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"Doing Time" Across the Centuries: Early influences on Twentieth Century Prison Narratives

by

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INTRODUCTION:
THE IMPORTANCE OF LOOKING BACK

"What I now knew, for certain, was that I'd been lied to my whole life. Uncle Lonny hadn't just 'hurt' me when I was five years old. He had molested me. And knowing he had, my father had let him come back and stay in the Silver Bullet.

There was a part of me that wanted to go backward—to forget it all over again—but I knew that was no longer possible. The time had come. And for the first time in five days, I had a destination. I pulled my car back onto the highway and drove toward the exit that would take me to North Caroline, to my mother, to rip open family secrets." (Lamb 36)

These are the words of Deborah Ranger, one of over fifty women with whom I work at York Correctional Institution in Niantic, Connecticut. She is also one of the 2.3 million Americans currently incarcerated in the United States. In 2008, Deborah's narrative was published in a collection of short stories, entitled *I'll Fly Away*, written by inmates at York. 2008 was also the year that I first set foot in York as a member of Professor Ronald Jenkins' "Prison Outreach and Activism" class. Two years later, I am in the process of finishing my third semester at York, but I do not believe I will ever finish learning from the women I have met there. Although many of them have undergone struggles just like Deborah's, no one has allowed herself to become defined by her past; instead, each woman uses the act of writing to re-assert her control over a past which, as Deborah writes, she might prefer to "forget" (Lamb 36). Yet, rather than give into her desire to push the past to the back of her mind, Deborah re-claims her past by addressing it head on, recognizing that she cannot hope to move forward without first looking to the past as a lesson. The strength displayed in Deborah's narrative, and its relevance to inmates and non-inmates alike, is what first attracted me to the prison narrative as a genre of literature in its own right.

Why, then, do I focus on the *male* rather than the *female* prison narrative? As a female who works with imprisoned women, I am especially prone to recognizing the value of the too-often overlooked female narrative. Judith Scheffler expresses the importance of the female prison narrative in "Women's Prison Writing: An Unexplored Tradition in Literature." Scheffler uses Richard Lovelace, whose work I analyze in chapter one, to demonstrate that "the tradition of men's prison writing is rich and established, while works by women prisoners remain scattered and largely unidentified as a body of literature with a tradition of its own" (57). Yet, it is precisely *because* the male prison narrative is so "established" that it must necessarily be a point of critique for anyone interested in the prison narrative as a whole. After all, how can one study the female prison narrative without first coming to an understanding of the male prison narrative from which it grew?

Ultimately, this work is a necessary stepping stone towards my much larger career goal of using both male and female prison narratives to draw conclusions about the future of the United States prison system. Yet, to do so without first coming to an understanding of the prison narrative and its influences would be highly premature. Like Deborah Ranger, then, I must recognize the value of the past—and all the lessons it offers—if I ever hope to understand how the future of the United States prison system can be different. I will restrict my focus to three elements that I found common among my works of study: race, religion, and sexuality.

In chapter one, therefore, I examine possible sources of influence on the representations of Christianity in twentieth century prison narratives. Reaching as far

back as the Old Testament and poems from the Romantic period, I question how faith functions for the imprisoned body.

Chapter two delves into Frederick Douglass' *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* as a possible predecessor to the modern-day male prison narrative. Therefore, I necessarily address the connections between the prison system and the system of slavery. Because I only focus on faith in chapter one, my primary area of focus in Frederick Douglass' slave narrative will be his perception of race.

In chapters three and four, I consider the more modern prison narratives of George Jackson and Mumia Abu-Jamal respectively. Here, I consider race, faith, and sexuality alike, and point to the influences that my previously studied works might have had on these later works.

On its own, the prison narrative may do very little to bring about change to the material reality of the prison; that change can only come from how those of us living outside of prison react and respond to the prison narratives we read. Ultimately, it is through our study of the prison narrative that it becomes not just a text of hardship and despair, but one of hope for the future of the American prison. We cannot hope to be a part of shaping that future without first coming to an understanding of its past. To that end, it is important that we not only study the firsthand source provided to us in the prison narrative, but also that we study what went into influencing those narratives in the first place.

CHAPTER ONE:

Influences

in Time and Space

This chapter examines the Christian Bible's story of Joseph and works written by poets during the Renaissance and Romantic eras, with a focus on the parallel representations of imprisonment within these texts. The Old Testament's story of Joseph, Richard Lovelace's "To Althea, from Prison," Samuel Taylor Coleridge's "This Lime-Tree Bower my Prison," and John Keats's "Written on the day that Mr. Leigh Hunt left Prison" are alike in their depictions of the prison environment. Yet, I argue that this is not the only area of convergence among these works; they all similarly portray religious faith and the function it serves for an imprisoned body. By establishing an understanding of how these works characterize faith, I may later demonstrate the influence of that characterization on the twentieth-century prison narratives I study in chapters three and four. Employing the theories of Michel Foucault, I argue that influence takes many forms, and that a prisoner need not read a literary text in order to be influenced by it. I suggest that, as a space, the prison indirectly influences the narratives borne of it, thereby linking earlier Biblical and poetic prison writings with modern day prison narratives. It should be noted that my remarks on the story of Joseph and the poems I study are not meant as full readings of these texts, but rather as angled commentary on just one of their many aspects.

Inmates and the Bible

Before considering faith as it appears in modern day prison narratives, I must necessarily analyze faith in earlier literature that influenced those narratives. The Bible is perhaps one of the most significant and widely-read texts among prison populations, and therefore has a direct influence on how inmates perceive and write about prison time. Although there are no concrete statistics on the percentage of

American prisoners who read the Bible, there is evidence suggesting that prisoners have significant access to both the Bible and to religious services. The Corrections Corporation of America is a leader in private prison management, and currently claims to house "75,000 offenders and detainees in more than 60 facilities" across the United States, or 3 percent of the total American prison population (CCA 2). Chaplain and religious services are offered at all prisons owned by the Corrections Corporation. In 2003, an organization called the Prison Fellowship Ministries offered ministry programs at more than 70 percent of United States prisons. The programs, which include "Operation Starting Line," "Out4Life" and the George W. Bush-endorsed "InnerChange Freedom Initiative," are centered entirely on the teachings of the Christian Bible (PFM 4).

These numbers, paired with easily available (and free) Bible correspondence courses and weekly chaplain services, suggest that inmates are exposed and have access to not only the Bible, but also to Christian teachings and practices. Because the prison narrators I study either allude to the Bible or quote it directly, I find it likely that it is a source of influence on their narratives, which is representative of the Bible's effect on the twentieth-century prison narrative as a whole. The notion that prisoners read and have access to the Bible should not be entirely surprising; it is to be expected not only because the isolation of the prison environment naturally lends itself to reading lengthy texts, but also because, in the face of committing a crime and receiving punishment, prisoners logically turn to that which accepts them and promises forgiveness. These insights can lead us to believe that Christian and non-

Christian prisoners alike have the opportunity to read or hear Biblical passages, especially those that pertain to imprisonment.

Biblical Imprisonment

One of the lengthiest Bible stories falling under this category is the story of Joseph in the Old Testament's Book of Genesis. An examination of this story's portrayal of prison time, as well as Joseph's reaction to imprisonment, reveals a deeper message about hope and justice that may well have an effect on any inmate reading it. As I analyze Genesis 39-41 so that later I can discuss the impact it has on modern prison literature, I will use the King James Version of the Bible as my translation. The reasoning behind this choice is twofold: first, at over 400 years old, the King James Version has had plenty of time to become known, and therefore has gained widespread popularity and acceptance as an accurate translation of the Bible; second, other popular translations of the Bible were released after the majority of the texts I study were written. The New International Version, for instance, was published in 1973, after both *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* and *Soledad Brother* were written. Another well-known Bible translation, the American Standard Version, was published in 1901, once again after Douglass wrote his narrative. Therefore, the King James Version is the translation most likely to have been read by, and therefore had influence on, the authors with whom I am concerned. I should note that my reading of the Bible is from a Christian perspective; I do so because of the Christian slant to which many prisoners are exposed, which is reflected in the previously mentioned inmate programs based in Christian doctrine. My decision is also largely rooted in the fact that both George Jackson and Mumia Abu-Jamal

attended Christian schools as children, and therefore their works are influenced by the Christian Bible passages to which they were exposed.

Joseph's imprisonment takes place in the book of Genesis, during chapters 39-41. The story of Joseph is about the son of Jacob, Joseph, as he serves Potiphar, the Pharaoh of Egypt. One day, Joseph denies Potiphar's wife's advances towards him, so she lies to Potiphar and accuses Joseph of misconduct. As a result, Potiphar sends Joseph to prison, where Joseph interacts with other members of Potiphar's staff who have been imprisoned—specifically, his baker and butler. Both men ask Joseph to interpret their strange dreams; Joseph does so, and accurately predicts what the dreams say about their futures. When Potiphar has his own strange dream, he gets word of Joseph's abilities and releases him from prison, eventually rewarding him by naming him ruler of all Egypt (Gen. 39-41).

In order to gain the most basic insight into what the story of Joseph says about the prison, we must first turn to the text itself and identify how many times words that denote imprisonment appear in these sections of Genesis. Over the course of Joseph's imprisonment, the words "prison" or "prisoner" only appear nine times—eight in Genesis 39, and one at the beginning of Genesis 40. In contrast, the word "dream" appears 21 times over the course of Joseph's imprisonment. The fact that the use of "dream" outweighs that of "prison," appearing more than twice as often as the words "prison" and "prisoner" combined, is significant. As Kenneth Goodman suggests in his article, "On the Wording of Texts: A Study of Intra-Text Word Frequency," counting the number of times that a word appears in a text can lead to better comprehension of its key elements. Goodman writes: "One of the most visible

characteristics of texts is their wording. In fact one common-sense misconception of written texts is that they are simply strings of words. Clearly, wording is an important text characteristic" (120). Goodman claims that counting words can "help to define a text in terms of its wording, its use of vocabulary. This will provide knowledge of the relative importance of any particular word to the text and to text comprehension" (121). Therefore, the textual imbalance between the word "dream" and "prison" reveals that dreams—not prison, as one might initially assume—are the most important aspect of Joseph's imprisonment.

Furthermore, "prison" is used for the last time only two verses before the word "dream" is introduced to the text. Once the concept of dreaming appears in the text, the word "prison" is suddenly absent from the rest of Joseph's imprisonment, suggesting it is unworthy of textual space. The fact that the end of "prison" is also the beginning of "dream," along with the disproportionate usage of the two words, is suggestive. It indicates that, once dreaming occurs, one's status of imprisonment no longer matters. This shift in focus—from prison to dreams—is reflected in the mind of the reader, whose attention is turned from Joseph's imprisonment to his dream interpretations.

The concept that dreams allow Joseph to have mental freedom that is independent of bodily freedom may be an appealing one, particularly for the reader who is himself behind bars. However, a close reading reveals that there is much more to the Bible's representation of freedom than engulfing oneself in dreams; ultimately, Joseph's dream interpretations further connect him to God. In "Wisdom in the Joseph

Story," Michael Fox addresses the divine quality of Joseph's dream interpretations. He writes:

> Joseph displays human skills in administering the land. But Joseph also received a measure of the higher wisdom when he learned the interpretation of pharaoh's dreams. Wisdom of the higher sort is necessarily divine endowment. It is not achieved through study, experience, or investigation. Upon hearing Joseph's satisfying dream-interpretation and advice, pharaoh exclaims: 'Is there found another such man who has the spirit of God in him?' The first thing that Joseph's interpretation shows pharaoh is that the young man possesses the divine spirit, that he is inspired. (36)

Like pharaoh, Joseph recognizes that God is within him. When Potiphar's butler and baker ask Joseph about their dreams, Joseph replies, "Do not interpretations belong to God? Tell me them, I pray you" (Gen. 40-8). By saying that dreams can only be interpreted by God, yet offering to interpret them anyway, Joseph further links himself with God. Fox continues: "Pharaoh, who speaks with a reliable voice in this story, also declares: 'Since God has informed you of all this, there is none as discerning and wise as you.' Joseph's being wise is consequent upon his having received this information" (37). These passages offer textual evidence that Joseph and God are bound together by dreams, and therefore dreams function as a means toward finding God. Because we believe that dreams have allowed even Joseph, whose very body is shackled, to mentally transcend his physical limitations, we conclude that dreams provide a kind of release from imprisonment.

Once Joseph interprets Pharaoh's dream, The Bible says that Pharaoh made Joseph "ruler over all the land of Egypt" (Gen. 41-43). Joseph is only asked to interpret Pharaoh's dream as a result of his prior dream interpretations. After all, it is the butler who tells Pharaoh about Joseph and his ability to correctly interpret strange

dreams. Had Joseph not believed in the butler's dream, or interpreted it as he did, the butler would not have suggested Joseph to the Pharaoh as a dream interpreter. Thus, Joseph's release from prison, and eventual rule over all of Egypt, is a direct product of his belief in dreams and his interpretation of those dreams in terms of his faith. Faith in one's dreams is therefore represented as the key to one's freedom.

