A Taxidermist is the Keeper of a Quiet Zoo:
An Examination of Voicelessness in the Written Narrative
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Abstract

This thesis examines the literary mind within institutions of confinement. The chapters focus on slave narratives, prison literature, and contemporary hip-hop lyrics and musicality, as well as real life experiences in a local juvenile detention facility. Ultimately this thesis is an exploration of the politics or narrative, legacies of trauma, and fictions of freedom.

Key words: prisoner\(^1\), criminalization, slave, blackness, traumatic memory\(^2\)

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\(^1\) This term is used critically throughout the paper. It is a term that belongs to white supremacist

\(^2\) This is a clinical phrase that describes the psychic injuries that can be induced by traumatic experiences.
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Preface

I took two different African American studies courses in the second semester of my freshman year of college. The first was *African American Autobiography* and the second course was *African American Literature and Theory*. As a result, I had the opportunity to read Frederick Douglass’s 1845 slave narrative along side John Edgar Wideman’s *Brother’s and Keepers*. As an English and African American studies double major, in a predominantly white liberal arts college setting, I was presented with very distinct narratives of blackness, Americanness, Africanity and whiteness. Every class felt the same, especially because early African American history had striking resemblances to modern African American history. While reading Douglass and Wideman in conversation with each other, though, I became particularly interested in the continuities between slavery and prison in North America. It did not take me long to see that there were unsettling thematic, contextual and structural overlaps between the prison narrative and the slave narrative. While reading these two foundational books, it became evident to me that people who were subjugated by the American institution of slavery, not only had very similar experiences to people who currently are subjugated by prisons in this country but that these two populations, separated by one hundred and fifty years, also shared dialects, methods of communication, literary traditions, and backgrounds. I had to know more and as a result, it was these issues and connections that became central to my thesis project and research.
African American studies courses, in my experience, revolved around themes of constraint. I began to familiarize myself with the genres documenting life in constraint. I read several slave narratives: The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave, The Narrative of Sojourner Truth, A North American Slave, Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl. The black body was the incarcerated and enslaved body in all scholarly discourse within the field. Michelle Alexander is among the most frequently cited authors, central to impacting the conversation. As a result, I also read Michelle Alexander’s The New Jim Crow, to gain an understanding of the reality that these genres reflect. Her writings prepared me for the extent to which themes, within slave narratives, of displacement; isolation, authorship, dehumanization and voice would recur in prison narratives as well. I subsequently read several prison narratives. Brothers and Keepers, A World Apart: Women, Prison and Life Behind Bars, and An Autobiography of Malcolm X informed me of the ways in which the societal realities permeated the literary imagination. I wondered if the similarities were proof of the residual effects of slavery or if the institution of prison recreated these continuities. The New Jim Crow powerfully asserts that the contemporary prison system has become and is functioning as a reconstruction of American enslavement. Alexander discusses the racial caste systems created to sustain slavery and acts of imprisonment and exposes elements of this racial caste that are still very much apart of everyday American life. Racial terms such, as white and black are exemplary of the ways the racial caste system permeate “the everyday.”}

Alexander, drawing on decades of research by scholars in sociology, government and
African American studies, states that these terms originated in response to collectivity between blacks and whites of similar occupation and class.

Prior to the 1676 “Bacon Rebellion” of Virginia, a historic uprising organized by an educated, white, working class man named Nathaniel Bacon, the planter class enslaved both black and white bondsmen (Washburn 1957). This method of enslavement was unsustainable precisely because it became evident that bondsmen certainly had it within their power to overthrow the planter class. In order to create a population that could consistently and sustainably provide the nation with free labor, the planter elites of the Virginia colony recreated the hierarchy, making Africans the only people that could be justifiably enslaved. They modeled this version of enslavement for colonies that would be established in the future. There was a stunning and strategic shift in the nature of the terms “white” and “black.” Under this new system of enslavement, these terms would be emphasized as identifiers so that whites would not feel connected to the enslaved peoples enough to help them overturn the system. Starting in the colonial era poor whites are empowered by newfound access to resources that their whiteness affords them. This strategically deployed terminology also functioned to remove Native Americans from dialogue and to remove them from social and political existence. Racial terminologies are still a central part of how we segregate and identify with one another in this country. These terminologies function to sustain racial hierarchies that were the foundation of slavery. If they still exist today, then what is their function now? Racial terminologies are one of much continuity that does not fade under the reconstruction of slavery. Michelle Alexander also discusses disenfranchisement, the lack of access to
citizenship and the dehumanization of both the slave and the prisoner. Alexander states so persuasively—and in ways that reveal her capacity for compelling social critique—that it only is justifiable to enslave a savage. Given this reality and reasoning, then, scholars like Alexander are able to expose the historic systematic processes of dehumanization that have focused upon enslaved and imprisoned people.

At this point of my research, I needed to go deeper. I realized that there were very obvious continuities between slavery—a system that is synonymous with containment—and prison—the site charged with meting out punishment and correction. Additionally, there are extreme similarities between how people in these institutions wrote about themselves and how others wrote about those people. If there is research on these populations, and there is data that very clearly proves that black and Latino people are still systemically subjugated at the extent to which they are, then why does the subjugation still exist? Is the government changing policies in order to create forced labor? Why not move towards other forms of rehabilitation? In reflecting on these questions, I felt frustrated and helpless to the system. Then I realized that it was unclear to me what “the system” actually was since the individual person or people creating these inequalities have no faces. This is a part of the problem. The invisibility and voicelessness that these institutions produce and are founded on. I had an extremely difficult time finding narratives written by people in prison, which suggested to me that the freedom necessary to be able to create literature is denied to people that, are oppressed by these institutions. In addition to that, white abolitionists were responsible for the publishing of Frederick Douglass’s narrative and that of Sojourner Truth. There are hardly any unadulterated accounts of
slaves or prisoners. Slaves have no voice, prisoners have no voice and the people oppressing them have long been referred to only as “the man.” Details and realities such as these have kept many, in and beyond America, unaware of who, in fact, is orchestrating and choreographing “the system.”

**Introduction**

“the debate about prisons …has to consider not merely the boundary between the imprisoned and the free but also the one between those whose lives include the prisons in their horizon and those whose lives do not”

(Da Cunha 2005, 163).

Prison does not end behind the bars of the barbed-wired fence that contains the people who are incarcerated. In reality, prison leaks, spills and leaves residue all over North America. The families that prisoners are displaced from experience a persistent absence, or are immersed in a criminalized culture that influences and is influenced by the prison system. Cunha, a scholar of prisons and government, produces work that has a strong engagement with that of Angela Davis, as they both advocate for prison abolition as opposed to prison reform. This project departs from the overtly sociological approach to prison discourse and merges sociological methodology with the literary in order to investigate exactly what residue prison and, its institutional twin, slavery have left on the American literary imagination.

If we approach and define a narrative as “a part of a legal document, which contains a statement of alleged or relevant facts closely connected with the matter or
purpose of the document,” then we encounter the legal core of narratives. There is a legal element to any narrative text. Questions of legality converge with questions of the genre and this complicates the relationship between the narrator and the document when the narrator is or was, by law, outcast and stripped of their right to citizenship. For over four hundred years, reading and writing were prohibited from people who are enslaved in North America. People, who are incarcerated, according to the fourteenth amendment of the U.S. constitution, are not afforded the rights of an American citizen; therefore, how then can they produce an unadulterated autobiography when their writings are representative of and regulated by a government that is not inclusive of their humanity? What do slave and prison narratives accomplish and what attributes characterize these genres?

There are a number of scholars in conversation about black positionality in relation to both historical and contemporary capitalist institutions. Frank Wilderson, Saidiya Hartman and Fred Moten, in particular, engage in discourse surrounding blackness as a space of abjection. Their conversation offered me a linguistic framework with which I could write. I used this framework primarily for the purpose of subscribing to a form that is somewhat legible to “the academy.” In reality my brothers inspire this project. After one year as an English and African American Studies double major I went home infuriated by the conditions of blackness that were illuminated to me in my studies. The reality of displacement, dehumanization and dis-ownership was at the forefront of my mind but at the dinner table, with my brothers, I described what I’d felt, what I’d learned rather, by tossing around lofty words

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dispassionately. It was here, in my home, that I first became aware of the relationship between black rage and the written medium. In conversation with my brothers, I regurgitated what I’d written in my essays at school and it did not empower me. It was indicative of feelings of indifference and detachment. What I’d learned had validated the notion that that language did not belong to me. How could I be assimilating in the process of learning about blackness? In “Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in the Nineteenth-Century,” Saidiya Hartman grapples with “the problem of crafting a narrative for the slave as subject,” and in terms of positionality, asking, “Who does that narrative enable?” In other words, who is authorized, sanctioned, or empowered⁴? Does the written narrative give legal power or license to its author? The legality present in this discourse is at the heart of what provokes Hartman’s argument. Hartman’s writings explore how a medium, such as the narrative, belonging to a larger legal document, can offer legal power to someone who the state regards as outcast, fugitive, abject and illegal. If there is a relationship between blackness and illegality that parallels a relationship between the written narrative and a legal text; then what exactly is a slave narrative and a prison narrative? Who do these narratives belong to and who do they enable?

