him. First, and most importantly to Peltier, are the names he has been given by his community:

Like most Indian people, I have several names. In Indian Way, names come to you in the course of life, not just when you’re born....Each name gives you a new sense of yourself and your own possibilities. And each name gives you something to live up to. It points out the direction you’re supposed to take in this life....One

of my names is Tate Wikuwa, which means “Wind Chases the Sun” in the Dakota language....Another name, bestowed on me by my native Canadian brethren, is Gwarth-ee-lass, meaning “He Leads the People.” (61)

Here, Peltier subtly subverts Western conventions by lending plurality and multiplicity to his autobiographical self, who cannot be pinned down to a single name or identity, but possesses many. He validates and gives foremost importance to his Native identities, rather than his Christian name, again breaching the norms of Western autobiography. Peltier values these names because they are earned “in the course of life,” not just bestowed at birth arbitrarily. By extension, he undermines the Western construct that seeks to stabilize identity by prescribing one name. Peltier’s Indian names also symbolize important values to which his narrative gives voice. He explains, “[‘Wind Chases the Sun’], to me, represents total freedom—a goal even most of those outside prison walls never achieve....And the second name—He Leads the People—to me, represents total commitment, a goal I strive for even within these walls, reaching out as best I can to help my people” (61-62). In foregrounding his Indian names and showing how they represent his true character, Peltier indirectly undercuts the importance of his other identities. He spends less time reflecting on his additional names, giving them less power and significance in his narrative:

Here at Leavenworth—in fact anywhere in the U.S. prison system—my official name is #89637-132. Not much imagination, or inspiration, *there*....My Christian name, though I don’t consider myself to be a Christian, is Leonard Peltier. The last name’s French, from the French fur hunters and voyagers who came through our country more than a century ago....My first name was given to me by my grandmother, who said I cried so hard as a baby that I sounded like a “little lion.” She named me Leonard, she said, because it sounded like “lion-hearted.” (62-63)

Significantly, these other names symbolize Peltier’s “othering.” Unlike his Indian names, which he says gave him “a new sense of [myself] and [my] own possibilities”, his prison

and Christian names are portrayed as stagnant and stifling—prescribed identities, rather than earned ones. His prison name carries no “imagination, or inspiration,” while his Christian name contains traces of colonialism. These names contain none of the vitality of his Indian names, nor do they celebrate the continuity of his life. He muses that his grandmother named him Leonard “because it sounded like ‘lion-hearted’”, and later learned that is exactly what the name meant (63). Interestingly, Peltier’s grandmother gives him a Western name, yet infuses it with Native significance and value. By pluralizing his autobiographical self-identification, Peltier wrests a space for commentary about the instability and impermanence of identity. Rather than identify himself by a single name, Peltier calls attention to the ways his various names “tell others who I am” (62). He stresses the socially prescribed nature of these identities, which are branded onto him externally. In these early sections, Peltier implicitly makes a statement about how public identity is a social construction and starts revising what Western readers expect from autobiographical life-writing.

The “Hardened Criminal” and the “Carceral Continuum”

Most important among his socially constructed American identities, Peltier notes, is that of the “hardened criminal,” an ironic characterization he continually invokes to demonstrate the hypercriminalization of Native Americans. He suggests that in his criminalization, he is not an aberration but like all Native people who are branded deviant in the American imagination. Again undercutting conventional ideas about innocence and guilt, he argues, “...when you grow up Indian, you don’t have to become a criminal, you already *are* a criminal. You never know innocence” (67). Framing his narrative with accounts of everyday life in prison, Peltier extends the prison space into the outside world

when he offers autobiographical sketches of his youth. Like Jimmy Santiago Baca in *A Place to Stand* (2001), he destabilizes commonly accepted boundaries between inside and outside, portraying American society at large as imprisoning for Native Americans.

Peltier also revises patriotic notions of freedom by depicting reservation life as punishing and confining. He describes his childhood as an initiation into the practices of persecution and isolation that comprise Native American life. In *Prison Writings*, reservations and other state-sanctioned Native residences are spurious home-spaces (like those Baca describes), seeking to stifle rather than nurture a sense of community.

Numerous parallels between the reservation and the prison underscore the ways both can be viewed as alternative American spaces for socially marginalized and disenfranchised communities.⁶⁶ Harry Daniels, erstwhile President of the Native Council of Canada (now called the Congress of Aboriginal Peoples), once lamented, “One day the whole of the Native population will at some point in their lives be incarcerated, whether it be in foster homes, residential schools, reform schools, provincial, federal, or territorial prisons” (qtd. in Rymhs 565). In *Inventing the Savage: The Social Construction of Native American Criminality* (1998), Luana Ross also describes a network of punitive measures on the outside that resemble prison punishment. These measures are designed to wear away at the sovereignty of Native people, including the prohibition of tribal practices, deracination of Native groups from their land bases, and the forced placement of Native children in government-run boarding schools and foster homes (Ross 3-4). Significantly, a similar network of punishing disciplinary mechanisms underlies what Michel Foucault refers to as the “carceral continuum” (303). As Foucault states, “The

⁶⁶ As Rymhs observes, “For many Native Americans, the prison is not just an apparatus of detention and punishment but a metonymic structure signifying the colonization, criminalization, and containment of an entire people” (565).

prison is merely the natural consequence, no more than a higher degree, of that hierarchy laid down step by step” (301). For Foucault, as for Peltier (and Baca), the prison stands as one of numerous carceral spaces perpetuating hegemonic strategies through confinement, surveillance, and terror.