Faith is not just a means towards mental escape while Joseph is actually imprisoned, but it also has the ultimate function of releasing Joseph from prison. This addresses a concept that is central to Christianity: belief in God, a higher power who is unseen in the present day. In a world that is frighteningly out of our control—particularly for imprisoned populations—it is Joseph's insertion of faith into his dream interpretations that causes him to be released from prison, thus allowing him to regain control—not only over his own body, but, as the ruler of Egypt, over the bodies of countless others. In this way, faith imposes order and control upon a world that is otherwise unpredictable and incontrollable. This portrayal of faith highlights belief in God as a means towards reclaiming power over your body. For the imprisoned readers of the story of Joseph, this concept may be comforting: though their bodies technically belong to the state, like Joseph they can own themselves again simply by believing. In Joseph's case, that belief is rewarded tenfold. Showing his faith provides him with much more than simple freedom, which might be enough for any prisoner; he receives the additional benefit of ruling over the land that once included his prison. In the story of Joseph, then, having faith means gaining control over your mind and body in an environment that has stripped you of the most basic aspects of control—when you eat, when you sleep, and where you live. Most

importantly, though, having faith means a chance at the ultimate gift of freedom. This hopeful message serves as a powerful catalyst for religious reformation, especially among imprisoned populations, whose only other option may be to face a reality in which they are entirely powerless.

The reader's awareness of Joseph's innocence may further underscore the concept that, in believing, one can rationalize the irrational. Early on, the reader discovers that Joseph is falsely imprisoned due to Pharaoh's wife's lies. The fact that Joseph is eventually released from prison because he has placed faith in his dreams suggests that dreams need not be divorced from reality. Whereas belief is often characterized as having little basis in reality, in this story the opposite is the case. Not only does believing in God allow Him to speak through Joseph, accurately predicting the real-life consequences of the dreams, but it is also this act of believing that ultimately causes justice to be served in an otherwise unjust situation. The arbitrary nature of Joseph's imprisonment makes his release particularly meaningful, especially when it is as a result of his beliefs, not something concrete. The message the reader receives from these events is that Christianity has the ability to right wrongs when society is unable, or unwilling, to. Because Joseph's thoughts directly affect his standing in the real world, the reader learns that believing in and connecting with God can bring about tangible changes to one's life. Contrary to human intuition, that only what we can see and touch is real, the story of Joseph tells us that an abstract concept—belief—can bring logic to life's illogical situations. For Joseph, all it takes is having strong beliefs in God for religious laws to bring justice to the unjust social laws that placed him in prison.

This intersection of religious laws with governmental laws asks that we consider how these two entities interact. The story of Joseph shows us that Christian doctrine succeeds where societal laws fail, indicating that Christianity compliments society by compensating for the inevitable shortcomings of man-made laws. Justice cannot be attained by following societal laws, which allow people like Joseph to fall through the cracks; but justice *can* be found by following the laws of Christianity. This is a strong justification for practicing Christianity. After all, why should humans abide by societal laws when doing so does not guarantee that an innocent man won't have to serve prison time for a crime he didn't commit? Through Joseph's story, The Bible may provide readers who are Christianity-inclined with proof of Christianity's benefits. For an imprisoned reader, these benefits may be particularly appealing because they represent hope for the future; behind bars, where inmates often feel like society has completely forgotten about them, that hope for a future in which they can "make something" of themselves is a rare commodity. In later chapters, I will discuss how imprisoned writers who claim innocence, such as Mumia Abu-Jamal, are literarily influenced by The Bible's representation of justice in the story of Joseph.

In the story of Joseph, biblical laws are placed relative to the less just system of society, as represented by Potiphar. In doing so, the text reveals its low expectations for societal laws. The story of Joseph rests on this assumption, recognizing the inevitability of societal imperfections and the human search for justice. However, the expectation that man-made laws will fail only serves to uphold them rather than change them. In this way, the presumption that societal laws can never be truly just, as displayed in the story of Joseph, depends on heightening

reliance on God by lowering expectations of societal laws. This brings the idea that religious doctrine and societal laws compliment each other to an entirely new level: not only does Christianity arise out of society's shortcomings, but it also relies on maintaining those shortcomings in order to assure its own existence. These two forces are therefore dependent upon one another to assure their mutual survival. As we will see in future chapters, the mentality displayed in the story of Joseph affects the narratives of imprisoned writers living in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Indirect Influences

Whereas The Bible is almost assured to have a direct influence upon prisoners today, not to mention writers of prison narratives, poems—in this case, those whose topic is prison time—have a less clear line of influence upon those writers. In the article "Language and the Making of Place: A Narrative-Descriptive Approach," Yi-Fu Tuan argues that it is language, not material, that creates a place. Tuan has a simple definition of place, claiming that a place can exist simply by being spoken of. He writes, "Insiders see 'homeplace'—an environment that is familiar to them, not because they have materially transformed it but because they have named it. It is their place—their world—through the casting of a linguistic net" (686). From this perspective, the use of "prison" in language and literature creates a communal space. Because the prison narratives and poems of my study construct the "place" of the prison, they find commonality in that they are adding their voice to the literary discourse surrounding imprisonment. The fact that prison narratives help to create the "prison" as we perceive it, and that specific poems took part in that creation by

speaking within the same literary dialogue, makes it necessary that we consider romantic poems as indirect sources of influence on later prison narratives.

The "place" of the prison, and how language reacts to and depicts that place, is of particular importance; perhaps more so than other literary form, the prison narrative is very much centered on place. At their barest levels, prison narratives are about how the narrators and those around them react to, and interact with, the space in which they have been involuntarily placed. It is by removing a prisoner's control over the space in which he lives that the prisoner is rendered powerless. For inmates, freedom is equated to deciding where you live; having that choice taken away from you is a key component of the prison system. In *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, Michel Foucault supports the notion that control over space is one necessary component to having control over prisoners. He writes about the prison system's "modality" of control:

> It implies an uninterrupted, constant coercion, supervising the processes of the activity rather than its result and it is exercised according to a codification that partitions as closely as possible time, space, movement. These methods, which made possible the meticulous control of the operations of the body, which assured the constant subjection of its forces and imposed upon them a relation of docility-utility, might be called 'disciplines'. (135)

In "Writing in Hostile Spaces," EE Oswald continues Foucault's argument, suggesting that the prison narrative is borne of an inmate's perceived lack of control, and therefore the place of the prison—and an inmate's powerlessness over that place—inspires and influences the narrative. Oswald writes:

> Prisoners are aware of their constant visibility, but more especially of the power this visibility gives the prison officials. The prisoner, wanting to disrupt and redress this imbalance of power, would need

> to find a form of power for him or herself. The prison-authors use their writing as a means by which to lessen the power of the prison and the prison authorities. (69)

As Foucault notes, space in the prison is manipulated, and it functions as a means towards controlling prisoners; paired with Oswald's argument that the prison narrative is an attempt to reclaim that space, we may conclude that the prison narrator interacts with the space he hopes to possess. Prison narratives, therefore, are not only focused around the space that imprisons them; they are the very product of that space, and would not exist as we think of them today were it not for the spatial restraints they seek to subvert. Since the place of the prison is such a significant part of the prison narrative, we must necessarily ask ourselves, what went into creating that environment? Without an understanding of what went into creating the place in which prison narrators are writing, we cannot thoroughly understand the prison narrative.

The thinking espoused during the Renaissance and Romantic periods reflect the ideal that confinement only has to do with one's mental—not physical—state. Because it is this way of thinking that went into the creation of the prison system as we know it today, we may conclude that the thinkers who influenced the creation of that space indirectly influenced prisoners interacting with that space through their narratives. The thinking displayed in the poems helped create the actual structure of the prison system as we know it today. Like the poems themselves, the prison structure is centered on individual improvement and inner reflection. Foucault writes about the inception of prison, "The first principle was isolation. The isolation of the convict from the external world […]"(242). This isolation is apparent in the use of

solitary confinement to punish inmates, as well as in the compartmentalized structure of the prison cells themselves. Historically, early prisons focused on individual inmate labor, conducted in complete silence for hours at a time (Kunzel 29). These practices were justified due to the thinking reflected in the story of Joseph and poems by Lovelace, Coleridge, and Keats. In the works that follow, these poets suggest that silent thought and imagination can lead a prisoner to transcend his physical constraints, thereby finding comfort within his imprisonment. In this way, Lovelace, Coleridge, and Keats indirectly affected the all-important *place* that is the core of the prison narrative. Even if the prison writers whose work I analyze have not read these actual poems, together the poems form an ideological space that affects our idea of the "prison," making it important to study them so that we may better understand prison narratives as a whole. Ultimately, the extreme environment in which these writers live is partially responsible for the creation and content of these narratives, making it prudent that we consider that environment, and the thinking which went into creating it, as possible sources of influence on later prison narratives.

Convergences in Lovelace, Coleridge, and Keats

Richard Lovelace's "To Althea, from Prison," is one such poem which, although being written in 1649, before the Romantic era, reflects the romantic thought that went into the modern-day structure of the prison system. Contrary to the depressing tone one might expect from a poem about prison, Lovelace evokes natural imagery throughout the majority of the poem's stanzas, giving the poem a whimsical and freely flowing feel. This feeling is mirrored in the meter of the poem, which switches between iambic tetrameter and iambic trimeter, making the reader feel less

inhibited than we might feel with a poem confined by a single meter. In the poem's first stanza, the final syllables stressed in each line are "wings," "gates," "brings," "grates," "hair," "air," and "ty" as in "liberty" (70). Just by looking at the syllables that are stressed by the meter—not yet paying mind to the poem's actual content—we are depicted an optimistic, welcoming picture. This is emphasized not only by the association with nature that many of the stressed words have, but also by their pairing with the verb "brings," whose definition adds to the poem's positive tone.

Lovelace also pays particular attention to physicality. Solely in the poem's first three stanzas, he mentions "wings," "hair," "eye," "heads," "hearts," "throat," and "voice" (70). This focus on body parts and that which is produced by the body serves to emphasize that which can be produced by the mind: imagination. By overwhelming the reader with these bodily structures, Lovelace makes the contrast that much more startling when he switches his focus to the mind's functions. He writes, "When thirsty grief in wine we steep,/When healths and draughts go free,/Fishes that tipple in the deep/Know no such liberty" (71). Unlike fish, Lovelace writes, the prisoner is able to remove himself from his immediate surroundings through the use of his imagination. In the case of this stanza, it is his ability to imagine drinking wine that Lovelace equates with having "liberty," despite being imprisoned.

This is not the only time that Lovelace mentions the concept of liberty. At the end of four of the poem's five stanzas, Lovelace continually returns to the notion of liberty with the phrase "Know no such liberty." Like the story of Joseph, Lovelace's mention of liberty connects the poem to societal law and the idea of justice.

Historically, it is known that Lovelace went to prison for presenting an ill-received petition to Parliament. This fact brings new light to Lovelace's repetitive use of the word "liberty": he, like Joseph, has been wronged by societal laws and unfairly placed in prison. Nevertheless, Lovelace still writes of liberty as something he feels regardless of his physical conditions. This idealized vision of liberty allows Lovelace not to seek justice, but instead to be thankful for the imagination he has and where it allows him to go. Yet, the message Lovelace sends to potential readers is an unhelpful one: he accepts being imprisoned for a non-illegal act, compensating for a lack of societal justice by using his mind. As in the story of Joseph, in "To Althea, from Prison" Lovelace approves of unfair conditions by choosing to accommodate to them rather than resist them.

Lovelace's skewed sense of justice, along with his frequent use of natural imagery, suggests that imprisonment exists only within the body, while the mind is able to roam free through its imagination. This point is highlighted by the poem's final stanza: "Stone walls do not a prison make,/Nor iron bars a cage;/Minds innocent and quiet take/That for an hermitage;/If I have freedom in my love,/And in my soul am free,/Angels alone, that soar above,/Enjoy such liberty" (70). For Lovelace, facing prison and injustice is no reason to let your mind be held back. By mentally transcending his physical captivity, Lovelace feels not only that he has received liberty, but also that he can "enjoy" the liberties of his mind.

Lovelace's appreciation for the prison which oppresses him, in spite of his belief that he is there unfairly, is a sentiment that continues to be expressed in prison narratives written centuries after Lovelace's time. Furthermore, the same ideas

communicated in “To Althea, from Prison”—that physical hardship is unimportant due to the abilities of the mind—were responsible for the early model of the United States prison system. Lovelace’s poem speaks to the thinking that serves as the very foundation of the modern-day prison system (Kunzel 47).

In “The Lime-Tree Bower my Prison,” written by Samuel Taylor Coleridge in 1797, Coleridge acknowledges an understanding of prison, nature, and the soul that is similar to that of Lovelace. Unlike Lovelace, however, Coleridge devotes the majority of his poetic text to extended descriptions of scenes in nature. Although Coleridge writes in the first line, “Well, they are gone, and here must I remain,/ This lime-tree bower my prison!”, his immediate launch into an imagined walk through nature hardly suggests that the narrator remembers he is in prison or even feels he “must […] remain” there (178). Coleridge’s depiction of nature is a celebratory one: he is passionate about all of its forms, even those things about which others might complain. He writes, “Behold the dark green file of long lank weeds,/That all at once (a most fantastic sight!)/Still nod and drip beneath the dripping edge/Of the blue clay-stone” (Coleridge). Even plants that take life away from other plants—“weeds”—are beautiful in Coleridge’s eyes. Indeed, even Coleridge’s punctuation after “a most fantastic sight” denotes an honest excitement for all forms of nature. Later, he writes, “A delight/Comes sudden on my heart, and I am glad/As I myself were there!” (Coleridge). Here, Coleridge acknowledges that these scenes of nature are entirely in his imagination. In doing so, he speaks to the vastness of an imagination that can make even the reader—not to mention the narrator himself—temporarily forget that Coleridge is locked in a prison. Like Lovelace, then, Coleridge emphasizes the idea

that the imagination can take you wherever you wish to go, even if that place is beyond your physical means.