**Relive to Remember**

When West Africans first encountered the slave ship, English colonialists implemented an ideology of humanity that reduced black people to objects, black bodies that would be traded and exchanged in capitalist transactions. This reality is at

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the core of the history that the slave narrative genre comes out of. The term “slave narrative” is an oxymoron because slaves, precisely due to their designation as such, are not imagined as having sensations, feelings or experiences to narrate. The very definition of “slave” and “black” in the United States affirms the idea of black inferiority, black bestiality, black illiteracy and black inexpressiveness. If slavery functioned to deprive slaves of their voice and methods of expression, what happens when a slave writes and produces a slave narrative? What are the thematic and structural qualities of the text and does it radically push back against the dehumanization of black people? The *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass: An American Slave* has a complex relationship with these questions because of the very distinct relationship he creates with the reader. He masterfully brings the reader close, but during the moments in the narrative when he is subject to the most suffering, there is no intimacy. He oscillates back and forth between close and detached in order to portray the ways in which slavery threatened the slave’s access to his emotions.

**Frederick Douglass**

“The black hole is the ever open wound of traumatic memory that cannot be articulated within the structure of rational discourse. Such memory demands transformation into testimony that, paradoxically, becomes testimony to its own impossibility: ‘As a relation to events, testimony seems to be composed of bits and pieces of a memory that has been overwhelmed by occurrences that have not settled into understanding or remembrance, acts that cannot be constructed as knowledge nor assimilated into full cognition, events in excess of our frames of reference.’”

-- (Elana Gomel 2003)
During the days of slavery in North America, there was little to no regard for black bodies, what these bodies may have thought, or what they might have felt. As a result, it remains difficult to imagine the physical and psychological torment that black people endured in this time and space. In 1845, there is potential for this tendency to change, though, when in 1845, the Boston-based *The Anti-Slavery Office* publishes the *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass: An American Slave*. Douglass, in this provocative autobiography, gives a striking account of his experiences as an enslaved person and provides unprecedented details about the nature of slavery, including his daily thoughts and routines along with the nature of his interactions with slave owners. 5,000 copies within the first four months of being published, and by 1860, 30,000 copies were sold internationally (Horn 2005). It is important to note the vast amount of abolitionists regarded Douglass’ writing as a tool necessary for revealing the need for abolition. Abolitionists felt that anti-abolitionists and accommodationists could not perceive the trauma that a slave endured, and also, did not believe that that trauma was being inflicted upon actual human beings. The hope was that Douglass’s writings would humanize black people enough so that anti-abolitionists and accommodationists would experience empathy for slaves and develop contempt with slaveholding as a practice.

Despite abolitionists’ intentions with the narrative, the most provocative moments in the narrative occur when the reader loses access the narrator’s emotional response to his suffering. Throughout the narrative, Douglass oscillates between vivid descriptions, vague facts and distant dialogue. The troubling vacillation challenges the readers’ access to truth and knowledge, illustrating precisely what,
critic, Michael Roth asserts in his discussions of documenting traumatic history. According to Roth, it is the very act of “the writing of ‘traumatized history’ [that] produces a discourse that undercut its own tendency to generate meaning” (Roth 158). Douglass’s dispassionate descriptions of being separated from his mother at birth, receiving beatings, and watching slave holders torture his loved ones, are indicative of a fragmented memory that is derived from having lived through traumatic events. Does Douglass’s narrative resist the nature of trauma by accurately accounting for events with consistent references to a coherent memory or does it make evident the extent to which history cannot be recovered? Douglass’s own complex relationship to his own truths portrays the severity and dehumanizing nature of slavery.

Douglass begins the narrative with a detached description of the common experience of displacement. Douglass was separated from his mother as an infant and states that he never knew his mother as his mother. This section of the narrative is an unforgettable list of declarative statements. There are no questions or any other grammatical elements that might indicate any inflection in tone:

“My mother and I were separated when I was but an infant—before I knew her as my mother. It is but a common custom, in the part of Maryland from which I ran away, to part children from their mothers at a very early age. Frequently, before the child has reached its twelfth month, its mother is taken from it, and hired out on some farm a considerable distance off, and the child is placed under the care of an old woman, too old for field labor. For what this separation is done, I do not know, unless it be to hinder the development of
the child’s affection toward its mother, and to blunt and destroy the natural affection of the mother for the child. This is the inevitable result” (Douglass 40).

It is evident that Douglass possesses the knowledge, vocabulary and literary persuasiveness to describe the emotional torment to which he was subjected as a child upon being separated from his mother. However, he does not use imagery, metaphor or profound adjectives to express his emotions regarding this occurrence. Vivid articulations of this moment would suggest that he had room to process and feel the weight of being stripped from his mother as an infant. His detached disposition is a clear marker of trauma and confirms, in powerful detail, that when separated from their mothers, young children are unable to develop the natural affection that children develop towards their mothers and, in turn, towards any other loved ones. Douglass writes, in the following chapter, about having underdeveloped natural affections towards his siblings as well. Douglass does not describe this effect but rather demonstrates it by writing with a stoic tone that suggests that separation from his mother, as a child, and later in his life, separation from his siblings impede upon his method of expression well into adulthood. Even in retrospect, Douglass conveys an intense trauma, void of emotion.

Sexual violence is another recurring and normalized event that becomes illusive in narration. Another instance in which the reader loses access to details of history and truth occurs at the very end of the first chapter when Douglass describes his Aunt’s experiences with “Master Anthony.” He alludes to fact that master Anthony probably raped his aunt frequently, but writes of this without detail or
elaboration, it becomes easy for the reader to overlook it or acknowledge it as a normal occurrence:

“He had ordered her not to go out evenings, and warned her that she must never let him catch her in company with a young man, who was paying attention to her belonging to Colonel Lloyd…Why master was so careful of her, may be safely left to conjecture. She was a woman of noble form, and of graceful proportions, having very few equals, and fewer superiors, in personal appearance, among the colored or white women of our neighborhood” (42).

Douglass does not emphasize the likelihood of his Aunt’s rape. However, by alluding to the potential violence, he demonstrates the casual nature of such an act. Douglass could not express an emotional response to incidents of sexual assault and violence against his Aunt because he was acculturated to desensitize to it and stripped of creative and communal forms of expression.

Douglass evokes a history of black dehumanization that is reflected in propaganda, media and literature in the seventeenth, eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries. Agatha Christie, a British-American author and playwright, authored novels, short stories and plays in the nineteenth century. One of her prominent works was a novel called *And Then There Were None*. The Collin Crime Club published this book in 1939 and it received international recognition; over 100 million copies sold. Few people know, though, that the title of Christie’s novel was inspired by a British, nineteenth-century blackface song and that her book was initially was entitled “Ten Little Niggers” (Christie 1997). The lyrical and visual
content of the book reflect the dehumanization that slaves were subject to, as Douglass describes. The following cartoon of black disfigured bodies that were propagated to suggest that black bodies were incapable of feeling pain:

![Cartoon Image](image.png)

The image above illuminates the desensitization of black death and black pain. It also offers a visual representation of a dissociative process that Douglass experienced in his attempt to cope with traumatic occurrences. Despite the hanging, dismembered limbs, there is no sign of blood, nor are there tears, signs of or agony, or any other expressions of distress. It is as though black bodies could endure pain and not experience it as a human being would. Douglass’s description, like this cartoon, illustrates the normalization of violence inflicted upon black bodies. This image, circulated throughout Britain and North America, alludes to the reality that slaves were not afforded the right to feel or express emotions.
Throughout the 1845 Douglass narrative, there also are moments of explicitly vague detail that function as a metaphor for the erasure that takes place within the memory processes of slaves. Douglass acknowledges unambiguously that there are things and facts that he simply cannot record due to the inaccuracy of documentation: “I wish I could commit to paper the feeling with which I beheld it” (Douglass, 42). Yet, we might and perhaps should complicate this admission since we, as post-nineteenth-century slavery audiences, know that there are aspects of slavery that people lack the capacity to describe or re-imagine. Contemporary clinical studies of trauma and mental health are working towards new definitions of traumatic memory. One especially compelling study, *The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, provides a thorough definition of traumatic memory and calls attention to the fact that: one “component of traumatic memory is that the memory is experienced as if the event and one’s responses to it—sensory, cognitive, emotional and physiological—were happening all over again. Most typically, intense flashbacks and nightmares force traumatized people to cope with constant recurrences of memories without the prospect of relief. The recurrent intrusive recollections and the nightmares themselves become new triggers of panic, which may evoke a variety of avoidance and numbing maneuvers that help dissociate the affective intensity of the experience” (Vander Kil, Hopper, and Osterman). If recounting a traumatizing experience has the same sensory, emotion and physiological impact on the slave as the actual experience, then what is beneficial about writing the slave narrative and who are the beneficiaries of such documents? In order to give an account for his life with detail, emotional descriptiveness and accuracy, assuming this was at all possible, Frederick Douglass
would quite literally have to relive his social death. The threat of re-encountering a traumatic experience manifest in his description of his Aunt’s beating when he blots out a moment when the master screamed, presumably an insult, at her: “He then told her to cross her hands, calling her at the same time a d—d b—h… ‘Now, you d—d b—h, I’ll learn you how to disobey my orders!” (Douglass 43). By blotting out the words that the slave master yelled at Douglass’s aunt, Douglass chooses to maintain social composure. He also chooses to live rather than to remember, to preserve his mind and body rather than reveal history. Douglass evokes the erasure that occurs in his psyche and, as a result, in his ability to document history, because of trauma. He also emphasizes the inaccessibility to emotion, truth and dialogue that characterizes the life of a slave.