In *Prison Writings*, the reservation forms part of the “carceral continuum” in its attempts to punish, disempower, and whittle away the rights of Native people. Peltier underscores the alienation of an upbringing on the “rez” marked by poverty and racism. He explains his poverty-stricken community’s estrangement from America at large in terms of geographical immobility, drawing upon and subverting the hostile critiques of passersby who take their own mobility for granted:

People drive through a reservation and see half a dozen junk cars in some Indian family’s front yard and they shake their heads, saying, “These dirty Indians, how can they live like that? Why don’t they get rid of those junkers?”... Those yard junkers take on a special value in Indian eyes: they’re the source of that hard-to-come-by and almost sacred commodity in Indian country—transportation. Without wheels out in the empty distances of the rez, you’re utterly isolated. When the family’s one working car breaks down, one of those yard junkers may provide precisely the part that’s needed so that Pop can drive seventy miles to town each day to his menial job and help feed his often-hungry family. To such a family, those junkers out in the yard represent survival. (69)

Here, Peltier emphasizes the isolation of the reservation, its remoteness from greater society. The hypothetical tourists who belittle the homes on a reservation are “driv[ing] through,” personifying the easy mobility of the upper classes. Interestingly, Peltier writes of these tourists as though are visiting a foreign country within their own nation; their critiques reflect an almost-xenophobic hostility. The Native family he mentions values transportation as a luxury; it is something they have to work for, both through a “menial job” and by making do with available resources. In Peltier’s descriptions of the reservation, its isolation from larger America resembles that of the prison, another “far-

flung repository for undesirables” (Davis xvi). As Scott Bunyan writes of the carceral space, its geographic remoteness connotes the social undesirability of those who live there (179).⁶⁷ Peltier hones in on the symbolism of the “yard junkers” in front of this family’s home not only to point out the different value that poverty lends to these discarded cars, but also to highlight the fact that reservations are usually cut off from mainstream forms of public transportation. This alienation signifies not only geographical but also cultural marginalization. Without easy access to transportation or alternative forms of mobility, the reservation becomes as confining as the carceral space.

In addition to isolation and confinement, Peltier also makes acts of “racial microaggression” a touchstone of Native childhood (Pierce 265).⁶⁸ Like Baca, he describes growing up with the sense that he was always already criminalized for being Native American. Again, Peltier draws from his own youth only to highlight forms of racism experienced by all Native people. He subverts the conventional conception of guilt and innocence that informs the American judicial system by showing how “...[growing up] Indian...you already *are* a criminal. You never know innocence” (67). According to Peltier, society polices Native children, branding them naturally deviant or predisposed to criminal behavior. This frequent form of prejudice robs many Native children of their innocence, causing them to mistrust authority. Of his early experiences

⁶⁷ Like the reservation’s remoteness from centralized urban spaces, the prison’s isolated geography helps “protect” the public from the terror it houses. Bunyan states, “This purposeful seclusion and concealment fulfills a key purpose in relation to punishment...Now, the spectacle of the punishment of prisoners is kept far enough away from the public to allow them to maintain a pose of ‘ignorance’...This neatly allows the public on the outside to avoid feelings of guilt, while safeguarding continuing abuses on the inside within the prison system” (178). Peltier arguably implies the same ideas about the reservation’s “seclusion and concealment.”

⁶⁸ As mentioned in Chapter 1, Chester Pierce coined the term “microaggressions” to describe the myriad ways racialized individuals are impacted by quotidian, cumulatively demoralizing acts of racism (265). Critical race scholars draw upon the concept to demonstrate the snowballing effects of daily racism on both individuals and communities.

with non-Native children, store owners, BIA officials, and law enforcement officers, Peltier recalls, “I’m seven or eight by now and beginning to understand the meaning of hate and racism. It seemed as if all white people hated us, and I was beginning to hate just as much” (Matthiessen 41-42). As a child, Peltier learns to suspect anyone who seems “mainstream” because he anticipates they will always already brand him a “bad kid” (65). In a section that parallels Baca’s descriptions of the racial microaggressions he experienced in his youth, Peltier writes that being followed or harassed by police forms a routine part of growing up Native American:

Ask any Indian kid: you’re out just walking across the street of some little off-reservation town and there’s this white cop suddenly comes up to you, grabs you by your long hair, pushes you up against a car, frisks you, gives you a couple good jabs in the ribs with his nightstick, then sends you off with a warning sneer: “Watch yourself, Tonto!” He doesn’t do that to white kids, just Indians. (66)

The frequency of this sort of harassment causes Peltier and his friends to fear the police. They learn to view law enforcement as a persecuting, rather than protective, force. Acts of racial microaggression like the ones described above also prompt Native youths like Peltier to recognize that police officers will accuse and arrest, but not defend, them.