The fact that Coleridge spends a prolonged amount of time relating nature's wonders to the reader, without complaining once about the place his body physically inhabits, suggests that voicing one's resistance is unnecessary when one can be mentally free. For Coleridge, who proves the depth of his imagination through the length of his natural imagery, this idealized approach to prison time allows him a happy escape from the four walls of his cell. In the poem's final stanza, he writes, "Henceforth I shall know/That Nature ne'er deserts the wise and pure;/No plot so narrow, be but Nature there,/No waste so vacant, but may well employ/Each faculty of sense, and keep the heart/Awake to Love and Beauty!" (178). Coleridge characterizes nature affectionately, writing of it as more a state of mind than a concrete place. For him, nature represents the safety and security of always having a place to feel welcome. At the same time, it is this escape to nature that allows Coleridge to deny the reality of his own living conditions. Coleridge's retreat into nature, facilitated by his poetry, is at base a reaction to the negative conditions in which he is living. Therefore, by leaving out the inevitable negativity he feels towards being imprisoned, he is excluding the very thing that causes him to write and withdraw into nature in the first place.

Coleridge explicitly mentions the soul in "This Lime-Tree Bower my Prison." He writes, "'Tis well to be bereft of promis'd good,/That we may lift the soul, and contemplate/With lively joy the joys we cannot share" (Coleridge). Because it is the soul that allows Coleridge to "contemplate," we can assume that the mind is part of

the soul, and the body is separate from both. Thus the soul is used as a means to further distance oneself from the physical. As with Lovelace, Coleridge justifies the silent contemplation meant to rehabilitate prisoners as being freeing. In *Reading Public Romanticism*, Paul Magnuson draws connections between Christianity and Coleridge's introspective approach to prison. Magnuson argues that the poem's intended recipient, Charles Lamb, reveals that Coleridge's underlying agenda is a Christian one. Magnuson writes that Coleridge's poem is "a public stance, a Unitarian and dissenting stance against an established order that has corrupted Christianity" (62). Coleridge's positive depiction of silent thought, therefore, may be a reflection of the Christian belief in silent prayer as a means towards inner growth.

In John Keats' "Written on the day that Mr. Leigh Hunt left prison," written in 1871, thinking for oneself in order to transcend physical constraints is once again advocated for. Keats writes that, even though Mr. Leigh Hunt has been imprisoned, "yet has he,/In his immortal spirit, been as free/As the sky-searching lark, and as elate" (230). Keats's approach to the spirit is similar to Coleridge's approach to the soul: it can be free even when the body it possesses is behind bars. Like Lovelace's mention of "wings," the freedom of thought about which Keats writes is emphasized by drawing comparisons to a bird. It makes sense that Keats would draw attention to Hunt's imprisonment by mentioning a bird: the bird is not confined by the walls and bars that a human is, and it is that very free-spirited mindset that Keats wishes to instill in his readers.

This idea of mental flight occurs again when Keats writes, "and he flew/With daring Milton through the fields of air: To regions of his own genius true/Took happy

flights" (230). Keats's mention of Hunt's "genius" suggests that only the limits of the mind—not the body—can prevent a prisoner from feely free. Once again, this poem epitomizes the aspect of Romantic thought which stresses the importance of using the mind to overcome physical hardship. This way of thinking is perpetuated today as a means of legitimizing the state's approach to rehabilitation: physical boundaries are used to inspire changes in inmate mentality. This is reflected in the individually-centered rehabilitation practices of solitary confinement, inmate labor, and enclosed cells, among other things.

CHAPTER TWO:

THE SLAVE NARRATIVE

In this chapter, I will turn to Frederick Douglass' autobiographical work *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (1845). I will analyze faith, race, and sexuality in Douglass' work so that, in later chapters, I can draw connections between the slave narrative and prison narratives of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. To that end, in this chapter I aspire to prove that the institution of slavery persists to this day in the form of prison labor. I will also show how Douglass' slave narrative is influenced by the Bible and romantic poetry. My study of how these earlier works affect Douglass' text will later allow me to demonstrate their continued influence on modern-day prison narratives written by George Jackson and Mumia Abu-Jamal. As I identify how Douglass represents faith, race, and sexuality in his narrative, I will necessarily suggest areas of the work itself that serve as influences on the later prison narratives of my study. In future chapters, when I consider more contemporary prison narratives, this foundation of understanding will allow me to prove Douglass' text itself as a further source of influence on the prison narrative. Along with my analysis, I will briefly touch on Douglass' own encounter with a prison cell, and how his depiction links slave life to prison life.

From Plantations to Prisons

Before I can consider the slave narrative as an influence on the modern-day prison narrative, I must first necessarily connect the practice of enslavement to that of imprisonment. Some might, with good reason, take issue with comparing life on a plantation to life in the prison system; to continue without expanding upon this point would surely be too great a leap. For this reason, I will spend some time explaining why, just as the modern-day prison system is rooted in the practice of slavery, the

modern-day prison narrative is rooted in the slave narrative. It is only by examining the institutions at the core of these narratives—slavery and the prison system—that I can logically compare the writings of a slave to those of an inmate. I will stray briefly from literary analysis as a means of supplementing, not replacing, my examination of Douglass' work and its influence on later prison narratives. To that end, I will first consider the common thread that runs through both the plantation and the prison: labor.

A study of the history of convict labor in the United States, and the present state of that labor, reveals that the prison is a business by which labor is produced cheaply and efficiently, not unlike the practice of slavery. The connection between convict labor and slavery is apparent in the thirteenth amendment. In the United States Constitution, this amendment is titled "Slavery Abolished," when in fact it only abolishes "involuntary servitude" (Jefferson 32). When we turn to the text of the amendment itself, it states that "Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, except as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted, shall exist within the United States, or any place subject to their jurisdiction" (Jefferson 32). Although this amendment may seem to prohibit slavery entirely, that prohibition is qualified by the phrases "except as a punishment" and "within the United States." These ambiguous terms allow room for interpretation, and serve as an explicit acknowledgement that there are certain circumstances under which slavery is acceptable. The cryptic wording of "duly convicted" rests on the notion that all prisoners convicted of a crime are guilty; yet, the United States criminal law system

is, like any other governmental system, subject to flaws. Conviction, therefore, does not always denote guilt.

The grey area within the thirteenth amendment allowed former slave owners to continue their practices by different means, ultimately proving that the amendment simply exchanged one form of slavery for another. With the phrase "duly convicted" came a new type of slave labor; African Americans only needed to be accused of a crime against a white person or owe a debt of any amount in order to be considered "duly convicted" of that crime. Southern sheriffs took the place of slave masters, and had the power of determining how long a laborer needed to work to pay off his debt to society. The fee determined was often ambiguous and inflated, allowing sheriffs to "rent" African American laborers against their will to companies that needed quick, cheap work and were willing to pay the right price (Blackmon 58).

For over fifty years after the thirteenth amendment was passed, African Americans made up more than 90% of the workers rented, showing that the racial tension at the root of slavery did not simply dissolve with the end of the Civil War (Blackmon 57). The idea that this same racial disharmony links slavery to today's prison system is reflected in a nonpartisan study conducted by The Pew Center on the States in 2008. The study, titled "One in 100: Behind Bars in America 2008," concluded that black men and women hold the highest incarceration rate among other members of their gender, finding that 1 in 9 African American men aged 20-34 is imprisoned in the United States and that 1 in 100 African American women aged 35-39 is imprisoned (Warren 7).

In *Slavery By Another Name*, Douglas Blackmon points out that, in some cases, blacks rented as laborers had even fewer rights than when they were called "slaves." Blackmon writes, "The key distinction between the sheriff and the old slave masters was that since these African Americans were not his or anyone else's permanent property, he had no reason for concern about how they were treated by their new keepers or whether they survived at all" (65). This new form of labor created a climate in which sheriffs and companies alike cared less than ever about the mental and physical wellbeing of their laborers. As a result, there were mass deaths among African American workers, as well as whippings similar to those African Americans had previously suffered under slavery (Blackmon 57). At present, more than 50 percent of inmates in the United States are African American men ages 18 to 28 (Bissonette 218). This figure, paired with the fact that racialized labor remained even after the official end of slavery, suggests that the same race-based inequality that once forced African Americans into labor during the nineteenth century may partially exist within the United States prison system today.

In 1908, the Georgia state legislature heard more than 120 witnesses testify as to the conditions of the state's convict leasing system. Blackmon notes, "The architects of the investigation launched the inquiry in hopes of proving corruption in the management of Georgia's extensive system of buying and selling prisoners […] It would prove that. But […] they learned of crimes far greater than graft and payoffs" (338). Witnesses reported rampant abuse: one brickyard guard, Arthur W. Moore, admitted that, over the course of one month, anywhere from 200 to 300 whippings were given to laborers (Blackmon 345). Others testified to forced labor that occurred

in high temperatures, regardless of any physical injuries exacerbated by frequent beatings (345). Yet, even the vivid descriptions of the abusive, slave-like conditions in labor camps across the state did little to reverse such practices, especially in Georgia. Blackmon writes:

> The state had more forced labor slaves than ever by 1930. In excess of eight thousand men—nearly all of them black—worked in chain gangs in 116 counties. Of the 1.1 million African Americans in the state that year, approximately half lived under the direct control and force of whites—unable to move or seek employment elsewhere under threat that doing so would lead to the dreaded chain gang. (371)

Like the prison system's use of the word "rehabilitation," "reform" in Georgia was more of a label than an actual implementation of change.

The numbers suggest that a link exists between the new type of slave labor that formed after the Civil War and the prison labor of today. Although modern-day prisoners, unlike their eighteenth-century counterparts, are paid for their labor, the fee is a nominal one compared to the profit turned by the prison system. Whereas convicts make $ .20 to $1.20 per hour, their labor is worth $14.54 per hour, allowing the prison to pocket a profit of at least 92 percent (Dyer 18). Just as companies once "leased" prison laborers from sheriffs in order to get their projects done cheaply, now "well-known companies such as Microsoft, Spalding, Bauer, Chevron, and TWA" use prison labor to make parts inexpensively. In 1998, sales from prison labor accumulated anywhere from $2 billion to $3 billion annually (Dyer 19). This is reminiscent of the $239,402—or $5.2 million today—that was made in 1907 solely from prison labor at a brickyard (Blackmon 345). Unicor, a government company that creates everything from office supplies to war missiles using inmate labor, made over $500 million annually as of 1996 (Dyer 18). The parallels between the cheap

labor performed by today's prisoners and those of the past suggest that little has changed over the decades.

After spending twenty-nine years in solitary confinement, Robert Hillary King found it easy to make connections between enslavement and imprisonment when he spoke to Wesleyan students in April of 2009. King was wrongfully convicted of murder, and was released only after spending a total of 32 years in prison. King said of his time spent imprisoned while innocent, "I had begun to feel that I was chattel. I took it upon myself to escape slavery." King's experience while imprisoned reflects the connection between the environment of slavery and that of the prison. Although it is certain that dissimilarities between enslavement and imprisonment exist, the two institutions are historically bound by the common ground found in their labor practices. Later, I will discuss Mumia Abu-Jamal as a prison narrator who, like King, links slavery with the prison system. Both King's and Abu-Jamal's view of the prison as a form of slavery is shaped by Frederick Douglass, who spends much of his narrative focusing on the details of the labor he is forced to perform. It is for this very reason—because both the slave and the prisoner have a life centered on labor—that it is of particular importance to understand how the two are directly tied together by the labor they perform.

Biblical Influences on the Slave Narrative

In *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, Douglass chronicles his life as a former slave, starting with his birth. Moving around frequently, from the fields of a farm in Maryland to the city of Baltimore, Douglass details the abuses he suffers at the hands of many masters, as well as the allure of freedom. After educating himself

and making one failed attempt at an escape, Douglass ultimately escapes successfully, ending up in New Bedford, Massachusetts. Throughout his narrative, Douglass uses literary allusions to further illustrate his arguments. The poets to whom he refers include William Cowper, John Whittier, William Blake, and William Shakespeare (9, 61, 22, 51). The fact that Douglass infuses his narrative with references to poems written by these men suggests that he is well-versed in literary works, even those written before his time and by non-American authors. Douglass' narrative language and views on transcending the physical—the specifics of which I will discuss later—along with his knowledge of literature, could mean that Douglass at least knew about some of the works by Coleridge, Keats, and Lovelace that I studied in chapter one.

Furthermore, Douglass often quotes the Christian Bible, citing passages from the Book of Matthew and the Book of Genesis's story of Ham. These references, in addition to Douglass' frequent assertions about the practice of Christianity, indicate that Douglass has read at least portions of the Bible, and certainly that he is aware of the story of Joseph, which appears in the Book of Genesis like the story of Ham. These insights are of particular importance as I identify the similarities between Douglass' approach to imprisonment and the approach taken both in the Bible and in the aforementioned poems. Knowing that Douglass has knowledge of Genesis, and therefore certainly of the story of Joseph, we can conclude that his work is directly influenced by the Bible, and possibly by those Romantic-era poems concerning imprisonment. By having this awareness of Douglass' literary knowledge, we may explore faith, race, and sexuality in the text from both a literary and historical perspective, thereby reaching a deeper understanding of Douglass' writing as we

connect his work to other literary works that deal with the issue of imprisonment. Throughout his narrative, Douglass' views on faith and Christianity are often contradictory. Douglass' discussions of fate, as well as the conflict between his thoughts and actions, create a particularly problematic representation of Christianity. Because the later works I will discuss, including Mumia Abu-Jamal's *Live from Death Row*, reflect a similarly contradictory approach to religion, it is necessary that we first examine Christianity in Douglass' work as a potential source of influence upon later prison narratives. Douglass' inconsistent depiction of Christianity is first apparent in his use of religious images to describe both the good and the bad. Early on in his narrative, Douglass describes Colonel Lloyd, one of his many owners, as having "a hand more unrelenting than death" (11). Likewise with Mr. Gore, an overseer who Douglass says "spoke but to command, and commanded but to be obeyed" (13). In both cases, the omnipotent, God-like qualities of each man are used to portray him negatively rather than positively.