Douglass uses his narrative to assert that literacy is one of the most powerful tools for emancipating one’s mind and body from slavery. Indeed, as historian David Blight asserts: “The act of writing for the slave constituted the act of creating a public, historical self” (Blight, 5). Literacy was denied to slaves and as a result of formal and informal enforcements, enslaved people rarely had any medium in or through which they could communicate or document their existence. Literacy laws became extensions of slave codes that varied from state to state. What was consistent throughout all slave states, however, was that the act of teaching a slave to read or write was punishable by fines or imprisonment. The assemblage of slaves was prohibited as well5. Douglass illustrates the inability to articulate the humanity of a slave in his narrative when he describes, in detail, the plantation, what is grown there,

5 For more information on slave codes, see ushistory.org. Slave Life and Slave Codes. U.S. History Online Textbook.
the masters, their names, their children’s names, and then states that there were somewhere between three-hundred to four-hundred slaves on the plantation:

“My master’s family consisted of two sons, Andrew and Richard; one daughter, Lucretia, and her husband, Captain Thomas Auld. They lived in one house, upon the home plantation of Colonel Edward Lloyd. My master was Colonel Lloyd’s clerk and superintendent. He was what might be called the overseer of the overseers. I spent two years of childhood on this plantation in my old master’s family…as I received my first impression of slavery on this plantation, I will give some description of it, and of slavery as it there existed. The plantation is about twelve miles north of Easton, in Talbot county, and is situated on the border of Miles River, The principal products raised upon it were tobacco, corn, and wheat. These were raised in great abundance; so that, with the products of this and the other farms belonging to him, he was able to keep in almost constant employment a large sloop, in carrying them to market at Baltimore. This sloop was named Sally Lloyd, in honor of one of the colonel’s daughters. My master’s son-in-law, Captain Auld, was a master of the vessel; she was otherwise manned by the colonel’s own slaves. Their names were Peter, Isaac, Rich, and Jake. These were esteemed very highly by the other slaves, and looked upon as the privileged ones of the plantation; for it was no small affair, in the eyes of the slaves, to be allowed to see Baltimore.

Colonel Lloyd kept from three to four hundred slaves on his home plantation, and owned a large number more on the neighboring farms belonging to him” (Douglass 43).
Throughout slavery, black people were objectified and perceived as property belonging to individual slaveholders and to the larger slaveholding state. The extensive documentation of slavery, many times, does not regard the enslaved as the primary subject but rather the system of slavery itself. As a result, approximately four hundred slaves have no names or faces in Douglass’ description of life on Colonel Lloyd’s plantation. It is not Douglass’s job to represent every person who was ever a slave, but the inclination to dissolve many voices into one embodies one way in which slavery dehumanized people who were enslaved. The representation and gesture of writing on behalf of another person is both invigorating and destructive.

American slavery was an institution that was founded on the ideology that West Africans, later to be known as black, were all objects. This process could not exist if West Africans were free to express their own individuality, as a result the collective condition of slavery created a collective experience, simultaneously erasing the multifaceted identities of enslaved peoples. It is sobering to realize, as scholar David Blight does, that, “The American philosopher William James once wrote that after ‘long brooding’ he concluded that ‘the one and the many ‘ is the ‘most central of all philosophic problems…The one becomes the source of individual narratives out of which we construct a sometimes coherent, sometimes conflicted, story about the many” (Blight, 21). This portrays the idea that, while someone who escaped from slavery can give an individual account of their experience, there will remain no accounts of the people that were never afforded an opportunity to write themselves into existence.
Douglass’s description of the function of writing implies grave consequences to subjugation that strips people of opportunities to express their voice. This subjugation is to deny someone of his or her humanity and freedom. Inaccessibility to this outlet gave slaves a false sense of freedom and limited their understanding of themselves and their condition. Without a true sense of the meaning of freedom, slaves would celebrate slaveholders for being less inhumane than others. Douglass speaks to this when describing Colonel Lloyd’s plantation: “The whole place wore a business-like aspect very unlike the neighboring farms. It was called by slaves the Great House Farm. Few privileges were esteemed higher, by the slaves of the out-farms, than being selected to do errands at the Great House Farm. It was associated in their minds with greatness” (Douglass, 45). The slaves’ perceptions of freedom existed on a spectrum of enslavement. Freedom was often conceived of as a less violent type of slavery. Margaret Kohn, a scholar of racial pasts, writes, “Douglass noted that slaveholders were right in forbidding their slaves from learning to read because literacy—and thus access to enlightenment humanism would undermine the system by strengthening slaves’ recognition of their own humanity and desire to be free” (Kohn, 499). Literacy is powerful in its offering of self-awareness along with awareness of human nature.

Douglass connects the inability to perceive freedom with illiteracy and in so doing he deconstructs the effective strategies used to create literacy laws. Douglass develops an intimate relationship with reading that is necessary to his self-awareness. He acknowledges relationship when describing his experience reading “The Columbian Orator,” Douglass writes, “They gave tongue to interesting thoughts of
my own soul, which had frequently flashed through my mind, and died away from want of utterance. The moral which I gained from the dialogue was the power of truth over the conscience of even a slaveholder” (Douglass, 61). There is a spiritual death that occurs upon the inability to articulate a thought that permeates the soul. Illiteracy functions to render the illiterate incapable of communicating thoughts and deep feelings. It also strips them of the power of truth.

Authorship and voice take unique form in the slave narrative genre. By nature, slave narratives serve a political purpose; according to white abolitionist, William Lloyd Garrison, a leading white abolitionist and longtime associate of Douglass’, Douglass’s narrative belonged to the abolitionists’ movement. Garrison’s possessive declarations over Douglass’s work suggest that Douglass did not have the luxury to write about anything that was not dedicated to this movement. Douglass’s narrative is a first-hand, unadulterated account of his own experience. He has the agency to choose how to articulate his sentiment and thoughts, but the preface complicates Douglass’s agency in how he portrays his ideas. While reading the preface, it becomes evident that Garrison, although dedicated to the abolition of slavery, exists within the same oppressive society that he critiques. He is evidently subject to the racial ideologies that are the foundation of slavery. He reveals the ways in which these ideologies permeate his thinking in the way that he attempts to authenticate Douglass’s writing in the preface.
Every human society constructs statuses of being that function to create categories of people that fall somewhere on a social hierarchy. This is consistent with hierarchical structures ranging from ancient Roman empires to status criterion developed in the Akan tribe four hundred years ago, to contemporary conceptualizations of being that are at the heart of racial ideologies in contemporary United States. The United States is distinct in its constructions of identity. In the US, this relationship historically has manifested itself in two major institutions, slavery and prison. In a lecture about the Prison Industrial Complex, author, activist, and associate of the Black Panther party, Angela Davis says that scholars and activists must analyze prison within the context of slavery because they exist because of the same incentives and are a product of the same ideologies. The concepts that govern these institutions are dehumanization and the criminalization of blackness. In this section, I will explore the process of constructing the racial hierarchy that conceptualizes white people as subjects and black people as objects.

In order to understand the origins of white supremacy in the United States, one needs to consider the origins of American slavery. Teachers in high school history classes often assert that slavery is an institution born of racism, when in reality, white supremacy is a concept that developed as a means to justify the capitalist advancements that were made at the expense of the humanity of Afro-descendant people. This is to say that in the United States, slavery is not the merely the product of racial ideology, but rather it is the consequence of the relationship between capitalism and racial difference. Betty Wood, author of The Origins of
American Slavery (1997), explores the role of racial difference in the construction of American statuses of being: “why was it that by the middle years of the seventeenth century, everywhere in English America the status of slave, with all that it entailed, became reserved for those of West African ancestry rather than for native Americans or for certain Europeans?” Wood later offers a qualified answer to this provocative question, which is, in part, a list of West African qualities that make them ideal slaves. One of the most powerful reasons states that the English awareness of racial difference would function as a visual manifestation of a concept of being. In other words, it is difficult to believe that someone is not a human being when they have similar physical attributes as people that are conceptualized as human. The racial difference facilitated the othering and exclusion that was necessary for slavery to grow, thrive and sustain itself.