Lisa Marie Cacho writes about criminalized minority populations like Native Americans in *Social Death: Racialized Rightlessness and the Criminalization of the Unprotected* (2012), stressing that, “As targets of regulation and containment, they are deemed deserving of discipline and punishment but not worthy of protection. They are not merely excluded from legal protection but criminalized as always already the object and target of law, never its authors or addressees” (5). Her arguments align well with Peltier’s assertions about Native American hypercriminalization. Like many Native youths, his early encounters with law enforcement cause him to view the law suspiciously

as a tool to undermine his rights, rather than protect them. Cacho further emphasizes, “people who occupy legally vulnerable and criminalized statuses are not just excluded from justice; criminalized populations and the places where they live *form the foundation* of the U.S. legal system” (5). Peltier agrees that without the criminalized “other” figure that minority groups and the working classes frequently supply, law enforcement officers would not know whom to suspect or accuse. He places added emphasis on the fact that law enforcement needs the hypercriminalized as part of its political narrative. Echoing Auli Ek’s characterization of the American penal system,⁶⁹ Peltier writes, “Truth is, they actually need us. Who else would they fill up their jails and prisons with in places like the Dakotas and New Mexico if they didn’t have Indians? ...We keep the system going. We help give the American system of injustice the criminals it needs” (66-67).

Peltier also writes about how hypercriminalization provokes reverberating social repercussions. When his family temporarily moves to Butte, Montana looking for work, they rapidly become the target of hostility and aggression. Off the reservation, Peltier feels ostracized and othered, unable to make any friends. He is frequently bullied or harassed by white children. The adults in his family encourage him to keep his head down and ignore any instigation, in order to help them maintain their low profile in the community. They dissuade Peltier from defending himself against threats of violence, indirectly implying that racial microaggressions form an ordinary part of Native life. He recalls one event when he refused to cower from a group of white children pelting him with rocks. When he injures one child, Peltier runs home to hide, only to be followed by the child’s mother. He writes,

⁶⁹ As noted in Chapter 1, Ek writes that the prison system’s narrative of punishment and reform “constructs the prisoner as the personification of criminality and, thus, as the racial, sexual, and criminal other of America” (109).

...A while later a big shiny automobile came pulling up in front of our little rented house. Big shiny automobiles always spelled trouble for Indians. A white woman got out. She was yelling and screaming and carrying on, warning that she was going to have me put away in the reformatory and calling Gamma [sic] dirty names like “stupid bitch” and “filthy squaw,” things like that. When she left she shouted she was going right to the police, have the whole “dirty bunch” of us thrown in jail. (76)

The incident causes Peltier’s whole family to pack up and quickly move out of town, so as to avoid further retaliation from the community. The event illustrates how Native people face persecution socially as well as by law enforcement. Cacho argues that some groups who are targeted this way have been socially and legally branded “ineligible for personhood,”⁷⁰ and are denied what philosopher Hannah Arendt calls “the right to have rights” (qtd. in Cacho 6). Cacho calls this status a form of social death. Peltier’s accounts of the frequent acts of racial microaggression he faced from early in his youth corroborate Cacho’s assertions.

After Peltier’s grandfather dies of pneumonia, his family is left without a breadwinner and the children are sent to a boarding school run by the BIA. Peltier remembers the BIA school he attended as his first experience of imprisonment.⁷¹ He writes, “One day in the fall of 1953, a big black government car came and took us kids away to the Bureau of Indian Affairs boarding school in Wahpeton, North Dakota. I remember Gamma [sic] weeping in the doorway as she watched them take us off” (77).

⁷⁰ Cacho defines what it means to be “ineligible for personhood” when she links this concept to being permanently criminalized. She refers to these legally and socially ostracized groups as “populations subjected to laws but refused the legal means to contest those laws as well as denied both the political legitimacy and moral credibility necessary to question them” (6). Peltier illustrates this concept in the ways he describes the law’s treatment of Native Americans like himself.

⁷¹ As Joy James notes in a biographical profile on Peltier that accompanies one of his anthologized writings, “For most Native American youths at the time, the only opportunity for education on the reservation was in racist, government-sponsored boarding schools. Largely designed to assimilate Native children, these boarding schools denied students the right to speak in their native language or practice traditional customs and proved a leading cause in the dissolution or loss of Native traditions and culture” (*Imprisoned Intellectuals* 311).