Douglass continues this less-than-flattering, Christianity-based characterization of his masters and overseers throughout his narrative. He writes of one master's conversion to Christianity, "It made him more cruel and hateful in all his ways; for I believe him to have been a much worse man after his conversion than before [...] He found religious support and sanction and support for his slaveholding cruelty. He made the greatest pretensions to piety" (32). Douglass writes of another master, who treated him particularly severely, that he and his wife "would kneel every morning, and pray that God would bless them in basket and store!" (31). Although these passages reveal Douglass' disdain for his masters' religious practices,

he continues to express a desire to be invited to prayer with his masters (31). Thus, even though Douglass recognizes that his masters' prayers are not in tune with how they act in reality, he sees his own version of Christian prayer as having some basis in reality.

We may further delve into Douglass' critique of Christianity by examining the ways in which he frequently connects Christianity with the perpetuation of enslavement. He writes of one master, "In justification of the bloody deed, he would quote this passage of Scripture—'He that knoweth his master's will, and doeth it not, shall be beaten with many stripes'" (33). Later, Douglass expands upon this idea of Christianity as a means of legitimizing slavery:

> The religion of the south is a mere covering for the most horrid crimes […] For of all the slaveholders with whom I have ever met, religious slaveholders are the worst. I have ever found them the meanest and basest, the most cruel and cowardly, of all others. It was my unhappy lot not only to belong to a religious slaveholder, but to live in a community of such religionists. (46)

From these passages, it would appear that Douglass views Christianity negatively; after all, in all of these instances it is used as a tool to uphold slavery rather than as a means towards enlightenment. Despite linking Christianity to enslavement in this way, Douglass later acknowledges that his statements might portray him as "an opponent of all religion," causing him to clarify his opinion on Christianity. He writes:

> What I have said respecting and against religion, I mean strictly to apply to the *slaveholding religion* of this land, and with no possible reference to Christianity proper; for, between the Christianity of this land, and the Christianity of Christ, I recognize the widest possible difference […] I love the pure, peacable, and impartial Christianity of Christ […] I can see no reason, but the most deceitful one, for calling the religion of this land Christianity. (71)

In the entirety of *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, this is Douglass' most explicit statement on Christianity, yet its appearance after the narrative—in the book's appendix—makes it come across as an afterthought rather than an authentic representation of Douglass' feelings. Despite this, Douglass' bold statements suggest that he opposes the skewed interpretation of Christianity adopted by his masters, one which allows them to sustain rather than end slavery. What Douglass does not recognize—at least in his writing—is that, just as slaveholders manipulate Christianity to rationalize their enslavement of others, so too does he manipulate Christianity to represent what he wants it to represent: opposition to slavery. For Douglass, this manipulation is a necessary survival tool, a way of feeling as though there is a greater meaning behind the mental and physical abuse of slavery; yet, the ease with which both he and his masters manipulate Christianity is significant in that it reveals the ambiguity with which the Christian Bible can be read.

Douglass spends much of the appendix calling his Christian masters hypocrites, using quotations from the Book of Matthew to support his argument (73). Since hypocrisy is still found among Christians and other religionists today, one wonders whether Douglass would continue to believe that Christianity and slavery in the United States are inherently linked to this day. Although it is irrelevant to consider this question at length, Douglass' contradictory approach to religion *is* relevant in that it influences how both Christianity and faith are represented in modern-day prison narratives. His inability to see how he himself manipulates Christianity to supplement his own needs is reflected in the later prison narratives I

will discuss.Douglass' selective and tendentious interpretation of Christian scripture is easily apparent in his passages concerning fate.

Throughout his narrative, Douglass acknowledges "fate" and "Providence," not his own actions, as the reasons behind his good luck. Upon being the only slave chosen to move from the plantation to the much more luxurious accommodations of Baltimore, Douglass writes:

> I may be deemed superstitious, and even egotistical, in regarding this event as a special interposition of divine Providence in my favor […] In the darkest hours of my career in slavery, this living word of faith and spirit of hope departed not from me, but remained like ministering angels to cheer me through the gloom. This good spirit was from God, and to him I offer thanksgiving and praise. (19)

In this passage, Douglass expresses the feeling that he is sent to Baltimore not because of his own hard work, but because of a higher authority. Here, we see a way of thinking that is directly influenced by Douglass' reading of the Christian Bible, and in particular the story of Joseph. Just as Joseph's Biblical interpretations of dreams ultimately lead to his release from prison, Douglass feels that he must interpret good fortune with the mindset of a Christian. When he spends time in an actual prison, Douglass writes, "I was now left to my fate," as if his imprisonment is, like Joseph's, for a greater purpose (55). Thus, like Joseph in the Bible, Douglass feels content with being in Baltimore and being in prison—even if he is enslaved in both scenarios—because he feels that his enslavement is part of a greater plan set forth by a Christian God. Furthermore, at the end of both the story of Joseph and *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, each man attributes his freedom from imprisonment to God. Whether consciously or otherwise, then, Douglass' high expectations of God, and low expectations of his own power to create opportunity for himself, is influenced by the

story of Joseph. By recognizing this Biblical influence upon Douglass' narrative, we may witness how he, like Joseph, uses faith to resign himself to living without freedom in hopes of a better future planned by God.

Douglass writes that one overseer "whipped, but seemed to take no pleasure in it. He was called by the slaves a good overseer" (7). Douglass' language suggests that a man can whip other human beings and still be "good." This inverted understanding of good and evil indicates that Douglass' environment of enslavement has caused him to demolish any expectation of humane treatment. If we assume that Douglass has read other English poems of the same genre as the ones he has explicitly mentioned, it is possible to conclude that Douglass may have been partially influenced by the romantic notions of imprisonment displayed in the poems by Coleridge, Keats, and Lovelace that I studied. Believing that some overseers can be "good" provides Douglass with a mental release, even though he knows that—whether the overseer is a "good" one or a "bad" one—he must bear physical pain either way. The romantic idea of using the mind to transcend physical pain is practiced by Douglass throughout his narrative. Because there is a possibility that the aforementioned romantic poems were read by Douglass, they must necessarily be mentioned as perhaps an influence on how he framed his narrative.

Since the contradictions within Douglass' Christian approach to the concept of fate appear in later prison narratives, it is necessary to identify them as a means of better comprehending influences on the modern prison narrative. When Douglass mentions that the woman who raised him, now too old to be of any use on the plantation, is sent by his master to die in a cabin in the woods, Douglass neglects to

mention how God's plan works into such an atrocity (29). Again we may view Douglass' manipulation of Christianity: he conveniently looks to "fate" and "Providence" for all the good things that happen to him, yet does not hold God accountable for the bad things that happen to him and those around him. Another inconsistency appears in a footnote that Douglass writes about superstition, which he harshly claims "is very common among the more ignorant slaves. A slave seldom dies but that his death is attributed to trickery" (47). As Douglass does not explain his opinion further, it is difficult to understand how he can reconcile his disgust for superstition with his belief in another unseen entity, fate. It appears that, when it comes to his own manipulation of Christianity to suit his needs, Douglass is unable to turn the lens of analysis upon his own life.

Black against White

Douglass adheres to a racial binary throughout his writing, often splitting his narrative into one that poses all white people against all black people. In *The Mind of Frederick Douglass*, Waldo Martin notes Douglass' placement of white versus black in his narrative. Martin writes:

> The link between white racism and black 'consciousness of inferiority' mirrored the power relationship between blacks and whites, functioning as both a cause and an effect of that relationship. Douglass tended to juxtapose in bold relief white power and aggression against black powerlessness and accommodation. (124)

It should be noted that Douglass' attachment to that racial binary is borne purely of the fact that he is enslaved; white versus black is all he knows and therefore, when it comes to race, it is the only thing he devotes narrative thought to. After successfully escaping from his master, Douglass writes, "The motto which I adopted when I started slavery was this—'Trust no man!' I saw in every white man an enemy,

and in almost every colored man a cause for distrust" (64). Although Douglass' initial phrase, "Trust no man," suggests that he fears men of all races equally, in the next sentence he qualifies that statement with the word "almost," admitting that *some* "colored" men can be trusted, just not any white men (64). Logically, Douglass knows that a black man can be wronged by members of his own race, too; after all, it was a fellow slave, not a white man, who told Douglass' master of his first plan to escape, causing him to go to prison. By forgetting the reality of the past, Douglass reveals the reverse racism that he has been forced to adopt as a result of the extreme conditions of racism under which he has suffered. Also forgotten in Douglass' narrative are other ethnic groups, with whom he might have found an alliance as a result of similar oppressive histories. I bring attention to this point not to criticize Douglass for becoming a product of his environment, but instead to reveal the similarities between Douglass' focus on a white/black racial binary and later prison narratives which have the same focus. As a result of the overcrowded prison system's hyper-racialized atmosphere, and of influential sources such as Douglass, prison narrators of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries reflect this concentration on the racial binary (Kunzel 29). I will speak more precisely on Douglass' influence upon these later works during the coming chapters.

Perhaps as a result of his skewed sense of race, Douglass underestimates the power of racism throughout his narrative. He initially describes one of his mistresses as being a kindhearted, perfect woman. Later, however, he writes, "That cheerful eye, under the influence of slavery, soon became red with rage; that voice, made all of sweet accord, changed to one of harsh and horrid discord; and that angelic face gave

place to that of a demon" (19). Here, Douglass turns an issue of race into one of power, for it's likely that this same woman would have mistreated a black man simply for being black, whether the institution of slavery existed or not. Later, Douglass again assumes that race is not at issue. He writes of one slaveholder, "He came into possession of all his slaves by marriage; and of all men, adopted slaveholders are the worst" (31). Once more, Douglass underrates racism as the simple explanation behind cruel slaveholders, this time writing it off as a class issue. We will later see how this tendency to blame factors other than racism for one's mistreatment has manifested itself in the modern-day prison narrative.

Sex as Violent

Sexuality is very rarely discussed in *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, and even then it is only briefly alluded to. Indeed, it is not until the book's last chapter that the reader discovers Douglass has been planning to marry a freedwoman immediately upon his escape from enslavement. In his first mention of sexuality, Douglass writes:

> Slaveholders have ordained, and by law established, that the children of slave women shall in all cases follow the condition of their mothers; and this is done too obviously to administer to their lusts, and make a gratification of their wicked desires profitable as well as pleasurable. (2)

This passage is an example of Douglass' previously mentioned inclination to place the blame on a factor other than racism. In this case, Douglass' use of the words "lusts," "gratification," and "desires" suggests that he blames sexuality for the slave master's practice of raping his female slaves, when, were she not black, he would not feel nearly as entitled to raping her. Thus, Douglass' first mention of sexuality is portrayed extremely negatively. This characterization continues when

Douglass links sexuality to extreme violence. He writes, "The louder she screamed, the harder he whipped; and where the blood ran fastest, there he whipped longest […] Why master was so careful of her, may be safely left to conjecture. She was a woman of noble form, and of graceful proportions" (4). This is Douglass' first in-depth description of violence. His choice of the words "louder," "harder," and "longest," paired with his allusion to the slave's figure and the master's sexuality, evokes sexual images that overlap with the violent ones.

The fact that Douglass only mentions sexuality when he is also discussing violence indicates that he thinks of the two as being one and the same. Because, by his own account, all of Douglass' early exposure to sexuality is in an environment of forced rather than consensual sexuality, he has come to equate violence with sexuality. This can lead us to conclude that Douglass' imprisonment has skewed his notion of sexuality and distorted his concept of consensual sex, causing him to view sexuality as a function of violence. In *Criminal Intimacy*, Regina Kunzel points to a similar phenomenon within the prison system. She writes that "Sexual manipulation, coercion, and sometimes lethal violence were recognized as features of the male prison scene from the time of its earliest renderings" (153). "By the late 1960's," Kunzel claims, "the subject highest on the agenda was sexual violence in men's prisons." (152). This insight creates a connection between Douglass' text and today's prison system, and could mean that Douglass's representation of sexuality as violent influenced later prison narratives that do the same. I will explore this idea further once I analyze more modern prison writings in the following chapters.

Though Douglass spent time in an actual prison cell, he writes little about his actual environment, instead focusing on his inner feelings. Douglass writes, “The thought of leaving my friends was decidedly the most painful thought with which I had to contend” (63). It is curious that it is this loneliness, not his desolate surroundings, that troubles Douglass. His manner may be considered an influence upon the introspection of mid-1900’s prison narratives (Haslam 47). Before determining that, however, we must first turn to the text of more modern prison narratives.