Despite the efforts of Reconstruction, it is difficult to locate when the plantation shifts from a presence to a memory. There may be some connection between the transformation of this site and the implementation of the qualified Emancipation Proclamation of 1863 and the passage of the 13th Amendment that freed approximately 4 million black people from enslavement in the United States. Shortly thereafter, former slave-holding Southerners sought ways to reclaim control over black bodies in order to maintain a functioning economic system. As of January 1st, 1863, though, millions of people essentially were without jobs, had no access to formal education and probably were battling high rates of illiteracy. Such realities were easy to discern and as a result, southern whites were knew exactly which population would be the most vulnerable. The 13th amendment states: "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." There is sharp but subtle shift here, that thrust all slave-like conditions onto a different population of people that are “duly convicted.” The wrinkle in the 13th amendment reserves a spot at the bottom of the social hierarchy for a group of people, prisoners, to be justifiably enslaved. The black codes functioned to criminalize black behaviors such as vagrancy and unemployment and the convict-lease system functioned to take prisoners out of prisons and put them back onto plantations.

Chapter 2: The Cycle of Trauma

The resilience of the plantation, as a domesticating and disciplinary construct, even after the abolishment of slavery has a profound impact on narrative genres, namely the slave narrative and the prison narrative. If the presence of prison comes to symbolize the objectification of the black body that the slave ship symbolizes; then what exactly does Reconstruction do? If a prisoner has about the same social status as a slave, then what is the relationship between the prisoner and his authorship? In the prison narrative, does the “object” speak, or does the oppressor lend its expression to a body that he renders voiceless? In this chapter, I will grapple with these questions through analysis of two post-slavery, prison narrative texts. John Edgar Wideman’s Brother’s and Keepers (1984) and Cristina Rathbone’s A World Apart: Women.

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6 The House Joint Resolution proposing the 13th amendment to the Constitution, January 31, 1865; Enrolled Acts and Resolutions of Congress, 1789-1999; General Records of the United States Government; Record Group 11
Prison, and Life Behind Bars (2005) offer a unique lens with which to discover qualities of the prison narrative genre and where it overlaps with that of the slave narrative genre.

Brothers and Keepers is a challenging, first hand account of a young man’s relationship with his brother who is incarcerated. Originally published in New York in 1984, Brothers and Keepers appeared at a time when incarceration rates began to increase and Congress was in process of making drastic changes in prison legislation. There were over 400,000 men in state and federal prisons in 1984, which doubles prison population ten years prior. This represents an early stage of what would become monumental admission trends that would develop in U.S. prisons: “Between 1978 and 2009, the number of prisoners held in federal and state facilities in the United States increased almost 430%, from 294,400 on December 31, 1978, to 1,555,600 on December 31, 2009” (Carson and Golinelli). This is an alarming reality that Michelle Alexander attributes to a federal agenda to recreate systemic inequalities that existed during slavery.

Congress passed the Sentencing Reform Act of 1984, and it is likely that this is, in part, a consequence of the increasing incarceration rates. While this act abolished federal parole, it primarily functioned to fundamentally shift sentencing processes. It established a sentencing commission that created guidelines for maximum and minimum time served for each specific crime as to alleviate the variability from judge to judge. One of the most informative terms of this act is Compassionate Release: “Compassionate release was established under the premise that changes in health status may alter justification for incarceration.” It affords early
release to certain incarcerated individuals that are very ill or near death. According to
the *The National Center for Biotechnology Information*: “Incarceration is based on 4
principles: 1) as *retribution* through deprivation of liberty, when other punishment is
deemed insufficient, 2) as *rehabilitation* (e.g., drug-treatment or educational
programs), 3) as *deterrence* for future criminal acts, and 4) as *incapacitation*, by
separating prisoners from society to enhance public safety. These justifications may
be substantially undermined for prisoners who are too ill or cognitively impaired to
be aware of punishment, too sick to participate in rehabilitation, or too functionally
compromised to pose a risk to public safety.” In other words, it is possible for a
prisoner to be too ill to be rehabilitated, too ill to commit future crimes, too ill to pose
as a threat to the safety of the general public and too ill to understand that they are
being punished. In theory, Compassionate Release exists because prison has no
punitive or rehabilitative function for prisoners nearing their death. Another theory is
that the Compassionate Release is necessary because if a prisoner’s body has no use
for labor, then that prison is subject to a significant financial loss. If prison is an
industry, and incarcerated peoples are its employees, then what is the use of a
prisoner who cannot work? In that case, the Compassionate Release is a retirement
plan; it functions to keep open cells for incoming and able-bodied prisoners. It also
validates Michelle Alexander’s assertion that prison is the New Jim Crow.

Legislation and incarceration rates in 1984 speak to what is at stake when
Without any account of life of incarcerated people, it is difficult to imagine the
humanity of a prisoner. The dehumanization that prisoners undergo is a tool that
functions to justify the mass incarceration of black men. With the increasing appeal of liberalism, there is an intense need to keep oppression that takes place covert. Sociologists Kilty and Swank observe, “eliminating ‘savages’ is less of a moral problem than eliminating human beings” (Alexander, 23). The preservation of free labor relies on a hierarchy where there are a group of peoples that can be justifiably enslaved. As a result, the presentation of criminals in the media should chip away at the humanity of criminals. If criminals are not human than it is morally acceptable to disenfranchise them, displace them from their families, isolate them from communities and limit their access to employment. The term “criminal” is an identifier. It implies absence of moral character, unintelligence and the same bestial qualities that people associated with black slaves. Dehumanization, displacement, flight and silence are major themes that Wideman addresses in *Brothers and Keepers*.

John Edgar Wideman has had an elaborate writing and teaching career, authoring nearly 25 books since the beginning of his career in the 1980s. Wideman had written two books and one collection of short stories prior to writing *Brothers and Keepers*; this work would depart from his typical literary style, as it was his first non-fiction book. The book sets out to process and articulate his brother’s experiences in prison, while also processing his own experience having a brother sentenced to life in prison. The book is divided into three sections: “Visits,” “Our Time,” and “Doing Time.” The theme of flight is especially prevalent in the first section. This section describes the tension between John’s environment and his pursuit of success. His desire to escape created distance between him and his brother: “Was I as much stranger to you as you seemed to me? …I was running away from Pittsburgh, from
poverty, from blackness…my flight from home began with good grades, with good English with setting myself apart long before I’d earned a scholarship and a train ticket over the mountains of Philadelphia” (Wideman 27). John’s desire to leave reflects the way in which he’d internalized a disdain for poverty and the cultures that are attached to it. He spent a great deal of time creating an image of himself that was not at all affiliated with his community, and the incarceration of his brother threatened that image. Moving into the second section of the book, Wideman delves deeper into this tension. He describes Robby’s crime and attempts to reveal his brother’s humanity while grappling with his own disdain for criminals. How can criminals be inferior if my brother is one? This question is at the heart of this chapter. The end of the book offers more insight into Robby’s voice and the difficulties that John experiences in his attempt to narrate his brother’s experience through writing.

Throughout the memoir, Wideman speaks to the conceptual coupling of race and criminality. He also reveals his own tendency to identify criminals as sub-human prior to his brother being characterized as one:

“Three men had been tentatively identified, which left one unaccounted for. I was black. My brother was a suspect. So perhaps I was the fourth perpetrator. No matter that I lived four hundred miles from the scene of the crime. No matter that I wrote books and taught literature and creative writing at the university. I was black. Robby was my brother. Those unalterable facts would always incriminate me” (Wideman 14).
This passage illustrates John’s contempt for the character of a person who has committed a crime. He is appalled that he could be considered a suspect because he has knowledge and an appreciation for literature as though a “criminal” could not possibly have these passions and affiliations. This implies his indoctrinated belief that criminals do not read, criminals are not educated and criminals lack any qualities that someone like himself would affiliate with: “When we say someone was ‘treated like a criminal,’ what we mean to say is that he or she was treated as less than human, like a shameful creature” (Alexander, 151). John Wideman was shocked that he could be considered a criminal because he himself did not believe criminals to possess the same humanity that he had. Police officers suspected the scholar and prolific author, John Wideman; as a result, John experienced a racial awakening and became aware of the ideological relationship between blackness and criminality.

There are no legitimate provisions for prisoners to be properly integrated back into society. The ways that prisoners are displaced from their home and family estranges them from the rest of humanity. The very presence of an “outsider,” in addition to any non-criminal’s attempt to reconnect with a former friend or family member reinforces the idea that the outside world is filled with humans and prisoners are no longer apart of that: “I want to greet the prisoners civilly as I would if we passed each other outside, on Homewood Avenue. But locks, bars, and uniforms frustrate the simplest attempts at communication; the circumstances under which we meet inform me unambiguously that I am not on Homewood Avenue, not speaking to a fellow citizen” (Wideman, 48). Wideman artfully writes this passage in present
tense, which does not allow a reader to perceive an end to these types of interactions, even if the prisoners’ circumstance changes.