Peltier's deliberate "I remember" here seeks to counteract the devastation of that childhood rupture from his home and family. By remembering the incident, committing it to his personal narrative, Peltier seeks to purge and heal the pain it caused. Once they arrive at Wahpeton, Peltier and his siblings experience an intake procedure comparable to those endured by prisoners. Upon admission, the children are stripped naked and doused with powdered DDT (78). Their long hair is cut off, the start of a strict discipline that will soon veer into physical abuse. Peltier recalls, "It was more like a reformatory than a school. You were whacked on the butt with a yardstick for the smallest infraction, even if you so much as looked someone in the eye. That was considered insubordination, trying to relate to another person as a human being" (78).⁷² At the school, Native children frequently face punishment for speaking any language other than English. The proscription of their mother tongue, and by extension ethnicity, bolsters their sense of being criminalized. Peltier remembers sneaking off behind the school with friends to smoke and "talk Indian," the language being as forbidden as the cigarette. Wahpeton becomes another spurious home space for Peltier, more punishing than the reservation in its isolation from family. Peltier refers to his time in boarding school as "my first imprisonment" and claims "it was for the same crime as all the others: being an Indian" (78). He writes, "I guess that's where I became a 'hardened criminal,' as the FBI calls me" (78). The oft-repeated term "hardened criminal" again contains an ironic inflection, echoing the easy judgments branded onto Natives like Peltier. Beneath this irony, Peltier

⁷² Peltier also discusses how any attempts at human connection are grounds for punishment in prison, where he has "been beaten in the past for the high crime of passing half a sandwich to another inmate" (23). This dehumanization establishes another commonality between the BIA school he attended in his youth and the carceral space he currently inhabits.

here critiques the social construction of Native criminality and the nebulous boundary between delinquent and criminal (Rymhs 565).

As part of the Indian termination policies of the Eisenhower era, the Indian Relocation Act of 1956 causes Native families like Peltier's to relocate to urban centers where they supposedly will find greater employment opportunities (Matthiessen 85). In *Prison Writings*, Peltier overwrites the legal euphemisms of these federal policies with language that reflects the fear these laws provoked in Native families. He refers to these laws as "termination and relocation" policies and compares them to forms of genocide: "Those suddenly became the most important, the most feared, words in our vocabulary: 'termination' and 'relocation.' ...I guess the Jews of Europe must have felt that way about Nazi words like 'final solution' and 'resettlement in the East.' To us, those words were an assault on our very existence as a people, an attempt to eradicate us" (80). Peltier's comparison of Indian termination policies to the Holocaust is more than a historical analogy. Here, he seeks to underscore the devastation caused by these termination policies by comparing them to a more frequently historicized genocide. This comparison illuminates the fact that these policies were federally sanctioned forms of terror and violence on Native American communities. In order to implement the Indian Relocation Act, the Eisenhower administration cuts off federal aid for reservations, so families like Peltier's are "given two choices: either relocate or starve" (80). Peltier contextualizes this experience in terms of a larger history of oppression against Native Americans, and relates how it created chaos on the reservation and left his own family homeless:

"Termination" was nothing new in red-white relations, really. They'd been trying to terminate us since 1492....With the reservation under threat of termination, housing was severely limited. Our lands were being leased right out from under us by white ranchers and mining interests, or annexed by the U.S. government. My

family, like many others, wound up with nowhere to stay. We were being all but forced off the rez to go to the newly sprouting urban “red ghettos” the government was so keen on sending us to. Sometimes we shuttled between relatives, sometimes we slept in the car. (81)

This account of termination’s effects on Native communities makes a direct link between colonialism and contemporary regulation of Native lands. These practices disenfranchise Native Americans and create broad-ranging consequences that make American freedom feel imprisoning.

In his youth, Peltier begins enacting forms of resistance by clinging tightly to his Native tongue and traditions, even when he is prohibited from doing so. While he rebels at boarding school by speaking his own language, he also resists proscriptions against Native religious customs through his performance of the Sun Dance, illegal in his youth because it involved the rite of piercing (83). Though non-Native readers might not be familiar with the act or may find it taboo, Peltier’s deliberate celebration of the Sun Dance operates as a textual form of resistance. In his narrative, the Sun Dance is repeatedly invoked as a healing and spiritually affirming practice that counteracts oppression. Even in his subtitle, *My Life Is My Sun Dance*, Peltier elevates the importance of this Native spiritual practice and gives it a place of textual authority. The significance given to the Sun Dance in the text directly relates to a rejection of Western values and an embrace of Native traditions. Peltier recalls emerging from the Sun Dance grounds one night with a group of friends, only to be met and quickly arrested by BIA police, who accuse them of being intoxicated (a claim Peltier vehemently denies). Peltier notes, “Here I was, not yet fifteen, and already I was getting firsthand experience in government-fabricated criminal charges and false imprisonment. I began to realize that my real crime was simply being who I was—an Indian” (84).

The fact that their own cultural practices are legally forbidden, that they are labeled “hardened criminals” simply for practicing their own religion, again prompts Peltier’s family and community to mistrust the law and view themselves as its direct targets. Peltier notes,

So speaking my language was my first crime, and practicing my religion was the second. When I was also arrested that winter for siphoning some diesel fuel from an army reserve truck to heat my grandmother’s freezing house, I...spent a couple of weeks in jail. That was my first stretch of hard time. So trying to keep my family from freezing was my third crime, the third strike against me. Henceforth, I would be considered “incorrigible.” My career as a “hardened criminal” was already well on its way. (84)

The irony of this passage highlights the racist subtext of policies that prevent Native Americans like Peltier from simultaneously practicing cultural traditions and upholding the law. From early in his youth, Peltier comes to associate his cultural identity with criminalization. He embodies a critical distinction Cacho underscores in her writing about rightlessness in America: “To be stereotyped as a criminal is to be misrecognized as someone who committed a crime, but to be criminalized is to be prevented from being law-abiding” (4). Peltier corroborates this assertion, showing that for him and his people, there is no way to remain both loyal to their culture and obedient of the law.