CHAPTER THREE:

SOLEDAD BROTHER

In this chapter, I will discuss the political and historical events surrounding George Jackson's *Soledad Brother*, paying particular attention to the role that Jackson played in the Black Power Movement. I will then analyze how the editor, writer, intended reader, epistolary medium, and environment of Jackson's collection of letters *Soledad Brother* should affect our reading of the letters as part of a prison narrative. As with previous chapters, my main points of focus within Jackson's letters will be how race, faith, and sexuality intersect. As guiding points, I will turn to the Bible's story of Joseph, Romantic poetry, and Frederick Douglass' *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, ultimately seeking to demonstrate that they serve as literary influences on Jackson's prison narrative. My reading of *Soledad Brother* is, like my previous readings, an angled one. One cannot fully grasp Jackson's metamorphosing political ideology without reading his second work, *Blood in My Eye*; yet, because covering all the relevant works of the authors I study would reach far beyond the span of this text, here I take a more detailed look at *Soledad Brother* only. It is Jackson's first work that offers us a glimpse into his unrefined beginnings as a revolutionary. *Soledad Brother* also reveals Jackson's beliefs when they were still in the process of being developed, suggesting that this work, more so than *Blood in My Eye*, was particularly subject to the influence of earlier prison texts. I offer, therefore, an in-depth—albeit partial—analysis of only one of Jackson's books.

The Black Panther Party

Soledad Brother is comprised of letters written by inmate George Jackson between 1964 and 1970. The letters, written to close relatives, other activists, legal counsel, and the editor of *Soledad Brother* itself, became a best seller at the time it

was published in 1970 (Cummins 174). However, *Soledad Brother* is much more than personal notes written to Jackson's loved ones and associates; they represent an era, as well as the Black Power Movement of which Jackson was a part. Because the political environment in which Jackson wrote shaped his writing, it is necessary to briefly consider both Jackson's criminal history and the history of the Civil Rights movement, as both had an effect on his letters. Initially convicted of armed robbery in 1960, Jackson would spend the next 11 years of his life behind bars for various alleged crimes. In 1966, Jackson established a prison gang known as the Black Family (and, later, the Black Guerilla Family). The gang was founded upon Jackson's ideals of Marxist-Leninist revolutionary action, and—Jackson being a member of the Black Panther Party—it would become closely linked to the Party itself.

In 1967, a newspaper named the *Black Panther* was founded in San Francisco by members of the Black Panther Party, a revolutionary group started the year before. Initially preaching violence only as a means of self-defense, the newspaper soon evolved into a call for violent action against racially-motivated police brutality. Several actions pursued by members of the Black Panther Party—including armed marches at the California state capitol and the open advocacy of police murders—created a perception of the Black Panther Party as violent (Cummins 110). As Eric Cummins notes in *The Rise and Fall of California's Radical Prison* Movement, "On the streets, the Panthers' activity never approached the militancy of their political rhetoric. Nonetheless, their image as urban terrorists, largely a literary figure of the organization's newspaper, was widely accepted by San Quentin readers" (112).

Despite Cummins' assertion, Black Panther action was by no means devoid of violence: over the course of his imprisonment, Jackson made two alleged escape attempts, aided in one attempt by fellow Black Panther associate Angela Davis. In that 1970 attempt, Jackson's younger brother Jonathan entered a San Francisco courtroom armed, and was shot and killed as he attempted to escape with three San Quentin inmates. The Black Panther Party, therefore, had a huge impact not only on Jackson, but also on his family. It was an integral part of Jackson's life within the prison system, as well as his plans for escaping that life.

During the late sixties, assisted by other underground newspapers such as the *Berkeley Barb*, the Black Panther Party organized rallies and prison strikes. The effect, writes Cummins, was that "Inside San Quentin, events were taking place that would bring the radical Bay Area community squarely into prison activism" (115). As a result, even those living outside San Quentin were in tune with prison news and events. By the time of Jackson's second escape attempt in 1971, which resulted in his death, Jackson's writings and associations had made him famous. The Soledad Brothers Defense Committee, formed to provide legal aid for Jackson and the two men with whom he was originally arrested, had acquired a large fund through donations, thanks in part to Jackson's notoriety (Cummins 178). By reviewing this history, we are able to see how the Civil Rights Movement shaped an activist; by critiquing Jackson's letters, we will able to see how Jackson shaped the movement. Both factors are essential to understanding Jackson as a prison narrator, and therefore are necessary to dissecting the prison narrative and its influences. The highly politicized climate in which Jackson was living influenced *Soledad Brother*, and thus

indirectly helped shape the writing and the genre of the prison narrative as we think of it today.

The Epistle as a Narrative

Before we can compare *Soledad Brother* to other prison narratives—or even call it a prison narrative at all—we must first question whether a collection of letters truly qualifies as a narrative. In order to decide what a narrative is *not*, we must necessarily identify what *does* characterize a narrative. In his article "Language, Narrative, and Anti-Narrative," Robert Scholes considers the narrative from a structural standpoint. He writes,

> It is a formal feature of narrative texts—a part of their grammar—that the events are always presented in the past tense, as having already happened. Even if the grammatical tense of the discourse shifts to the present, as in certain epistolary novels, the fact of textualization ensures that interpretation follows the event. (209)

Scholes' approach is commendable because it addresses how one's perception of time affects one's reading of a text. His point is well-noted on a grammatical level, and does suggest that letters may be read as a narrative. What Scholes neglects to consider, however, is the effect of a letter's timing on its original reader versus the effect of its timing on the scholar who reads it as part of a larger collection. Whereas the letter's original reader responds to it and receives replies over the course of several months or years, that temporal passage is significantly shorter for the reader. In *Narrative Discourse*, Gerard Genette addresses this temporal incongruity. He writes:

> The temporality of written narrative is to some extent conditional or instrumental; produced in time, like everything else, written narrative exists in space and as space, and the time needed for

> ‘consuming’ it is the time needed for *crossing* or *traversing* it, like a road or a field. The narrative text, like every other text, has no other temporality than what it borrows. (34)

This “false time standing in for a true time” is what Genette calls “pseudo-time” (34). In our reading of *Soledad Brother,* the fact that our sense of time is significantly different from that of the letters’ original recipients is relevant; time allows the letter’s recipient to think, respond, and shape Jackson’s next response—an exchange that the reader has missed entirely. Even if we do accept letters as creating a narrative, any reader of *Soledad Brother* must remain cognizant of how Genette’s “pseudo-time” affects our reading of the text.

In his article “Epistolary Narratives of Transmission and Transgression,” Bernard Duyfhuizen also finds it important to consider when events unfold for different readers. He writes, “All epistolary novels contain a double narrative of the events and a narrative of the letters that precipitate or report the events. This double narrative is produced within a textual society created for the reader by the private correspondence of its members” (1). Duyfhuizen reconciles the divergence between how events actually happened and how we read them by suggesting *not* that letters are entirely devoid of narrative, but rather that letters contain two narratives. Duyfhuizen continues his assessment of the different types of letter readers:

> Epistolary novels […] present a special case in that every receiver of a letter would be a characterized reader; therefore, we need to distinguish different kinds of ‘characterized reading acts’ to understand the characterized reader’s function in the double narrative. Characterized reading acts are distinguished by the intentionality of their occurrence. Characterized reading can be intended (the receiver obtains access to a message not written for him), or unintended (the receiver reads a message written for him)[…] Also, the different kinds of characterized reading acts have different degrees of narrative potential for affecting plot. (6-7)

Duyfhuizen's insights apply to epistolary fiction and non-fiction alike. As in epistolary novels, in *Soledad Brother* certain readers can affect the content of the later letters. Thus, Duyfhuizen confirms that the "intended" readers of Jackson's letters can shape the narrative of the letters themselves (6). In our critique of Jackson's letters, we must always take into account who he is writing to, and how the intended reader affects his narrative. Indeed, often in his letters Jackson openly admits that he must censor his more radical thoughts when writing to his father. How do other recipients' expectations and responses influence what Jackson decides to write? Although both Scholes and Duyfhuizen agree that letters can create a narrative, we must still pay attention to potential sources of influence on what Jackson chose to include in his letters. In doing so, we may come to a better understanding of Jackson's narrative.

The restraints of the letter as a form certainly affected the writing of *Soledad Brother*. In one letter, which Jackson manages to illegally slip to Angela Davis, he writes, "I'm going to write on both sides of this paper, and when I make a mistake I'll just scratch over it and continue on. That is my style, completely informal" (280). Frederick Douglass had the opportunity to re-work and revise his autobiography, and Jackson certainly had that opportunity during the editing phase of *Soledad Brother*. Yet, the very fact that Jackson had to work within the confines of a letter handicapped the narrative he might have otherwise written. By nature, letters already limit a narrative—combine that with the restrictions at San Quentin, where Jackson's letters were searched, censored, and cut short by the one-page maximum, and it is easy to

conclude that Jackson's narrative was hampered by his means of writing. The rushed, secretive manner in which Jackson was forced to write certainly affected what he wrote in his letters, as well as how he wrote it. There is little way of knowing to what extent Jackson censored himself, but it is nonetheless important to consider as a factor that contributed to the creation of *Soledad Brother*.

Editor and Reader Bias

In addition to the potential for self-censorship, there is also the possibility that the editor of *Soledad Brother*, Gregory Armstrong, injected his own idealized version of Jackson into the narrative. A friend of Jackson learned what the author thought about *Soledad Brother* in its final form. The friend relates,

> Well, not much of it was his, as far as I can tell, and he was madder than hell about it. The irony in the end, I guess, was that the book was sold all over the world, and attracted all kinds of people, thousands of them, to the defense committee. They put their money in the hat, organized meetings, and made him a hero. And yet the guy they were doing it for wasn't George. He never really existed for them. They were doing it for the guy in the book, whoever he was. Some guy who'd been cut, edited rewritten, recomposed and bowdlerized somewhere outside the walls, to fit the image they wanted. (Cummins 177)

Although information through a third party source is far from reliable evidence, it does point to the possibility that over-editing occurred in the case of *Soledad Brother*, an occurrence which should influence our perception of Jackson and his narrative. Perhaps more dependable evidence comes from Armstrong himself. Cummins writes, "At one point in the editing of his book, Armstrong admits, inmate Jackson complained to him, 'I don't want anyone cutting me up like this.' 'That's me,' Armstrong confessed, 'trying to improve you'" (175). As with any political figure, people imagine George Jackson as an idea rather than an actual man; this

effect was probably intensified by Jackson's isolation. As an inmate whose primary form of communication to the outside world was by means of letters, Jackson is more recognizable as—in his friend's words—an "image" rather than a physical, fallible human being (Cummins 177). A romanticized characterization of Jackson is perhaps more convenient because of the era in which he lived. The Sixties—especially for today's reader, who is removed from the decade by more than forty years—represents an era of change that is typically idealized in modern-day America. Thus, while readers may be apt to project their own perceptions of Jackson and the Sixties onto *Soledad Brother*, we can stay away from such presuppositions simply by acknowledging that they exist.

We have considered how both the intended reader and the form of the letter affect the narrative of *Soledad Brother*; Armstrong's insertion of himself into the narrative asks that we now consider how our own reading may influence the text. As with any text, we must think especially about the effect of our own race, sexuality, and faith on our reading as we seek to delve into those specific aspects of the narrative. Yet, with this text, taking our own bias into account is of particular significance. In the article "'On the outside Looking In': White Readers of Nonwhite Prison Narratives, D. Quentin Miller writes,

> Prison narratives are written primarily (even exclusively) for outsiders, not for inmates. One of the most basic functions of these narratives is to communicate the horror and degradation of being incarcerated. But they invariably go beyond the walls of the prison to address broader social ills. Many recent American versions of these narratives, dating back to Martin Luther King's 'Letter from Birmingham City Jail,' are written by nonwhite authors and are addressed self-consciously to a white audience. The evident analogy is that white readers are outsiders to the cultures and lives of racial minorities just as virtually all readers are outsiders to prison. (15-16)

As Miller points out, writing—or in this case, editing—for a white, non-inmate audience is inherent to the prison narrative. Whether subconsciously or intentionally, this results in a change in how the narrator approaches writing. Likewise, throughout *Soledad Brother* both Jackson's pedagogical technique and Gregory Armstrong's editorial technique change according to whom Jackson is writing. For instance, Jackson often tones down his violent rhetoric when writing to his mother. Like any prison narrator, Jackson knows that he can win only certain battles with outside readers, and thus he selectively narrates only those viewpoints that complement the perceived reader's opinion. Similarly, Miller goes on to write:

> White readers exert a pull on the contemporary prison narrative that disrupts the chronological order of narration. Whether biological or autobiographical, the ethnic prison narrative cannot follow a conventional narrative order, which would likely take the following form: the subject's identity, what he did (or didn't do) to land in prison, the horrible condition of prison, and the prisoner's hopes for the future. Instead, minority prison narratives tend to be peripatetic, discursive, and multivocal since they bear the burden of educating the liberal and liberated white reader as to the social circumstances that surround the narrative while also persuading the reader to sympathize with the subject rather than to judge him. These narratives disrupt chronology[…]" (16)

The existence of a hypothetical white reader, then, disrupts the typical form of the prison narrative because the racialized inmate feels he must prove something to the white reader, and is thus charged with positively representing an entire race of people. Without a reader even existing, the narrative is shaped simply by who *might* read it, and thus the prison narrative is in part a reaction to the white gaze and the fear that white readers may essentialize one race based on a single narrative. Although

many of the people to whom Jackson wrote were black, and thus Miller's statement does not apply, *Soledad Brother* was edited by a white man with white readers in mind, a fact which surely influenced what was cut and kept. Furthermore, even if they are not the intended readers of the letters, white readers of *Soledad Brother* are likely to impose their own beliefs about race on Jackson's narrative. Yet, it is a natural response to apply that the known to unknown—and therefore frightening—situations, even in the case of nonwhite readers. As a Cherokee, I must consider my own tendency to question Jackson's few statements about Native Americans. Similarly, each reader of a racialized text must especially take into account how her own race affects her reading of the text.