Wideman also articulates absence through authorship. There isn’t much distance between the reader and the author; this is a story of John and Robby. In this narrative, prevails the inability for those in close proximity to these oppressive institutions to speak for themselves: “I visited him in prison and listened… I’d take a few notes… sometimes later I would reproduce on paper what I’d heard” (Wideman N.P). While Robby is very much present throughout the autobiography, still, John writes on behalf of him. Robby’s containment does not afford him with access to this medium of expression.

One of the four principles of incarceration is to contain a person who otherwise would threaten the safety of the general public. Wideman deals with this idea when he illustrates prison as a space that is designed to segregate good and evil. The very nature of the narrative disrupts that dichotomy because it attempts to bring the reader inside of the prison and eliminate the distance between “good and evil.” The invisibility of the humanity of the prisoner protects the idea that incarcerated people are evil. This idea is necessary for the preservation of prison because “if prisons don’t segregate good from evil, then what we’ve created are zoos for human beings. And we’ve given license to the keepers to stock the cages” (Wideman, 48). The notion that the oppression that takes place is not happening to human beings makes it morally acceptable and maintainable. “Prison is at the same time a result and a metaphor for the forces of exclusion at work in American society” (Feith 668). Prisons function to isolate and divide. The prisoners are isolated often from other
prisoners. And, the guards sit behind locked doors and see-thru windows to ensure that no person crosses a border.

Containment is one of the four major goals of imprisonment. It is predicated on the idea that prisoners are a threat to the general public and “need to be kept as far away from society as possible” (Haney). Ironically, many “criminals,” commit crimes as a result of major mental health imbalances, drug addictions, or anxieties surrounding societal pressures like poverty and unemployment, but the method of containment exacerbates the very same anxieties that provoked the criminal behavior in the first place. There is an entire branch of psychology dedicated to the study of the prisoner’s psyche. Correctional psychologists, AJ Taylor, Craig Haney, Lee Bukstel and Peter Kilman are reknown in the fields. Taylor’s studies, in 1961, affirmed that containment can induce symptoms of trauma: “The mental vacuity, dwindling memory, and inability to concentrate are all elements of the bogey of deterioration that forms one of the constantly recurring themes about men in captivity…and inmates themselves are aware of the signs of apathy, emotional flatness, and loss of initiative shown by some of their number” (Taylor, 373). Nineteen years later, in 1980 Bukstel and Kilman conducted ninety experiments, with male prisoners, that revealed the cause and effect relationship between extended periods of isolation and personality disorders and clinical depression. Psychological deterioration is a constant attribute of life under the constant constraint of incarceration. Haney’s research extended passed all male facilities and he found that female prisoners endure similar psychological traumas ranging from existential death to sexual disorders: “In an environment characterized by enforced powerlessness and deprivation, men and
women prisoners confront distorted norms of sexuality in which dominance and submission become entangled with and mistaken for the basis of intimate relations” (Haney). As a result of the nature of containment, trauma is one of many themes present in both male and female prison narratives.

**Women: Characters Without Character**

Within the prison narrative genre, the prison itself is the nucleus. This makes prison narratives distinct from other narratives that have a multiplicity of settings and ideas that the content of the book revolves around. The table of contents of both Wideman and Rathbone’s prison writings are exemplary of this reality. *Brothers and Keepers* is divided into three parts: “Visits,” “Our Time,” and “Doing Time.”

Wideman describes life and time in relation to the prison. This affirms the implications of the term “criminal.” The term is an identifier, similar to racial identifiers, gender identifiers and nominal identifiers; its temporality is not restricted.

The table of contents of *Brothers and Keepers*, gives a reader awareness that the prison exist in the beginning, middle and end of the memoir. Rathbone’s table of contents has similar attributes. It is divided into three parts: “Beginnings,” “Losses,” and “Escapes.” The book takes shape around a prison. Characters are characterized by what they lose in the space and a desire from escape or flight from containment. This is by no means limited to Rathbone and Wideman; the genre has had a central focus on the prison with a secondary focus on the prisoner since the earliest prison writings.

Kate Richards O’Hare, a political prisoner, wrote *In Prison* in 1923 and the table of contents consisted of the following titles: “What is a Crime,” “Rich and Poor Before
the Law,” “The Function of the Prison,” “The Prison, The Prisoners, Prison Food, Clothing, Education, and Recreation,” “Task and Punishment,” The Religion of the Convicts,” “Crimes of the Individual and of State,” “The Waste of Our Penal System,” “Where Responsibility Lies,” and “Conclusion.” In O’Hare’s table of contents, it is evident that a great deal of the writing will engage with understanding the prisoner’s physical body in relation to the law. There is a re-enactment of violence that occurs within a genre whose content revolves around the inhumanity of an institution rather than the humans living within that institution.

Saidya Hartman’s work speaks to what can and cannot be revived in any narrative of a human being that has endured psychological trauma and social death. In description of “Venus” – a woman who has been stripped of her humanity, she writes—

“There are hundreds of thousands of other girls who share her circumstances and these circumstances have generated few stories. And the stories that exist are not about them, but rather about the violence, excess, mendacity, and reason that seized hold of their lives, transformed them into commodities and corpses, and identified them with names tossed-off as insults and crass jokes. The archive is, in this case, a death sentence, a tomb, a display of the violated body, an inventory of property, a medical treatise on gonorrhea, a few lines about a whore’s life, an asterisk in the grand narrative of history. Given this, “it is doubtless impossible to ever grasp [these lives] again in themselves, as they might have been “in a free state.”” (Hartman 2)
Hartman highlights the distinction between narrating a circumstance and narrating a life. If this is true, then there is no slave narrative that offers insight into the unique personhood of a slave, but rather, the narrative serves as a set of descriptions of events and stories and the qualities of an environment that the author had no agency in creating. If the slave ship is the vessel in which over 500 cultures dissolved into blackness and were conceptualized as objects, then when the object speaks, what story do they tell? Can they tell their own story, or are they forced to tell the story of the violence projected onto them by white colonialist? There is a distinction between one’s personhood and one’s circumstance. If the slave ship is an environment and a circumstance that functioned to strip enslaved peoples of their humanity and personhood, and if the slave does not have access to his or her own humanity, what then can the author or reader recover about the life, humanity and personhood of a slave through the written narrative? Additionally, in light of the fact that both the institution of slavery and that of prison threaten the relationship between the slave/prisoner and literacy, one must question how much agency they have in narrating their own experiences. Saidya Hartman refers to these narratives as biographies of dead subjects. At the end of the narrative, who is revived and who is breathing? These questions functioned as a lens with which to read, understand and challenge Cristina Rathbone’s *A World Apart*.

*A World Apart* is a non-fiction narrative in which Cristina Rathbone tells the stories of multiple incarcerated women, with special attention to five of them, that she developed a relationship with over the course of five years. It was published in 2006, when 1,570, 860 women were incarcerated in the United States which is about
A World Apart takes shape during a period of time when incarceration rates are increasing rapidly. The book is both literary and analytical. Rathbone offers her account of the women’s lives while also critiquing the circumstances under which they live, and also narrates the process of narrating on behalf of the women. The latter reveals the extent to which the facility and the state enforce separation from prisoners and the outside.

Throughout the book, several women reveal their experiences in containment as they describe how they got to prison and from what livelihood they’ve been displaced. Rathbone builds relationships with nearly ten incarcerated women, but is particularly attentive to five of them. Their names were Denise, Charlene, Susan, Riza and Carmen. Charlene Williams is a Caribbean mother serving fifteen years in prison for a drug offense that she did not want to commit. Susan Grissin is a white Anglo-Saxon woman in her mid-thirties, whose qualities seem to be influenced by the trauma of abandonment. Her mother left her on a street corner when she was twelve years old. Since then, she’s been diagnosed bipolar, lost her home, become addicted to crack and arrested twelve times. Riza Stots is a thirty-eight year old white woman who was sentenced to life for murder. Rathbone is particularly attentive to how Stots gradually changes, oscillating back and forth between desperate and indifferent, and becoming an exaggerated version of herself. At the center of the book is a tentative, unaware, character named Denise Russell. Denise, a mother, is serving five years and a day in prison on a drug trafficking charge. Rathbone delves deeper into Denise’s life beyond bars and reveals Denise’s abusive relationship with her ex-boyfriend and the fear that he would harm her son while she is in prison. Her detachment from her
son infringed upon her mental and emotional health and she becomes more and more depressed during her time there. In addition to sharing personal stories about several prisoners, Rathbone discusses the culture of prison and the inhumanity of the system. She discusses sexual violence and the punitive methods that provoke severe clinical disorders for prisoners.