Sites of Collective Memory

Peltier arguably makes historical revisionism the central theme of *Prison Writings*. He manipulates temporality in his narrative to transform his past into a space that contains not just his own experiences, but also the collective Native American struggle to be recognized as a subject and rightful citizen. Throughout his text, Peltier situates his experiences between the spaces of history and what French historian Pierre Nora calls “sites of true memory” (Nora 9). Nora developed the concept of “*lieux de*

memoire” in response to what he saw as a prevailing shift in Western attitudes about remembering the past. In “Between Memory and History” (1984), Nora argues that “true memory”—the spontaneous memory generated only by living traditions—has gradually come to be replaced by recorded and archived history. A break with the past occurs when “*milieux de memoire*” (realms of memory), the “real environments” that link the present to the past through tradition, are exchanged for “*lieux de memoire*” (sites of memory), which break from lived tradition and display “nothing more in fact than sifted and sorted historical traces” (5-6). Nora argues,

At the heart of history is a criticism destructive of spontaneous memory. Memory is always suspect in the eyes of history, whose true mission is to demolish it, to repress it. History divests the lived past of its legitimacy....The thrust of history, the ambition of the historian, is not to exalt what actually happened but to annihilate it. (3)

To concretize the concept, Nora offers the example of the historical monument, which celebrates monolithic representations of the past, in turn silencing the dissenting voices of “true memory” (2). According to Nora, “a society living wholly under the sign of history would not need to attach its memory to specific sites any more than traditional societies do” (3).

In *Prison Writings*, Peltier also seizes upon symbolic images, particularly American historical monuments, as symbolic of hegemonic power and the suppression of indigenous voices. Echoing Nora, he critiques the monument as a false representation of history that belies its complexity and the nuances of collective experience. He also seeks to imbue some monuments with newer, more complex meanings that take his people’s historical struggles into account. He points out that monuments help shape the little contact most Americans have with real history. Comparably, he notes that most

Americans never come into contact with Native people unless they happen to drive through a reservation. Like the “rez,” the collective history of Native Americans in the U.S. forms a “world most white people never see and will never know” (68). Their ignorance of Native culture is symptomatic of their lack of real historical awareness. Peltier writes, “When they do happen to drive by an Indian ‘rez’ while out on vacation to see the four white presidential faces that desecrate the face of the holy mountain they call Mt. Rushmore, they gawk at us.... ‘Look!’ the parents tell the kids as they pass by in their shiny car, pointing their finger at us – ‘There’s an *Indian!*’” (68). Peltier’s appropriation of Mt. Rushmore as a “holy mountain” sanctified by Native American tradition and folklore, rather than as a man-made representation of a false American past, exemplifies his objective to overwrite standardized history with the testimony of lived experience.⁷³ Similarly, his critique of Mt. Rushmore’s celebration of white (male) leadership is juxtaposed to the Native people who memorialize the monument as a sacred place. Peltier represents Mt. Rushmore as a desecration, a monument to a mendacious history that deliberately overlooks indigenous people and whitewashes an important cultural symbol.

The Vietnam War Memorial is used comparably in the text to represent a limited, state-sanctioned version of history, rather than a site of collective memory. He compares the memorial to other token historical tributes that reveal only part of the story. Peltier writes,

⁷³ Peltier’s attitude toward Mt. Rushmore illustrates critic Nicole Schroder’s ideas about the interpretive possibility of certain sites of memory. Referencing Nora, Schroder writes, “As *lieux de memoire* are sites open to signification and, therefore, invite different people to produce different (hi)stories, alternative memories can be validated here and claim validity....The fact that a lot of our memories and also of our (national) histories are fabricated or invented, becomes apparent in Nora’s concept of sites of memory” (41). This fact also becomes apparent in Peltier’s text.

I would like to see a red stone wall like the black stone wall of the Vietnam War Memorial... Yes, right there on the Mall in Washington, D.C. And on that red stone wall—pigmented with the living blood of our people (and I would happily be the first to donate that blood)—would be the names of all the Indians who ever died for being Indian. It would be hundreds of times longer than the Vietnam Memorial, which celebrates the deaths of fewer than sixty thousand brave lost souls. The number of our brave lost souls reaches into the many millions, and every one of them remains unquiet until this day. Just as effective might be a Holocaust Museum to the American Indian to recall the voices of those who were slaughtered. (21)