Race as Violence

Having identified the narrative qualities found in *Soledad Brother*, as well as the drawbacks of the epistolary form, we may now move onto the representations of race, sexuality, and faith within the Jackson's work. Before we begin, however, I should explain why I have chosen this narrative in particular. In "The Prison Writer as Ideologue: George Jackson and the Attica Rebellion," Brian Conniff addresses the question of why anyone might choose to read Jackson's work to begin with. He argues that:

> Jackson's death and the eventual massacre at Attica are dramatic conclusions to highly contested narratives of crime, punishment, and redemption. As such, they directly demonstrate the theoretical and practical significance of prison writing for any analysis of morality and violence behind bars. (Miller 9)

As Conniff suggests, the controversial nature of Jackson's case and the events surrounding it justify the importance of the prison narrative as a genre. Because

Jackson's writing is so well-known, it has become the figure of Civil Rights era prison narrative. Therefore, by reading Jackson's *Soledad Brother*, we may gain wider knowledge about the structure of and influence on the prison narrative as we know it today.

From the outset of *Soledad Brother*, Jackson refers to himself as a "slave," and continues to use this terminology over the course of six years of letters (4). Likewise, he reclaims the word "nigger" as his own, often calling himself one (9). In both cases, Jackson associates blackness with a word that was once used—and still used—to oppress his race. Jackson's word choice reveals his political leanings; he equates blackness with slavery, and believes himself to be a slave whether he is physically behind bars or not (9). He writes: "After the Civil War, the form of slavery changed from chattel to economic slavery, and we were thrown on the labor market to compete at a disadvantage with poor whites. Ever since then, our principal enemy must be isolated and identified as capitalism" (236). Yet, although Jackson has sound logic behind his belief that he was born into slavery, he often lapses into self-deprecatory patterns of thinking, at times calling himself an "old slave trying to deal with his environment," or an "old slave, wet and trembling" (213, 219).

Jackson's lapses into self-condemnation, in which he seems to blame himself for having a slave mentality, reflect a greater conflict within the black community. Just as Jackson grapples with his own notion of the black identity, so too did other black revolutionaries living during the Civil Rights Movement have to form their own idea of the black identity as they considered how to best facilitate an uprising by the black population. Jackson's own self-doubt, then, is indicative of a larger struggle for

one communal black voice. Similarly, Andrew Laird notes that Jackson applies his personal discoveries about race to the bigger picture of racism in the United States. Laird writes,

> "More recently, in *Soledad Brother* […], George Jackson viewed the power structures and hierarchies of race in the Californian prison system he experienced—the 'world' directly accessible to him—as a paradigm for a critique, on the macrocosmic level, of North American society as a whole." (14)

In this way, Jackson's views on race were shaped by his environment—the prison system—and, in turn, helped shape the public's perception of race. For Jackson, race is not only a means towards self-discovery, but is also a tool that can be manipulated towards a greater end—in Jackson's case, towards allowing the black community to realize their own enslavement.

The fact that Jackson applies his experiences in the hyper-racialized prison environment to race in the outside world is problematic to say the least. Because inmates are often separated along racial lines, Jackson's imprisonment has made him accustomed to an atmosphere of extreme racism. His reaction, in turn, is similarly extreme. Indeed, even Jackson himself writes, "I am an extremist. I call for extreme measures to solve extreme problems" (265). It takes several months for Jackson to expand upon this realization and admit just how much the prison environment has skewed his view of "extreme problems" (265). He writes, "I've divided the world's people into two categories only (I reject further classification on the grounds that I will not be confused, manipulated, divided to be conquered). I recognize two distinct types only, the innocent, the guilty" (307). Even Jackson's reasoning behind taking such an extreme stance is reactionary and prison-minded: he is accustomed to the

mindset that someone is always attempting to take advantage of him. This is emphasized by his word choice; he does not write that he does not *want* to be confused, but rather he demands that he "will not be confused" (307). Although Jackson's extreme words and opinions are a natural reaction to the prison environment, we must nevertheless consider that environment as a source of influence upon Jackson's perception of the outside world.

As one could imagine, Jackson's extremism is reflected in his characterization of whites within *Soledad Brother*. His dichotomy of the innocent versus the guilty manifests itself within the text as an "us versus them" mentality. In a letter to his editor, Jackson writes about his elementary school years: "'We' played and fought on the corner sidewalks bordering the school. 'They' had a large grass-and-tree-studded garden with an eight-foot wrought-iron fence bordering it […] 'They' were all white. 'They' were driven to and from school in in large private buses or their parents' cars" (6). Despite never defining who either "we" or "they" is, Jackson is adamant that racism is—both literally and figuratively—a black-and-white issue.

Later in the same letter, Jackson writes: "all blacks do look alike to certain types of white people. White people tend to grossly underestimate all blacks, out of habit. Blacks have been overestimating whites in a conditioned reflex" (16). Jackson's inclusion of the phrase "certain types of" before "white people" initially suggests that Jackson does not group all white people together. Yet, Jackson's qualification is entirely forgotten by the next sentence, in which he generalizes about all "white people" (16). Thus, like Frederick Douglass before him, Jackson subscribes to a racial binary in which white and black are posed against each other.

Although one can hardly blame either Jackson or Douglass for being a product of his environment, one wonders: what is the ultimate function of Jackson's theory on race relations? Does he use race as a means of separating or uniting the black and white communities? From his initial characterization of blacks and whites, it would appear that the former is true. H. Bruce Franklin, however, thinks otherwise. In "The Literature of the American Prison," Franklin writes,

> even Genet, many of whose *themes* are common to American prison writings, has a profoundly different consciousness, a fact in part demonstrated by his introduction to Jackson's *Soledad Brother*, in which Genet, despite some fine insights, fundamentally misreads Jackson's message as being anti-white, whereas Jackson, both in his writing and in his prison leadership, was trying to forge revolutionary class unity between Blacks and whites. (53)

It is not difficult to see how Genet concluded Jackson is opposed to allying himself with white people. Apart from writing the occasional letter to a white person, Jackson expresses little but contempt for the white race. In his article "Race Consciousness," however, Gary Peller agrees with Franklin. Peller notes that "Roy Wilkins charged that 'no matter how endlessly they try to explain it, the term Black Power means anti-white power.' In fact, the virulent and extreme denunciation of Black Power symbolized the unity of what would quickly become the new center of American consciousness about race" (789). Peller effectively suggests that, just because a text is pro-Black does not mean it is anti-white. Perhaps the true signifier of Jackson's feelings towards white people can be found in the amount of textual space he devotes to them; whereas members of non-white or –black races rarely get mentioned, and even then only in passing, both whites and blacks comprise a considerable amount of space in Jackson's letters. The tendency for Jackson to hold

to the racial binary is evident in his argument that "No other people have completely been divorced from their own as we have in such a short period" (51). Jackson's statement—whether true or not—is of little functional value. After all, what can be gained from competing with other oppressed races for the title of "most oppressed"? It appears that, for Jackson, there is only one oppressor, whites, and there is only one oppressed group, the blacks. Simply the fact that Jackson devotes textual space in his letters to whites at all suggests that he wishes to create unity rather than disharmony.

Douglass and Jackson are not only similar in their subscription to a racial binary; in fact, Jackson's political beliefs themselves can be used to argue the slave narrative as a forerunner to the prison narrative. In addition to the fact that Jackson regards himself as a slave, thereby making anything he writes a slave narrative, he connects the racism of past slavery with racism in the American prison system. He writes:

> After one concedes that racism is stamped unalterably into the present nature of Amerikan sociopolitical and economic life in general […], and concedes further that criminals and crime arise from material, economic, sociopolitical causes, we can then burn all of the criminology and penology libraries and direct our attention where it will do some good. (18)

It matters little whether Jackson himself believes his narrative to be a slave narrative; *Soledad Brother* shares other similarities with *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass.* One such commonality is the authors' use of knowledge to rebel. In Douglass' case, knowledge is used to escape slavery; in Jackson's case, knowledge is used to escape—or at least make two attempts at escaping—prison. Jackson writes about his time in a juvenile detention center: "When told to do something I simply played the idiot, and spent my time reading. The absent-minded

bookworm, I was in full revolt by the time seven months were up" (14). Douglass, too, must feign ignorance in order to learn and ultimately escape. For both men, knowledge represents the freedoms they were rarely given.

Representations of Christianity

One point of dissimilarity between Jackson and Douglass is their approach to faith. Throughout *Soledad Brother*, Jackson associates racism with organized religion—and, in particular, Christianity. He writes to his mother, "I've read as much St. Augustine as I could stomach. […] You know how I feel about those people. […] That Pope Pius XII, the guy you let us pray for, gave Mussolini his blessing as he was about to embark upon his misadventure in Ethiopia" (87). Jackson's use of the phrase "those people" without really defining who he's talking about is reminiscent of his "they" approach to white people.

Indeed, Christianity and racism are intricately linked in Jackson's mind. The first act of violence depicted in *Soledad Brother* is that committed against Jackson by white boys in kindergarten. This event led Jackson to be enrolled at a Catholic school, where, he writes, "Holy ghosts, confessions, and racism" go hand-in-hand (6). Because Jackson's early exposure to violence was also his first exposure to Catholicism, he has come to associate the two with each other. Even Jean Genet, who wrote the original Introduction to the collection of letters, proclaims, "From Richard Wright to George Jackson, the blacks are stripping themselves of all the Presbyterian and biblical rags: their voices are rawer, blacker, more accusing, more implacable, tearing away any reference to the cynical cheats of the religious establishment" (Sandarg 279). Genet sees Jackson's refusal of Christianity as making him "blacker,"

thus supporting Jackson's link between racism and religion. Jackson continues to express his contempt for Christianity throughout *Soledad Brother*, writing about his mom's "white god," the "artificial world of those catholics," and ascribing to "whatever gods there be" (42, 82, 46).

Although Jackson is not outwardly religious, he shares more in common with Frederick Douglass—and even The Bible's Joseph—than one might initially assume. Like Douglass, Jackson often remarks on his "good fortune," even though he does not associate that fortune with God as Douglass does (96). Jackson even shares common ground with Romantic poets and The Bible's story of Joseph, in that he overlooks the struggles of the body, using his mind to be free. He writes to his father, "Locked in jail, within a jail, my mind is still free. I refuse ever to allow myself to be forced by living conditions into a response that is not commensurate with intelligence and my final objective" (154). Just like Romantic poets and Joseph before him, Jackson does not let his mind be caged by the physical constraints on his body. And, considering Jackson's intelligence and his allusion to texts from The Bible to Shakespeare to Baldwin, it is very possible that the previously discussed Romance-era texts directly influenced Jackson's use of knowledge to transcend bodily pain.

The Female Body as Deviant

Throughout Jackson's text, sexuality is written about as a taboo subject, likely because Jackson associates it with his Catholic upbringing. He writes about his Catholic school, "You could get away with anything (they were anxious to make saints) but getting caught with your hand up a dress" (6). Because Jackson has already connected this school with racism, the message is clear: racism is okay, but

sexuality is not. As a result of this skewed notion of sexuality, Jackson often writes about love and sex as if they are the same thing. He writes, "I had a girl from Arkansas, finest at the mission, but the nuns convinced her that love—touching fingertips, mouths, bellies, legs—was nasty" (10). It is of great significance that Jackson lists only body parts as his definition of love. His understanding of expressing love for a woman—which was certainly stunted by his time in prison, surrounded entirely by men—relies solely on sexuality. Jackson's tendency to objectify the female body reveals itself when, in opposition to his revolutionary viewpoints, Jackson takes possession of the female body. He writes that he wants capitalists to "stop selling our women or allowing them to be used and handled against their will" (56). By using the phrases "our women" and "allowing them," Jackson suggests that all black women are under male authority. Thus, Jackson is uncomfortable with anything but male heterosexual dominance. Jackson's assuredness of his own masculinity is apparent in what the editor of *Soledad Brother*, Gregory Armstrong, wrote about meeting him. He writes,

> It is as if he were taking the very space inside himself, absorbing, pulling in everything that surrounds him, almost visibly swelling with the intake of substance. Always alert, always wary, watchful, responding to every sound…On the other hand, my body, when I sit, is limp, my hands rest wherever I put them and remain inert. As someone who leads an almost completely protected life, I have no need for my body. (Cummins 177)

Cummins sees Jackson's masculinity as being integral to the effect that *Soledad Brother* has upon the reader. He writes, "George Jackson's was an intensely politicized masculinity that, for Armstrong and other readers, could lend the story of his crimes, even the subject of crime itself, an erotic appeal" (177). Indeed, his own

masculinity and manhood are things that Jackson never once questions. In one letter, Jackson asks his brother to visit a girl that Jackson is interested in. He writes, "You're supposed to be representing me, meaning that you are to be strong, intellectual, watchful, serious, unapproachable" (204). Jackson's use of adjectives that are all typically associated with masculinity reveals the impact of the hyper-sexualized prison system in which he has spent most of his life. Jackson's perception of black masculinity is an intriguing one that we will consider in the following chapter, within the context of the modern-day prison narrative.