Throughout the book, the stories of the woman illuminate the relationship between voicelessness and consent, within prisons. There are constitutional laws that protect certain rights of persons who have committed crimes, such as the eighth amendment that states: “Excessive bail shall not be required, nor excessive fines imposed, nor cruel and unusual punishments inflicted.” This amendment is applicable to court-involved citizens, and it makes mention of treatment of incarcerated individuals, but federal authorities have clearance to manage and punish individuals as they see fit. Prisoners are afforded limited constitutional rights, but Congress give federal prison officials the authority to govern the space on their own terms:

“Congress has given federal prison officials full discretion to control prisoner classification as affecting conditions of confinement. Generally, such matters are left to the control of the Federal Bureau of Prisons.” As a result, humane treatment of prisoners can be loosely interpreted by federal powers. Additionally, the language of the fourteenth amendment, a clause that states the eligibility of citizenship, does not extend towards people who have been sentenced to hard time in prison. Section one of the fourteenth amendment states: “All persons born or naturalized in the United States, and subject to the jurisdiction thereof, are citizens of the United States and of the State wherein they reside. No State shall make or enforce any law which shall
abridge the privileges or immunities of citizens of the United States; nor shall any State deprive any person of life, liberty, or property, without due process of law; nor deny to any person within its jurisdiction the equal protection of the laws.” 7 The phrase without due process excludes all protections, privileges and immunities, stated in the amendment, from people convicted of crimes. As this amendment is the part of the constitution that most clearly states who can be a citizen of the United States, it is evident that prisoners are excluded from this identity and as a result, can, by law, be deprived of life, liberty and property.

In light of the reality of all of the people that that fourteenth amendment includes and excludes, the connections between the life of a female American slave and a female American prisoner become evident. One intense overlap of their experiences is the sexual violence that is inflicted upon their bodies and disguised as consent. What does consent look like for women are dispossessed from legitimate constitutional rights? What does consent look like in a place that functions to repress voices and contain individuality? According to the Oxford English Dictionary, “consent” is a voluntary agreement. As consent is something that is volunteered or given, how can someone who has been dispossessed of all possessions and relationships offer it, as it would seem, it is something that they do not own. Consent can only be given by someone with agency. The nature of consent sheds light on the sexual exploitation that incarcerated women encounter. In light of this reality, the prisoner’s relationship to the law is parallel to that of a slave: “Contemporary prison

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7 The House Joint Resolution proposing the 13th amendment to the Constitution, January 31, 1865; Enrolled Acts and Resolutions of Congress, 1789-1999; General Records of the United States Government; Record Group 11
regimes thus reproduce the sexual oppression that was characteristic of slavery. Slave owners often used the concept of seduction as a source of power. Rape was defined in the nineteenth century as the illegal ‘forcible carnal knowledge of a female against her will without consent’, but as Saidiya Hartman explains, this law did not apply to female slaves. Instead, the concept of seduction was used to mask the actual violence committed against female slaves. Any sexual relations between master and slave were assumed to be consensual bonds of affection, not crimes” (Willingham 61). The lack of protection under the law has a profound impact on the experiences of women under the institution of both slavery and prison. The legislative negligence that both slaves and prisoners are subject to make violent traditions permissible acts that become apart of slave and prison culture.

During her time conducting research at MCI, Rathbone became increasingly aware of the fact that sexual exploitation that had become one of many violent traditions occurring within the prison. Unlike John Wideman’s description of a male prison, the women that Rathbone interviewed described MCI to be a hyper-sexualized space. Surprisingly, this sexual life was a transparent reality. Everyone was aware of signals and coded communications leading up to a sexual encounter with a guard. Often times, “consensual” sex within the prison, was a tool used by prisoners to purchase goods. After a series of legislation passed in Massachusetts in 1999, it was determined that no sex in prison could be considered consensual: “…experts began to conclude that sexual relations between staff and inmates were inherently abusive and could never be truly consensual, even if initiated by inmates” (Rathbone, 55). This law validates the extent to which women are disempowered when in prison. The state
ascertained that no one that is stripped of as much power as a prisoner is stripped of, can participate equally in a sexually exchange. Consent implies that the subject offering it has control and ownership over their own bodies.

While Rathbone describes emotionally draining events that many women are subjected to, after some time living in the facility, it became evident that some women fell out of touch with healthy ways to process their emotions. Some of the women that Rathbone interviewed suppressed the memory of their personal histories as to not relive traumatic experiences. This coping practice is evident in Douglass’s narrative as well. He creates emotional distance between his present emotions and past events that triggered feelings of rage, melancholy and depression. There is one moment in particular, in A World Apart, when this tension between storytelling and traumatic memory manifest, and Rathbone experiences resistance:

“But then, she’d always looked older than her age. When she was just thirteen, she told me, her mother had been able to sell her as a wife to a neighbor for three hundred dollars…In a calm voice, as though it had happened to another person long ago, she began to detail the physical abuse he’d subjected her to. But I was stuck on the detail of the ‘selling.’ I asked her what she meant exactly by that. She looked at me, blank and angry all of a sudden, and said: ‘What part of it is it that you don’t understand? My. Mother. Sold. Me. For. Three. Hundred. Dollars. I. Was. His. Merchandise’” (Rathbone, 80).

This is excerpted from an interview between Rathbone and a prisoner named Janine. Janine is fifty-one years old and has spent a good amount of time at Framingham
prison. While discussing her abuse, Janine’s voice does not waver and there is no inflection of tone that would imply that Janine was having a difficult time remembering her abuse. Memory dissolution is a symptom of trauma and, as Elena Gomel points out, it strangles the reader’s access to the truth of a story: “Traumatic memory is the nemesis of narration. If it is articulated at all, it is only through a discourse of rupture and fragmentation that mutely gestures at what cannot be encompassed by discredited structures of causality, continuity, and closure” (Gomel 2003). Janine’s stoic descriptions of events suggest that there is some aspect of her experience that the reader can not see up close. The narrator is not accessing her emotions, but rather stating facts and offering an account. As a result, the reader cannot access her emotions either. Janine was traded for money, which made her apart of a transaction. This exchange stripped Janine of her humanity as it rendered her an object. Janine’s response to Rathbone, when she attempts to penetrate the metaphorical walls encasing this memory, reveal her desire to resist remembering. She does not want to relive the dehumanization she felt, especially in a space that continues to objectify her.

It is possible that the process of writing the narrative is more informative than the narrative itself because of the reality of accessibility to and within the space. Throughout Douglass’s narrative, he wielded power; he chose what the reader could and could not have access to, but in A World Apart, the MCI institution, along with state legislation have complete agency over what Rathbone can and cannot access: "It's important that you know this: except for the visiting room ... I have seen little of the prison I write about in this book," Rathbone writes. "Despite nearly five years of
research, two successful lawsuits and countless trips to court, the Massachusetts Department of Correction continues to deny me access” (Rathbone, xi). The theme of isolation is a recurring one in the prison narrative genre. It is a constant attribute of the space and it impacts both the subject and the amanuensis. The visibility of the prisoner is a tool that the institution uses sparingly in an effort to sustain the common narrative of the prisoner, the immoral, punishable body that is not worthy of freedom, rather than a person that is worthy of their humanity. As a result Rathbone’s writing hardly penetrates deeper than what can be seen from three-hour sessions in a visiting room.

The prison has more authority in shaping the narrative of the prisoners than the prisoners themselves. State government does fund educational programs in prisons and jails, but state politicians and private owners implement policies that incentivize manual labor programs as opposed to education and literacy programs. In light of legislative measures that function to create intense separation between the outside and inside of the prison, it seems as though the invisibility of the prisoner is apart of an agenda to preserve notions of American freedom: “Almost every major periodical in the country has had to shelve prison stories because access was denied. Despite attempts by press organizations to rally against such restrictions, the trend to exclude media from prisons continues to grow apace with the system itself. In 1998, for example, California, which as the nation’s third-largest prison system, banned all face-to-face interviews with, as well as confidential correspondence to, every inmate in its system…And Mississippi states that consideration will be given only to media requests to develop stories ‘portraying rehabilitative efforts’” (Rathbone xii).
prison is hiding something. Michelle Alexander’s work highlights the strategy behind
dehumanizing the criminal. Interviews, and published writings about prisoners and by
prisoners would create an avenue that alleviates constraint, and more importantly,
provides a platform in which, prisoners speak. This would upset legacies of
voicelessness that function to hide the humanity of incarcerated people.