Here, Peltier makes a comment about the selective nature of historical remembering, addressing the way some holocausts are given historical value over others. Just as Toni Morrison famously echoed and subverted the language of the Holocaust in the dedication to her classic work, *Beloved* (1987),⁷⁴ Peltier also compares Native American deaths to those of history's more frequently touted wars and genocides. He tries to overwrite the significance of prominent American historical sites to remind readers that history is often cherry-picked. He validates the importance of commemorating Native American history by comparing it to events that are publicly remembered more often. In the above passage, red becomes a symbolic color of racialized struggle, signifying Native cultural identity and bloodshed, but also anger at history's omission of his people's collective experience. Peltier criticizes the fact that memorializing indigenous people has never been a national priority in the way that daily roll calls in the media marked the number of American casualties occurring in Vietnam. He proclaims, "Yes, the roll call of our Indian dead needs to be cried out, to be shouted from every hilltop in order to shatter the

⁷⁴ Morrison provoked discomfort among critics and readers by dedicating *Beloved* to "the sixty million and more." In an American context, the number clearly was a subversive reference to the frequently cited "six million" Jews who perished in the Holocaust. Though Morrison's number did not coincide with any scholarly estimates of the deaths related to slavery and the Middle Passage, her dedication was an evident critique of how the historical record elevates certain atrocities over others, often overlooking centuries-long violence on black bodies.

terrible silence that tries to erase the fact that we ever existed” (21). Peltier here again emphasizes the fact that history silences as much as it voices.

Throughout his text, Peltier challenges the significance of both geographic places and what Nora calls the “grand narrative” of history, prompting readers to question what they think they already know (Nora 4). In the words of Michel de Certeau, he “poaches the spaces of the oppressor” in order to create surprising possibilities within them (37). Peltier humanizes collective experiences like the “reign of terror” at the Pine Ridge Reservation,⁷⁵ in order to both problematize the media’s reporting of these events and exert some degree of control over a historical narrative that often misrepresents Native Americans. He takes back these recorded events and overwrites them with “true memory.” In particular, Peltier seizes upon sites of AIM protest in order to complicate their significance and question the government’s treatment of his people. These sites illustrate how American laws persecute but do not protect Native Americans. For example, Alcatraz becomes a potential site of reparation and redress for violence against Native Americans when AIM protestors occupy the island and demand that it be turned into a Native cultural center. Peltier clarifies that activists had discovered an old law giving Native Americans the right to procure “surplus” lands abandoned by the federal government. He further explains,

⁷⁵ The era known as the “reign of terror” is described in Peltier’s narrative as a federally sanctioned genocide targeting Native families. He writes, “After Wounded Knee, life on the Pine Ridge Reservation became even worse than before, turning truly nightmarish. The GOONs increased their terrorist attacks upon traditional Indian people and their supporters. AIM members were being killed, maimed, and wounded: two hundred and sixty casualties have been documented to date. A nine-year-old girl had her eye shot out playing in front of her log home when GOONs drove by and machine-gunned the house. The murder rate proved astronomical for a reservation of barely twenty thousand people. From 1977 to 1978 the General Accounting Office investigated and documented sixty murders of Indians occurring between 1973 and 1975; they eventually stopped counting and the investigation was terminated due to ‘lack of funds.’” (112)

So we decided to test that law—to test whether *any* law was true when it came to Indians. In California in November 1969, Indians occupied Alcatraz Island, site of the notorious federal prison abandoned in 1963. Our Alcatraz occupiers declared our intention to turn the island into a Native peoples cultural center—the first building to be seen by visitors coming through the Golden Gate; that, at least, would symbolize whom all this vast and wonderful land had been stolen from. (56)

A few months later, AIM activists work to transform another historical landmark, Washington's Fort Lawton, which they achieve in getting named a Native American cultural center (57).

Peltier's accounts of these contemporary historical events are repeatedly positioned against media reports that highlight Native American criminality. He recalls that AIM activists “were called ‘thugs’ and ‘Commies’ and ‘invaders’” (57). He also records acts of violence against protestors:

Men, women, and children were beaten—and much worse—when Indians were arrested during the fishing-rights protests. At Fort Lawton the government confronted us with machine guns and flamethrowers. When we were arrested, the soldiers fondled the women in front of the men, trying to trick us into reacting so they could justify killing us. Those of us singled out as leaders were beaten in our military jail cells in the army stockade. (57)

Here, Peltier's recollections stand in contradistinction to the way the protests were remembered in the press. The “good” and “bad” guys are inverted, so as to incite readers to doubt the authority of media reports. Additionally, the “Trail of Broken Treaties,” AIM's five-day seizure of BIA headquarters in protest of the federal government's neglect of treaties with Native Americans, is juxtaposed against the way the incident was routinely reported: “We were portrayed in the press as ‘thugs’ and ‘hoodlums’ and ‘violent militants’...[but] [w]e felt that we'd made at least one point—that point being *we exist!* We'd proven that” (100-101). In other words, this act of resistance sought acknowledgement of personhood, in addition to the restoration of civil rights. Peltier also

stresses that resistance forms the only means by which Native Americans can achieve true freedom or reform: “America really didn’t give a damn about Indians unless we staged takeovers like Alcatraz, Fort Lawton, the BIA building in Washington, D.C., and Wounded Knee. Even then the public was more amused or temporarily outraged than really concerned” (95).