CHAPTER FOUR:

CONNECTING PAST AND PRESENT

In this final chapter, I will use Mumia Abu-Jamal's *Live from Death Row* to navigate further discussion of the modern-day prison narrative and its influences. Guided by my previous observations on the Bible, romantic poetry, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, and *Soledad Brother*, I will argue that all of these texts have served as partial influences on today's prison narrative. By continuing my study of books written within a unique political and social environment, I will ultimately analyze how literary influence and history have shaped the prison narrative as a genre.

To that end, I will begin the chapter by summarizing the historical events surrounding Abu-Jamal's arrest and imprisonment. As Abu-Jamal's seminal narrative *Live from Death Row* is the focal point of this chapter, I find it of particular importance that I delve into Abu-Jamal's past. Without knowledge of Abu-Jamal's history, we cannot fully understand his narrative—especially since it is that very history that led Abu-Jamal to being imprisoned, and thus being a prison narrator, at all. This point is particularly relevant in Abu-Jamal's case because, like George Jackson before him, his writings often consist of his reactions to current political events. After touching on the political atmosphere in which Abu-Jamal wrote, I will consider the distinct style of Abu-Jamal's prison narrative, as well as what type of reader Abu-Jamal is intending to write for. Turning to an analysis of the text itself, I will use race, sexuality, and religion as a means of critiquing *Live from Death Row*.

Background

Mumia Abu-Jamal was a political activist, radio journalist, and taxi driver when he was arrested in December of 1981 for the shooting of a Philadelphia police

officer, Daniel Faulkner (Jackson 550). Abu-Jamal's trial, murder conviction in July of 1982, and subsequent death sentence in 1983, are now the subject of much debate. Since his sentencing, Abu-Jamal has adamantly attested to his innocence, both in written form and through tape recordings. *Live from Death Row,* published in 1995, represents one of many calls for Abu-Jamal's re-trial and release from prison (Jackson 550). That release, however, is still pending, and Abu-Jamal remains on death row to this day. The conflict that surrounds Abu-Jamal's imprisonment stems from claims that, as an African American, he was targeted by racist cops, jurors, and attorneys involved in his conviction, thus taking away his constitutional right to a fair trial. Opponents of Abu-Jamal point to his political record with the Black Panther Party as signs of his guilt. For this reason, as well as the previously stated ones, it is necessary to consider the political climate surrounding Abu-Jamal's arrest, as well as the role he played within political movements of the time.

Like George Jackson, Abu-Jamal was a member of the Black Panther Party; unlike Jackson, however, Abu-Jamal was a member not in California, but rather in Philadelphia. This difference was a critical one, and ultimately it was the Black Panther Party feud between East and West that alienated Abu-Jamal from the Party itself. Directly in the pages of *Live from Death Row*, Abu-Jamal writes briefly about the disenchantment that led him away from the Black Panther Party and towards MOVE, a revolutionary organization founded by a man named John Africa:

> The Panthers, to whom I had loaned my life, were sputtering in an internecine, bicoastal, and bloody feud, East Coast against the West Coast […] The prospect of us fighting one another sickened me. […] Frustrated, angry, I drifted away from a party that had drifted away from its moorings in the people. Bitterly, I told myself that I would never join another organization. Then I met MOVE. (152-153)

For Abu-Jamal, MOVE was not simply a political, cultural organization; it also has religious aspects, the details of which I will touch upon in my discussion of the representation of religion in *Live from Death Row*. Yet it is of importance that MOVE was much more than just "another organization" for Jamal (153). It was his family, its members his brothers and sisters. As a radio journalist, Abu-Jamal's political leanings had the potential to influence what he exposed the public to, although he notes that, even once he was introduced to MOVE, his boss prevented him from broadcasting more than one interview with a MOVE member. Abu-Jamal writes, "I swallowed my own not inconsiderable pride (it was, after all, my freedom I was concerned about and not MOVE's) and followed his edict" (155-156).

In 1985, the Philadelphia police department firebombed a house inhabited by MOVE members, claiming they did so in response to a standoff at the residence. 11 MOVE members died as a result. This occurrence, as well as others that affected MOVE, served as direct sources of influence on Abu-Jamal's narrative. He references the bombing explicitly in *Live from Death Row*, writing that "the intentional mass murder of MOVE men, women, and children was justified by the government" (119). Here we witness how the political events surrounding MOVE shape Abu-Jamal's narrative directly by serving as his topic of discussion. Later, we will see how Abu-Jamal's membership in this organization does much more than dictate the subject matter of his writings; it also helps form his representation of race within his prison narrative. It is Abu-Jamal's personal history as a journalist, as well as his political history with MOVE, that give its narrative its focus on current events.

Also like Jackson's prison narrative, Abu-Jamal's is one whose form is unique, as it is not a narrative of Abu-Jamal's own life but instead a collection of his writings on politics and the lives of inmates with whom he has crossed paths. Additionally, the short stories compiled in *Live from Death Row* do not make up a single narrative; rather, Abu-Jamal wrote the text of his narrative piecemeal, throughout the late 1980's and early 1990's. The result is a collection of writings in random order and on various topics, a far cry from what one thinks of a traditional prison narrative. In his article "Dangerous Narratives," Richard Courage alludes to this disjointed narrative form, describing Abu-Jamal's narrative as being "told in bits and pieces." Courage states simply, "*Live from Death Row* is not conventional autobiography" (126). Later, when I discuss the connections between *Live from Death Row* and Douglass' slave narrative, I will identify the ways in which Abu-Jamal's work deviates from early autobiographical narratives.

Despite its unusual nature, however, Abu-Jamal's work is a prison narrative nonetheless, and by recognizing its abnormal style we may better understand the effect of that style upon our reading of the text. Like Jackson's letters in *Soledad Brother*, the form of Abu-Jamal's narrative allows him more freedom as a narrator. Both authors write short pieces over the course of several years, spanning different stages of their lives. This gives their narrative a sense of transformation: their opinions are not stagnant ones plucked from one phase of the author's life, but rather dynamic ones that change over time, thus making the narrative one of an ever-changing voice. Furthermore, unlike traditional prison narrators who recite the story

of their crime and conviction as if required to do so, Abu-Jamal feels no obligation to attest to his innocence, or to narrate the events that led him to prison.

This decision, paired with the informal, noncommittal style of Abu-Jamal's short essays, frees him of many of the narrative restraints felt by traditional prison narrators. While this may at first appear to make Abu-Jamal's job as a narrator easier, the author's choice to create a multi-layered narrative was not only intentional, but it also further complicated his role as a narrator. In "The Literature of the American Prison," H. Bruce Franklin explains how, at the time he wrote the article in 1977, a new approach to the prison autobiography—similar to Abu-Jamal's approach in *Live from Death Row*—was already beginning to form. Franklin writes:

> Whereas the literary criteria dominant on campus exalt what is extraordinary or even unique, with "originality" as the key criterion, most current autobiographical writing from prison intends to show the readers that the author's individual experience is not unique or even extraordinary, but typical and representative. This presents some problems, for how can a single author prove that his or her own experience is commonplace? By reading ten or twelve autobiographies, we can corroborate the general truthfulness of each. But this clearly entails other problems, both aesthetic and practical. (62)

Franklin's insight suggests that, by relating the stories of other prisoners, Abu-Jamal hopes to show readers that these are not isolated incidents; indeed, Abu-Jamal writes about individuals to prove the widespread nature of the scenes he is describing. In this way, although Abu-Jamal takes an *un*usual approach to the prison narrative, he does so to prove how very usual the harsh conditions he describes are. As Franklin notes, it is nearly impossible to prove what Abu-Jamal sets out to prove, and thus his narrative form actually complicates rather than eases his obligations as a narrator. By telling not just his own stories, but also the stories of others, Abu-Jamal proclaims

himself the voice of a community of prisoners, thus placing a significant burden upon himself as a narrator.

Besides further complicating his narrative duty, Abu-Jamal's telling of other people's stories calls into question his reliability as a narrator. Authors already stretch the truth enough in reference to their *own* life; to what extent can we trust a narrator who is telling his third-person perspective of an incident that didn't even happen to him? Although this question may not have an answer, simply by asking it we can remain aware of the potential pitfalls that can come from Abu-Jamal's narrative decisions. Of course, this question is to be expected when it comes to reading the prison narrative. Because the environment in which the prison narrator writes is entirely separate from the outside world in which we read it, we necessarily call into question the authenticity of the prison narrator. We do so because the subject of the prison narrative is entirely unknown to us; whereas we can question the realism of a non-prison narrative by referring to our own life experiences, readers of prison narratives who are not in prison themselves have no rubric by which to judge the portrayals of prison life. It is the isolated nature of the genre and its narrators that mystifies the reader, causing us to question how much truth lies beneath the narrative. Although we can do little to combat our instinctual misgivings about the prison narrative, by identifying them we can better recognize the biases that we bring to the text as readers living outside of the prison environment.

Intended Readers

Before we begin analyzing direct quotations from the text itself, I find it prudent that, as with Jackson's narrative, we first consider who Abu-Jamal wrote *Live*

on Death Row for, as his intended reader significantly affects the approach he takes as a narrator. From the outset of his narrative, Abu-Jamal assumes the reader knows very little about the United States prison system. This presupposition suggests that Abu-Jamal is writing for the liberal white reader rather than a revolutionary black one, who is more likely to know many of the statistical figures that Abu-Jamal quotes in his narrative. In June of 1970, Tom Wolfe wrote a short story for *New York Magazine* entitled "Radical Chic." In it, Wolfe uses fictional characters to question how truly revolutionary the Black Panther Party is. He critiques the Party by portraying their primary supporters as upper middle class white liberals, who support the movement not for the movement's sake, but rather for social posturing (Wolfe 1). The movement's outcome has little effect on the lives of Wolfe's "radical chic."

Over two decades later, a *New York Times* article entitled "The Case that Brought Back Radical Chic" applied Wolfe's earlier concept to the celebrities and media attention given to Mumia Abu-Jamal. In the article, Francis Clines writes that Abu-Jamal's "case is now firmly a cause. But there's little likelihood there would be a cause had Mumia Abu-Jamal not proved such a creative writer and gripping reporter behind bars, an attractive exception to the lumpen felons of death row" (Clines 2). Clines attributes Abu-Jamal's fame among an unlikely community—wealthy, white liberals—to his actual writing. This suggests the possibility that Abu-Jamal's narrative is tailored for a certain, mainly white, audience. This revelation should not come as any surprise; Abu-Jamal's primary fight has always been for his innocence—indeed, *Live from Death Row* was published only four weeks before the Governor of Pennsylvania signed his death warrant (Jackson 550). By appealing to a rich white

audience, Abu-Jamal identifies the readers who are most likely to have some political sway in his case. Abu-Jamal's militant call for action might be better suited for a black audience who had suffered under the oppression about which he writes; yet it is that very oppression that prevents most black readers from being able to make a difference in Abu-Jamal's case. The white reader, on the other hand, has influence simply by being white, and therefore has a greater chance of being able to give Abu-Jamal his freedom.

The notion that Abu-Jamal gears his writings towards a white audience is supported by his brief foray into writing for NPR's *All Things Considered*. Abu-Jamal's commentaries on death row were never aired because NPR's managing editor, Bruce Drake, said he had "serious misgivings about the appropriateness of using as a commentator a convicted murderer seeking a new trial" (Jackson 550). Drake, it seems, recognized Abu-Jamal's strategic use of a white audience to further the message of his innocence. Yet, although Abu-Jamal's tapes were never aired, the fact that he almost became an inmate commentator for this public radio program reveals a lot about who Abu-Jamal is gearing his message towards. 86% of NPR listeners identify themselves as white, while only 5% consider themselves African American. The median income of an NPR listener is $86,000, as opposed to the national average of $55,000. Finally, 78% of NPR listeners categorize themselves as "liberal" (wqub.org). Together, these statistics suggest that there is a reason Abu-Jamal wrote commentary for *these* listeners. These listeners, unlike Abu-Jamal himself, are of the correct race, class, and politics to actually make a difference in Abu-Jamal's case. For this reason, as we consider Abu-Jamal's written work, we

must remember that the author is literally writing to save his life, and addresses the audience that has the potential to give him his freedom back. Thus, Abu-Jamal's writing is not only strategic but also desperate, two qualities which have the potential of significantly affecting his narrative. By remaining cognizant of the extreme measures under which Abu-Jamal is writing, as well as what is at stake for him, we may better recognize how Abu-Jamal's writing is not only "creative," as Clines stated, but also that it is strategic, and thus Abu-Jamal necessarily manipulates the language to evoke a certain response from his intended reader.

Intersections in Race

Like George Jackson, Abu-Jamal bases the representation of race in *Live from Death Row*, in part, on his early interactions with racist white people. Abu-Jamal describes the first fight he had with a group of white men, which occurs when he is only a teenager:

> I was grabbed by two of them, one kicking my skull while the other kicked me in the balls. Then I looked up and saw the two-toned, gold-trimmed pant leg of a Philly cop. Without thinking, and reacting from years of brainwashing, I yelled, 'Help, police!' The cop saw me on the ground being beaten to a pulp, marched over briskly—and kicked me in the face. I have been thankful to that faceless cop ever since, for he kicked me straight into the Black Panther Party. (150-151)

Because Abu-Jamal's first exposure to violence is centered on his race, he depicts race and violence as being inherently connected. This characterization continues throughout *Live from Death Row*; for Abu-Jamal, race *means* violence because his race has borne violence in his own life. As Abu-Jamal relates, this incident is a pivotal one that leads him to become a member of the Black Panther Party. As an organization teaching militancy and the need for armed protection, the

Black Panther Party does not offer Abu-Jamal a relief from violence; interestingly enough, Abu-Jamal's natural response to racism is—like his attackers—a violent one. The connection between race and Abu-Jamal's involvement in political organizations such as the Black Panther Party is an important one; by Abu-Jamal's own admission, it is in part due to his racist treatment that he joins the Black Panther Party in the first place. Abu-Jamal associates that freedom from racist violence with both the Black Panther Party and MOVE. This is perhaps because it is in organizing politically that Abu-Jamal finds that initial respite from racialized violence. For Abu-Jamal, then, these organizations are deeply connected to his race, and therefore he represents them not only as political movements but as components of his identity as an African American.