In 1977, forty-two states and the federal government enacted the Son of Sam
Laws, which prohibited any prisoner from receiving proceeds or earnings from a
book, show, film or other depiction that engages with details of his or her crime.
What is at stake if a prisoner can narrate his or her own experience? The state
prefaced the law saying that it was designed to “provide the victim with security” but
in reality, it seemed as though it was a gesture designed to preserve the institution of
prison: “Although ostensibly designed to ‘protect the victim’ and to keep criminals
from profiting from their crimes, the real purpose of these laws was identical to the
purpose of the repression of prison literature in the 1930’s: to keep the American
people in the dark about the American prison” (Bruce, 14). Prior to this legislative
attack on prison literature, it was a thriving genre, in which, some authors
accomplished economic success. This was precisely one of the dangers of prison
writings that posed as a threat to the American ideology of a prisoner: “the crack
down on prison writers’ was a direct response to their attainments” (Howard, 10). The
idea that a prisoner could attain something, namely capital, contradicts the American
conceptualization of a prisoner who is characterized by his or her dispossession.

The Son of Sam laws have a similar impact on the prisoner as slavery did on
the slave because it does not afford the prisoner with access to the economy generated
by his efforts, in the same way that slavery prevented a slave from having ownership over the fruits of his labor. These laws, even after having been struck down by the Supreme Court for its violation of the First Amendment, have infringed upon the prisoner’s authorship. There is less incentive for them to write for themselves, and any book in which the author narrates on behalf of a different subject is at risk disempowering the subject and re-enacting the silence.

The slave narrative genre and the prison narrative genre cannot offer more than a description of the violence and torment inflicted on the subject. As someone who is characterized as a criminal, one can consider writings and archives about Mike Brown as items that belong to a prison narrative. When you search “Mike Brown” in Google images, the first picture that comes up is the following:
Mike Brown’s lifeless, brown body is in the middle of the street. His body is not covered. It is a wide-open, on display death that interrupts the life of the people in the community, yet, the onlookers cannot touch the body. They maintain a close, but distant relationship with the body. Onlookers are not as visible in this frame, but the presence of onlookers delineates a spectator and onlooker binary. *World Star Hip Hop* and other forms of media position consumers and online viewers to take part in this lynch-like spectatorship as well. To the viewer, and the person videotaping, it is a haunting but delicious sight. One eyewitness account has nearly 21 million views on *YouTube*. There is something desirable and familiar about seeing injured, disfigured and lifeless black bodies. The consumer hunger associated with massive spectatorship evokes the plantation here, in Ferguson, and in media. There is a looming absence or “gone-ness,” in relation to that hunger.

The media primarily shapes a graphic and incomplete narrative of Mike Brown. His life is characterized by the nature of his death. Rather than attempting to revive this body by narrating it, the media, in all its facets, makes his death his story and his dead body a spectacle. In reality, the media broadcast this because of the American addiction to violence, especially violence being inflicted upon a black body, but even if the media had an interest in humanizing Mike Brown, it is difficult to know whether or not anyone can have access to his story: “We stumble upon her in exorbitant circumstances that yield no picture of the everyday life, no pathway to her thoughts, no glimpse of the vulnerability of her face or of what looking at such a face might demand. We only know what can be extrapolated from an analysis of the ledger or borrowed from the world of her captors and masters and applied to her”
(Hartman 2). Even when someone takes the initiative to “lend voice to the voiceless,” is that enough? Unless Mike Brown personally wrote or orated his story, there is no way of knowing his feelings, his passions, or his thoughts. Understanding Mike Brown’s life in a three-dimensional way is not possible, except by way of observing and analyzing, which leaves the viewer with more agency and power to create the story than the subject who is being viewed.

If the narrative is in fact a legal text, then the idea of a prison narrative, of a genre that narrates the lives of political outcast, is oxymoronic. How can a person who represents illegality produce a text in a medium that is, by definition, apart of a greater legal document? With that understanding, it is not surprising to learn that there are no published narratives written by prisoners about their lives and personhood. Within the written medium, the closest that citizens, who are not incarcerated, get to understanding the life of an incarcerated person, is through authors like Rathbone and Wideman. While these texts do function to somewhat illuminate experiences of incarcerated peoples, they do not afford the “prisoner” the right or opportunity to narrate their own experiences. No matter how egalitarian the author is it is still a relationship based on binaries. It becomes a narrative about perpetual separations between the author and the “prisoner” or the audience and the “prisoner,” or the outside and the inside. It is not about reunions or social life but rather informs us of the reality of existing while socially dead. For the purposes of this project, we must adjust and expand our understanding of what a narrative is and investigate the mediums that the prisoners themselves have access to wielding.
Chapter 3: Hip Hop as Narrative (Disrupting the Cycle)

The narrative genre is unique in that it allows readers to imagine—and, even to encounter—bodies that are not conceptualized as human. The written narrative has shaped the ways in which Americans imagine black bodies, but in consideration of the methods of expression that were denied to black bodies, namely the written tradition, to what extent can the written narrative embody black experiences? The relationship with blackness and the written tradition is one that is constantly and rigorously challenged by the residual presence of slavery and the current presence of prisons. I am not claiming that written narratives fail to encapsulate any black experience, but rather asking to what extent can they encapsulate those experiences? According to Saidiya Hartman, whose recent scholarship grapples with loss and trauma, it is essential to ask, “how does one recuperate lives entangled with and impossible to differentiate from the terrible utterances that condemned them to death, the account books that identified them as units of value, the invoices that claimed them as property, and the banal chronicles that stripped them of human features?”

This chapter interrogates the role of the written narrative in contemporary black communities in light of the social ostracism that black Americans are subject to. It contrasts the role of the slave narratives and the prison narratives discussed in the preceding chapters with the role of the oral narratives of contemporary performance artists Kendrick Lamar and Tupac Shakur in order to validate the function of hip-hop in these communities. It is useful and thoroughly illuminating, in light of the institutions that challenge the relationship between marginalized people and writing,
to examine how hip-hop endows black bodies with agency and enables these bodies to narrate their own experiences in a way that writing practices cannot.

Loss of voice is an effect of diaspora that has a long-lasting psychological impact on African Americans. Michael Gomez, author of the provocative critical text, *Exchanging our Country Marks: The Transformation of African Identities in the Colonial and Antebellum South*, writes concerning an exchange of identities. What is unique about the African Diaspora is that upon dispersal into a new place, Afro-descendant peoples took on a new identity. Many Africans let go of their native tongue in exchange for English, that would allow them to communicate with their masters and other slaves: “What did it mean to the African to hear and at some point repeat words associated with his captors? What did it signify to the African to be expected to learn and embrace concepts, which further concretized his condition of social death? What was it like to have the world renamed, redefined, and reimagined for him?” (Gomez 171). There certainly were political and circumstantial gains available for the enslaved African who was able to learn and to use English, but this learning had a traumatic psychological effect in that it displaced him further from his identity prior to enslavement and closer to a new identity constructed for him by the oppressor. The Brazilian author and educator, Paulo Freire, in the *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* describes the striving towards the identity of the oppressor by the oppressed as a result of dehumanization (Freire 30). During enslavement, language became a tool used to dehumanize Africans by stripping them of their voice and forcing them to embrace the voice of their oppressor. Once white colonialist took absolute control over the written form, it became a form that evokes the oppressor.
What is the function of narrating dead black bodies in a format that is inaccessible to that body? What is this function, when the inaccessibility, illiteracy, in part, is responsible for the death of that person? One might ask, in fact, how does illiteracy kill a human being? According to sociologist Dennis Hogenson, there is a profound relationship between illiteracy and delinquency. Hogenson, who surveyed many environmental factors and factors of family structure in a comprehensive study entitled, “Reading Failure and Juvenile Delinquency,” found a significant correlation between violence and illiteracy: “...the present study was unsuccessful in attempting to correlate aggression with age, family size, or number of parents present in the home, rural versus urban environment, socio-economic status, minority group membership, religious preference, etc. Only reading failure was found to correlate with aggression in both populations of delinquent boys” (Hogenson 1974). He goes on to assert that, “reading failure is the single most significant factor in those forms of delinquency which can be described as anti-socially aggressive. I am speaking of assault, arson, sadistic acts directed against peers and siblings, major vandalism, etc," (Hogenson 1974). Illiteracy not only impacts employment and communication, but also impacts the psyche and social behaviors of an individual. When 44% of black eighth graders in the United States do not have basic reading skills, therefore, it is safe to say that there is a significant relationship between illiteracy and violence in black communities. Because illiteracy has such a fatal impact on black bodies, it does not come as a surprise that residents at the Connecticut Juvenile Training School in
In addition to inaccessibility, writing and reading are a symbol of colonization because they are not apart of main forms of narration in West African traditions. Writing was not created by nor does it belong to white colonizers, but prior to European presence in West Africa, oral practices were the predominant medium in which West Africans taught, entertained, performed and narrated: “Elias Kwaku Asiama (Legon, Ghana) relied on the appreciation of story-telling as a traditional pedagogical instrument with various educational, psychological, sociocultural, religious and other benefits beyond its value as sheer entertainment” (Asare 2013). Historically, there is an intimate relationship between Afro-descendant peoples and oral traditions. The presence of Europeans in West Africa increased the popularity of written traditions. To date, white colonizers have permanently changed the relationship between black Americans and literacy, so much so, that the relationship signifies loss of agency. In *Exchanging Our Country Marks* Michael Gomez’s scholarship attends to the awful erasure that occurred when West African slaves were immersed in European traditions. Recall the quote: “What did it mean to the African to hear and at some point repeat words associated with his captors? What did it signify to the African to be expected to learn and embrace concepts, which further concretized his condition of social death? What was it like to have the world renamed, redefined, and reimagined for him?” (Gomez 171). In the new world, writing was a tradition and tool that belonged to white Americans. Literacy became a marker of status and a method of economic mobility. Because of the historical
relationship between black Americans and literacy, along with the contemporary relationships between black people in low-income schools and literacy, Americans are conditioned to associate literacy and education with whiteness. As a result, writing and literacy have become symbols of an oppressive political system that define black as inferior, called white supremacy that defines black as inferior. With that being said, what does it mean for African Americans to hear and use words and tools that are apart of white colonialism? What does it signify to African Americans to be expected to learn and embrace concepts and traditions that draw them closer and closer to whiteness?