However, the most important event Peltier seeks to overwrite in his narrative is his own conviction. He describes the trial and verdict that led to his 40-year imprisonment with the same irony that he uses to describe his routine rule-breaking at boarding school:

The same “hardened criminal” who had dared speak his own language and practice his own religion as a boy was now, as a young man, being hunted like an animal—really, more maliciously than any animal is ever hunted—because of two crimes he never committed, two crimes that were, in fact, fabricated by his very accusers. My life had abruptly turned into a nightmare [after the 1975 Pine Ridge shootout], and that nightmare hasn’t lifted to this day. (107)

When discussing his trial, conviction, or prison sentence, Peltier performs the kind of self-representation he was denied in the courtroom. He dialogues with his persecutors and provides counter-arguments to support his innocence. Significantly, his text provides him with a platform to give voice to testimony that was silenced in the courtroom where justice was supposed to take place. His account helps Peltier achieve a self-written justice the legal system denies him (Meister and Burnett 720). It also helps him suggest that the federal government is the real guilty party in his case:

Years later, documents uncovered by my lawyers under the Freedom of Information Act revealed the FBI plot to have local police put AIM’s leaders “under close scrutiny...arrest them on every possible charge...” We were, quite simply, in the FBI’s own choice phrase, to be ‘neutralized.’ (107)

Here and throughout, Peltier uses his text to dialogue with history and the way things are remembered. This kind of dialogue occurs most notably in the final appendix, which reproduces his 1977 pre-sentencing statement. Peltier transforms his statement into a platform for redressing the legal injustices he has faced. The crimes that took place at his trial, such as withholding exonerating evidence and coercing witnesses, become the bases for a multifold critique of the American judicial system. He creates a space in which to speak back to the judge's words to him, which he inflects with contempt: "*You profess to be an activist for your people, but you are a disservice to Native Americans*" (237; emphasis in original). Unlike at the original hearing, Peltier here has the space to respond with his own scathing criticism of the system this judge represents, and as such, gain back the power to self-represent: "*I will let you—and history—decide who spoke the truth that dark day in the history of American injustice*" (237; emphasis in original).

Peltier transforms the significance of personal testimony by changing the context under which it is given value (Rymhs 567). For him, testimony means exploring the collective dimensions of his individual story to give his life larger political and historical meaning. But calling his narrative a "personal testament" also gives it "a sense of legality" that overturns that of the criminal justice system (Rymhs 567). Rymhs notes, "This work is, among many things, a rebuttal—an amassing of reflections and arguments that will be used in his defense within the space of his autobiography" (567). Peltier's unabashed rejection of the legal system that convicted him thinly obscures his evident attempts to dialogue with that system in and through life-writing. His narrative creates a second-chance opportunity to overwrite the false testimony that informed his incarceration with his own voice, resisting the penal system's enforced silence.

Peltier revises and complicates history so as to problematize the way it is often recorded and exert some degree of control over historical narratives that misrepresent him and his people. He takes back recorded events and overwrites them with “true memory.” In other words, Peltier uses his autobiography as a space for historical counter-inscription and political resistance. His text thus underscores the instability of memory and history, showing how they too form spaces of strategic power and provide opportunities for tactical resistance. The formal structure of *Prison Writings* subverts the conventional prison narrative in its collapse of individual and collective memory, as well as its amalgamation of varying genres. Like Kaplan’s “out-law genres,” Peltier’s text challenges Western literary norms—not only by resisting marginalization based on hierarchies that determine who can write, but also by fighting against the erasure of Native Americans in both the historical and literary establishments. *Prison Writings* speaks back to the master narratives undergirding American history and literature by reinvesting the autobiographical genre with political significance and making it a site of collective memory.

Conclusion

In this dissertation, I have underscored the importance of the prison narrative or memoir of incarceration not only as an “outlaw” literary genre within American autobiography (Kaplan 119), but also as a socio-historical document that tells us about our own contemporary history. I have shown how narratives like those written by Baca, Shakur, and Peltier link American experiences across a broad swath of the nation to imprisonment, making implicit arguments about the racialized nature of mass incarceration and the continued criminalization and segregation of minorities in the U.S. I have indicated that these narratives illustrate resistance in comparable ways by showing how their subjects assume limited agency over spaces designed to break them down, reclaiming subjectivity amidst the dehumanization of prison punishment. To Baca, Shakur, and Peltier, speaking back to hypercriminalization and the “criminal injustice system” (as Peltier refers to it) remains as important as narrating their own autobiographical story. Noting parallels in their geographically distinct experiences, which range from the Southern and Northern ends of the East Coast (Shakur), to the Great Plains (Peltier), and to the American Southwest (Baca), helps us see ways in which these problems remain endemic to our nation. These narratives show how these social issues are widespread, not unique or localized, phenomena that contribute to structural racism and legal inequity in our nation.