Abu-Jamal's story about being beaten by a police officer is not the only time he looks to personal experience to draw greater conclusions about racism. Like Jackson, Abu-Jamal applies many of his experiences in prison to a larger critique of racism on the outside. Yet, as with Jackson, this use of a hyperracialized environment to judge race on the outside world poses some problems for Abu-Jamal's narrative. In "Dangerous Narratives," Richard Courage writes about *Live from Death Row*, "It is the work of a radical journalist who describes events inside the walls with a cold eye, and who struggles to locate and explain those events within the context of life outside, glimpsed through books, periodicals, and the reports of visitors. 'I' and 'we' are often interchangeable" (126). As Courage notes, Abu-Jamal calls for extreme action because he is reacting to the highly racialized environment of the prison system and applying it to a distant, outside world. Influenced by Douglass and

Jackson before him, Abu-Jamal's narrative takes a severe, all-or-nothing approach to race.

That Abu-Jamal's work is influenced by previous prison narrators is unquestionable: at one point, he directly quotes Douglass, and frequently alludes to works by other members of the Black Panther Party, such as Jackson (137). This influence is reflected in the dichotomy of "black versus white" and "us versus them" adopted by Abu-Jamal throughout his narrative. This mentality is particularly noticeable in Abu-Jamal's memory of a Philadelphia protest in which he took part. He writes: "We shouted, "Black power, Ungowa, black power!" They shouted, "Wallace for President! White power!" and "Send those niggers back to Africa!" We shouted, "Black power, Ungowa!" […] They hissed and booed. We stood up in our seats and proudly gave the black power salute" (149-150).

As previously stated by Courage, Abu-Jamal often adopts a plural "we" voice as if he is a representative for the entire black race. His choice of the words "we" and "they," as well as the repetition of these words, places black in opposition to white. Here, the term "they" refers not to a particular group of people whom Abu-Jamal has identified, but rather to a generalized mass. Likewise with Abu-Jamal's frequent references to "the state," a loosely defined entity that he believes is racist and employs "racist cops," another far-reaching phrase that Abu-Jamal uses often. Although Abu-Jamal does, in some cases, cite specific court cases that illustrate his point, overall his use of these phrases simply serves to weaken rather than strengthen his argument, their indefinite nature leaving them open to speculation and criticism. For instance, the reader might suspect that Abu-Jamal is demagogically hyperbolic, or

that his "us v. them" world-view is callous and child-like; neither of these readings serve to support Abu-Jamal's claims.

This broad characterization of whites continues throughout *Live from Death Row*, serving to further "other" them by making overly generalized statements about them. He writes:

> For far too many blacks, prisons have become a warped rite of passage, a malevolent mark of manhood, and a dark expectation. For whites, however, even working-class whites, prison is a mark of social expulsion in extremis, and an affirmation of one's outcast status. Blacks have a longer history of rejection from this society than the relatively recent era of grudging acceptance. Many have been socialized into oppression, with prison just one more grim experience in a bitter existence. (104-105)

All of Abu-Jamal's statements are unsubstantiated, and he provides no evidence as to why lower-class whites are excluded from his statements. It should be noted that, as Abu-Jamal openly admits by referring to a "history of rejection," his generalized statements about white and black are simply a reflection of how he says he has been treated his entire life; he "others" whites in response to their "other"ing of him, and thus these generalizations are the only way that Abu-Jamal knows how to speak about race. Like Jackson, Abu-Jamal holds the belief that blacks have come to be "socialized into oppression," and that prison is more accepted within the black community because blacks have come to accept their enslavement, thus making them better prisoners.

This is not the only instance in which Abu-Jamal alludes to slavery and draws connections between enslavement and imprisonment. Early on in the narrative, Abu-Jamal laments that "TVs are allowed, but not typewriters: one's energies may be expended freely on entertainment, but a tool essential for one's liberation through

judicial process is deemed a security risk" (7). Writing and knowledge are thus represented as essential to Abu-Jamal's attainment of freedom, not unlike Frederick Douglass' depiction of education in *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*. Both men use their narratives to display their hunger for knowledge and writing as instruments of justice, mental freedom, and physical freedom. Abu-Jamal emphasizes the connection between his narrative and previously-written slave narratives through the words he chooses to characterize his imprisonment. "Caged," "menacled," "shackled": all are words that Abu-Jamal frequently employs to vividly describe his living conditions, ultimately linking them to slave conditions (4,18,19). In his essay entitled "On Death Row: Fade to Black," Abu-Jamal relates a story about certain death row inmates who were told they had to exercise within newly-installed, fenced-in boxes as opposed to in the open yard. He writes:

> Only when the cages were full did full recognition dawn that all the caged men were African […] The cages were for the blacks on death row. The open yards were for the whites on the row. The blacks, due to racist insensitivity and sheer hatred, were condemned to awaiting death in indignity. The event provided an excellent view, in microcosm, of the mentality of the criminal system of injustice, suffused by the toxin of racism. (28-29)

Although Abu-Jamal typically refers to members of his own race as "blacks" or "African Americans," here he intentionally switches to "African," a change that significantly affects our reading of the text by alluding to slavery. At critical moments throughout the text, Abu-Jamal's repeats of the word "full" to emphasize the overly-crowded "cage." Later, his use of "death row" to refer to blacks and "the row" to refer to whites underscores his argument that race decides how inmates are labeled. This passage is a good example of the aforementioned inclination of the

prison narrator to make conclusions about society based on incidents occurring within their hypersensitive, hyperracialized environment. Eventually, Abu-Jamal makes the direct connection between his own prison narrative and the slave narrative by mentioning Dred Scott. He writes about "the power of the state to further cheapen black life. One hundred and thirty-three years after *Scott*, and still unequal in life, as in death" (32-33). Abu-Jamal sees his own plight as being just as bad, if not worse, than the times of slavery under which Dred Scott lived.

John Edgar Wideman, who writes the introduction to *Live from Death Row*, also compares Abu-Jamal's narrative to a slave narrative; yet, he argues that this narrative actually differs from the form of a typical neo-slave narrative, in which a narrator writing in the modern day imagines a historical slave narrative. Wideman writes, "Mumia Abu-Jamal's voice is considered dangerous and subversive and thus is censored from National Public Radio, to name just one influential medium" (xxix). He then asks, "What set's Mumia's story apart as so threatening?" (xxix). In an effort to prove that Abu-Jamal's text is not a neo-slave narrative, Wideman dissects the genre itself. He writes:

> It is useful to remember that the slave narrative and its progeny, the countless up-from-the-depths biographies and autobiographies of black people that repeat the form and assumptions of the slave narrative, have always been best-sellers. They encapsulate one of the master plots Americans have found acceptable for black lives. These neoslave narratives carry a message the majority of the people wealthy enough to purchase books wish to hear. The message consists of a basic *deep structure* repeated in a seemingly endless variety of packages and voices. The slave narratives of the 1800s posited and then worked themselves out in a bifurcated, either/or world. The action of the story concerns moving from one world to another. […] In the safety of an armchair, readers can root for the crafty slave as the slave pits himself against an outrageously evil system that legitimizes human bondage. Readers can ignore for a charmed moment their

> reliance on the same system to pay for the book, the armchair. The neoslave narratives thus serve the ambivalent function of their ancestors. […] This manner of viewing black lives at best ignores, at worst reinforces, an apartheid status quo. […] Mumia Abu-Jamal's essays question matters left untouched by most of the popular stories of black lives decorating bookstores today. (xxix-xxx)

Wideman's characterization of the neo-slave narrative and its readers is an openly critical one; but what is Mumia Abu-Jamal's world if not an "either/or" one? At one point in his narrative, Abu-Jamal writes, "we the caged share air, water, and hope with you, the not-yet-caged" (51). Here Abu-Jamal speaks in terms of extremes: *either* you are "caged," *or* "not-yet-caged" (51). His views are similar to those displayed by George Jackson in *Soledad Brother*, in which he writes, "I am an extremist. I call for extreme measures to solve extreme problems" (265). The either/or scenario is even more applicable when it comes to Abu-Jamal's dichotomized approach to race. As prisoners, both men write urgent narratives that truly *are* in terms of "either/or": either guilty or innocent; either justice or injustice; either freedom or imprisonment; and, in Jackson's case, either life or death.

I further question the logic of Wideman's distaste for the neo-slave narrative by posing the following questions: what does Abu-Jamal characterize the American government as, if not "an outrageously evil system"? (xxx). How are the intended white readers of *Live from Death Row* any different from the hypothetical reader of the neoslave narrative, who "relies" on the "system" to pay for the book? How can a genre of literature "reinforce […] apartheid" on its own? Wideman's argument is wholly unsubstantiated.

Abu-Jamal and Christianity

As previously mentioned, Abu-Jamal's ideas on race were closely linked to his involvement with the organization MOVE. Although Abu-Jamal was raised going to a Christian Sunday school and considers himself Muslim, MOVE is also an obvious source of religious inspiration for the author. Certain religious beliefs are inherent to those of MOVE. Their "Belief and Practice" statement reads, "Nothing is more important or as important as Life, the force that keeps us alive. All life comes from one source, from God, MOM NATURE, MOMA" (onamove.com). Although Abu-Jamal rarely mentions his religious beliefs explicitly, he often speaks of MOVE founder John Africa, who died in the 1985 firebombing of its headquarters, with much admiration. Abu-Jamal represents John Africa's teaching as if he has all-knowing, God-like qualities. After hearing that a fellow death row member has been found innocent and released, Abu-Jamal writes that he exclaims, "That's somethin' wonderful! Long live *John Africa*!" (35). As in the Bible's story of Joseph, Abu-Jamal evokes the name of a spiritual authority as thanks for a man's release from prison. Thus, John Africa functions for Abu-Jamal in the same way that God functions for Joseph: a source of comfort and justice within an otherwise unjust reality.

As MOVE's mission statement would lead one to believe, MOVE members believe in nature as a form of religion. Later, the statement proclaims, "We believe in Natural Law, the government of self. Man-made laws are not really laws, because they don't apply equally to everyone and they contain exceptions and loopholes" (onamove.com). Abu-Jamal's narrative is very much reflective of this belief in natural laws rather than ones created by humans. He writes, "The earth is but one

great ball. The borders, the barriers, the cages, the cells, the prisons of our lives, all originate in the false imagination in the minds of men" (52). Abu-Jamal continues to treat nature religiously throughout his narrative, criticizing the "man-made," "state constructed" prison that constantly keeps him from freedom (42, 45). Like pre-Romance era poems before him, then, Abu-Jamal finds little value in physical barriers and has never let them control his mind. Also similar to the previously discussed poets, Abu-Jamal uses writings to mentally escape the walls of the prison surrounding him.

The Absence of Sexuality

Sexuality is rarely discussed throughout *Live from Death Row*; as a male prisoner writing in a hypersexualized environment, Abu-Jamal takes the route of avoidance. Like Jackson and Douglass, he limits his explicit discussion to heterosexuality or homosexuality within the prison. In fact, most of Abu-Jamal's scenarios are applied to men, as that is the only world he knows. When he *does* write about women, Abu-Jamal focuses on motherhood and the biological functions of the female body. He writes about crack cocaine, "The natural instinct of motherhood melts into mud"(81). Later, he writes, "mothers haunt ho-strolls, all in an infernal lust for that sweet, deadly poison" (81). It is interesting to note that Abu-Jamal's first use of the word "lust" is qualified by the word "infernal" and associated with something negative. Abu-Jamal's association of sexuality with violence does not stop there. His first mention of sex at all is in reference to rape, and his only mention of homosexual acts were ones forced upon inmates by correctional officers, thereby proclaiming sex as a dangerous weapon rather than an act of pleasure. Unlike the

topic of black manhood, which comes up frequently through Abu-Jamal's and Jackson's text, neither author devotes nearly as much textual space to black womanhood. It is fitting that our analysis comes to an end with a subject that is restrained by the narrative itself; that is, were Douglass, Abu-Jamal and Jackson allowed more contact with women, they would likely write more about women, but in so doing would no longer be imprisoned, thereby no longer writing a slave or prison narrative. The prison narrative is filled with many such constraints, posed by the isolated nature of its authors, the censorship of the prison system, and the intended readers of the narrative.

CONCLUSIONS:
UNLIKELY INFLUENCES

From my study of the Bible, poems by Coleride, Lovelace, and Keats, and the narratives of Frederick Douglass, George Jackson, and Mumia Abu-Jamal, it is clear that there are often unpredictable sources of influence on many modern-day texts. One might not have initially assumed that the Bible or romantic poetry helps create our notion of the prison, but the similarities among the works suggest otherwise.

Across all the texts, faith functioned in a similar way. Likewise, Douglass, Jackson, and Abu-Jamal had violent associations with race and sexuality. Through examining these texts, we may see how future prison narratives will come to represent these different aspects of prison life. Therefore, looking at past narratives allows us to predict the representations that will appear in future prison narratives. This is of great importance to reaching a better understanding of the prison system and how we can transform it.

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