During the summer of 2015, President Barack Obama became the first sitting U.S. president to visit a federal prison. After spending an afternoon with inmates at Oklahoma’s El Reno Correctional Institution, President Obama called American prison reform a critical national priority, noting, “Mass incarceration makes our country worse

off and we need to do something about it” (Horsley). He also addressed the racially imbalanced demographics of the U.S. penal system, as well as the fact that our prison population has quadrupled since the beginning of our national War on Drugs. In a speech that followed his tour of El Reno and a roundtable with inmates there, President Obama addressed mass incarceration as a problem in need of a solution, and underscored the fact that Americans of color are the ones most commonly affected by the problem: “In too many places, black boys and black men, and Latino boys and Latino men, experience being treated different under the law... I think we have a tendency sometimes to almost take for granted or think it's normal that so many young people end up in our criminal justice system. It's not normal. It's not what happens in other countries. What is normal is teenagers doing stupid things” (Baker). Referring to the convicted men he met at El Reno, he emphasized, “These are young people who made mistakes that aren't that different than the mistakes that I made and the mistakes that a lot of you guys made” (Horsley). What makes the incarcerated stand apart from Americans outside prison walls, President Obama noted, is not a penchant for criminal activity, but a lack of resources, “social support structures,” and second chances (Baker). He became the most outspoken president in recent decades when it came to condemning the prison problem the War on Drugs left in its wake, arguing, “We have to consider whether this is the smartest way for us to both control crime and rehabilitate individuals” (Horsley). Even in his push for prison reform, President Obama invoked the penitentiary, or prison reform, narrative—inadvertently emphasizing its importance to our penal system, which is so historically bound up in this philosophy. The president's push for a penal system that would transform the individual while simultaneously punishing them for criminal acts

exemplifies our collective inability to see the prison apart from a social need to morally transform individuals labeled criminal or deviant by U.S. courts.

Obama's visit to El Reno highlights the importance of lending transparency and openness to the traditionally secluded and closed-off prison experience. Such transparency is the cornerstone of the modern prison abolition movement. As Joy James notes in *The New Abolitionists: (Neo) Slave Narratives and Contemporary Prison Writings*, "In previous centuries, forging a new language, the modern antislavery movement marked a significant awakening of the public moral conscience in the Western world. In this century, antiprison movements offer the same possibilities: to struggle by dismantling mechanisms of incarceration and dehumanization" (xxxv). Furthermore, the more Americans get to know their government's system of punishing criminals and serving justice, the more informed their support or protest of that system will be. Those "inside" also need more venues in which to have their voices heard by people "outside." For instance, prison writing programs like PEN, which began in the early 1970s and in which widely acclaimed writers like Baca once participated, seek to overcome the silence of isolation and the inability to be heard, some of the most punishing facets of imprisonment.

Educating our youth about the realities of prison also helps elucidate truths about our criminal justice and penal systems. Students in an American Studies course I recently taught got first-hand perspective into the strong parallels between immigrant and criminal detention when they worked as volunteer visitors at Krome North Processing Center in Miami, FL. There, the students visited men who had no family or friends to visit them and who had signed up for the volunteer visitation program. They learned

these men's stories while simultaneously working on a project about Krome's history and began to see immigrant detention's place within the historical development of mass incarceration. Future evolutions of this project would consider the place of immigrant detention narratives within the tradition of American prison literature. For example, a narrative like Edwidge Danticat's *Brother I'm Dying*, which reimagines the carceral experience of Danticat's uncle who died of medical neglect at Krome, makes a unique intervention into this genre that should be critically examined in the future.

As noted, the U.S. incarcerates more of its citizens per capita than any other industrialized nation in the world, and African-American and Latino inmates constitute more than half our prison population, which currently stands at over two million inmates. In this study, I have explored ways contemporary American prison literature reflects racialized constructions of criminality dating back to the antebellum era and illustrates various states of imprisonment on the inside and outside. I have shown ways these works portray the U.S. as a carceral state that often positions people of color as criminals. Drawing from the work of prison studies scholars, literary critics, criminal justice activists, and contemporary authors, I have considered how these narratives speak to the ways American criminality has been constructed and linked to race and ethnicity over time. There is no denying that mass incarceration has become a central concern in contemporary America. First-hand accounts of imprisonment, like those written by Baca, Shakur, and Peltier, illustrate the experience of modern-day enslavement, which remains constitutional only in the case of criminal conviction. Narratives like these also testify to the social construction of criminality and give voice to the experience of numerous forms of punishment leading up to the carceral space. None of these writers poses a particular

solution to the problem of mass incarceration, instead implying that the system as it currently stands cannot be fixed. However, each of the authors manages to transcend the system in their narrative by depicting willful resistance to its false brand of rehabilitation and reform. Socio-political ideologies inform the subtexts of these writings and pluralize their significance. James notes, “Through their narratives, imprisoned writers can function as progressive abolitionists and register as ‘people’s historians.’ They become the storytellers of the political histories of the captives *and* the captors” (xxxii). These autobiographies illustrate not only radical ideas about space and identity, but also make arguments about important social problems within our current place in history. Like earlier American literature of confinement and resistance, these prison narratives overwrite punishment with radical possibility.

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