Freire uses his landmark work, *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, to define the ideology that makes oppression cyclical and to assess the pedagogy that is necessary in order to deconstruct it. Freire asserts that the oppressed have the task of not only liberating themselves but also liberating the oppressor as well. It is only possible for the oppressed to fulfill this task because when oppressors attempt to liberate the oppressed they reinforce the inferiority of the oppressed and further dehumanize them in the process: “No pedagogy which is truly liberating can remain distant from the oppressed by treating them as unfortunates,” he declares, before noting that its liberation is made difficult when a people are offered “for their emulation [,] models from among the oppressors. The oppressed must be their own example in the struggle for their redemption. Pedagogy which begins with the egoistic interests of the oppressors (an egoism cloaked in the false generosity of paternalism) and makes of the oppressed the objects of its humanitarianism itself maintains and embodies
“oppression” (Friere 36). History cannot be divorced from the present because it is responsible for current ideologies the permeate American thought.

Historically, black and indigenous peoples were prevented from learning to become literate, among other things. One example of this was a law, published in the book of slave codes in 1862; it stated that it was illegal for slaves to learn to read or write. It was also illegal for a non-slave to give a slave a book. Contemporarily, for non-English speakers primarily, literacy can mean sacrificing one’s cultural affiliation and compromising ethnic identity. Tove Skutnabb-Kangas, a prominent linguist, discusses the contemporary relationship that indigenous people have with literacy: “some of the direct main agents for this ‘linguistic and cultural genocide’ are formal education and mass media” (Hanemann 2005). This significant reality racialized and racializes the written. The written became a form that embodies white ownership and white life. As a result, resistance as it manifests in the written is not and will not be responsible for the liberation of oppressed peoples because it is a form that emulates the model of the oppressor. The oral traditions of narrating along with other movement traditions do not inherently have an engagement with the egoistic interest of the oppressors.

Many aspiring authors lack the capacity to free themselves from the terminologies and ideologies created to protect the systems that kept black voices from developing or being heard: “…for both black and white American writers, in a wholly racialized society, there is no escape from racially inflected language, and the work writers do to unhobble the imagination from the demands of that language is

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complicated, interesting, and definitive” (Morrison 13). As long as the connection between systems of oppression and literature persists there will continue to be a vast realm that authors will not be able to access. Additionally, American artists that express themselves through hip-hop cannot escape from racial ideologies but the difference is that it does not purport to. Hip-hop is entrenched in blackness. It does everything with black in mind and in spirit and it is predominantly performed and embodied by black bodies. As a result, hip-hop grabs hold of what the written cannot access.

Hip-hop, in all its facets, is a vibrant and assertive medium that resists the enslavement of black bodies. Black life, black identity, black expression and black invention are at the center of hip-hop, and the black body moves out of enslavement, shifting from the object to the subject. It is significant to acknowledge the distinction between hip-hop and rap. According to Cheryl Keyes, author of Rap Music and Street Consciousness, rap is a “musical form that makes use of rhyme, rhythmic speech, and street vernacular, which is recited or loosely chanted over a musical soundtrack’’ (Keyes 2002), whereas hip-hop is a vast and multifaceted genre that consist of a “much broader artistic and cultural movement that took shape in the early 1970s and included rap but also other elements such as graffiti, break dancing, DJing,” (Kubrin 2014: 187) and knowledge. Graffiti—art and writing that is a part of the public sphere—is a particularly unique pillar in hip-hop that has clear connections with written slave narratives.

Of all of the documented accounts of slaves, there is a vast majority of narratives wherein; the author profusely emphasizes his or her authorship. Chief
among these are works such as *The Narrative of Frederick Douglass: An American Slave*, *Written by Himself*, *The Truth of Slavery*, *Aaron’s History*, *Interesting Account of Thomas Anderson, A Slave, Taken from His Own Lips*. *A Narrative of Some Remarkable Incidents in the Life of Solomon Bayley, Formerly a Slave in the State of Delaware, North America; Written by Himself, and Published for His Benefit; to Which Are Prefixed, a Few Remarks by Robert Hurnard*. These titles convey a noteworthy urgency and a desire to write oneself into existence. Each of these titles repeats the author’s name and role in creating the text. There is an emphasis on ownership that is emphasized and re-emphasized. The authors are shamelessly redundant. This urgency also is present in hip-hop, namely, in graffiti art. Graffiti reflects a sensation in writing one’s name on a property that does not belong to them. It is a beautiful and ironic insurrection, because, within American conditions of naming, only the owner of the thing has the authority to perform the act and tradition of naming it. It is a rebellious inflection of black rage.

Black rage is an emotion that is inextricably linked with hip-hop because of the relationship that black people had with expression during slavery. Throughout slavery, music, dance and writing about slaves was primarily created by white people that wanted to preserve slavery. As a result, minstrelsy and propaganda frequently portrayed an image of a happy slave that was well fed and jolly. Professor Lisa Wade discusses the notion of the “simple slave,” and deconstructs the image of watermelons in Jim Crow. This jolly picture is excerpted from a postcard that circulated throughout America during slavery:
The picture above portrays blackness that has access to abundance. The children not only look full, content and satisfied, but there is food left over. There is excess. This illustration attempts to invalidate the relationship between blackness and abjection that the institution of slavery forcibly creates. In this time, black people had no agency in how their emotions were portrayed. Black bodies were prevented from expressing their anger and their resistance and white slave owners constructed a false narrative for them.

Hip-hop, unlike print stereotype or images such as those on distressing postcards and unsettling photographs in media, can exist outside of social confines precisely because of its engagement with black emotions and black rage. Lauryn Hill’s music is exemplary of black rage in hip-hop, namely her song entitled *Black Rage*. Hill was raised in South Orange, NJ and, became one of the most prominent female hip-hop artists in the early 1990s. She is mostly known for her first solo
album, “The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill,” but her work that most critically engages with black rage are songs that are not mainstream or critically acclaimed by audiences. *Black Rage* exemplifies this moment of departure from stardom and immersion into critique. Lauryn Hill, in the song *Black Rage*, samples the song *My Favorite Things* by show tune artists Mary Martin and Patricia Neway. The original song, which emerged in the 1950’s, is emblematic of white culture and positions whiteness to be the subject. Throughout the song a white woman highlights a list of things she loves in order to forget about what makes her feel bad. The third stanza of the show tune contains several positive symbols associated with whiteness:

“Girls in white dresses with blue satin sashes
Snowflakes that stay on my nose and eyelashes
Silver white winters that melt into springs
These are a few of my favorite things”

The tone, in this stanza, is evidently pleasant, and also both literally and figuratively white. The listener is immersed in a completely white space, with white dresses, white snowflakes and white winters.

Lauryn Hill recycles the melody of the original show tune, but she shifts the subject from white culture to black culture, which, in light of violent histories places black rage in the subject:

“Black Rage is founded on two-thirds a person
Rapings and beatings and suffering that worsens,
Black human packages tied up in strings,
Black Rage can come from all these kinds of things.

Black Rage is founded on blatant denial
Squeezed economics, subsistence survival,
Deafening silence and social control.
Black Rage is founded on wounds on the soul!”

Hill is artful and deliberate in what aspects of the original song she keeps and what she changes. She slows the instrumental and adds a drum to it which simulates the beating that black bodies historically and contemporarily endure:

“In the midst of these practices arises the drum, which I read as a fundamentally catachrestic figure, that is, both irreducibly abused (it must be beaten to be played) and prosthetic (in exhibiting a body, a skin, a voice, it stands in for an expressive interiority, in a word, the subject). My claim is that this figure, which African slaves were legally stripped of in the wake of the Middle passage, arises as black musicians—through brilliant ‘making do’ tactics, or what de Certeau presciently calls ‘blows’—reconstituted the means by which to beat back against the shock, the beating, that constitutes the abrasive urban surface or late modernity” (Mowitt, 344).

The drum is sonically and conceptually at the center of hip-hop because it is the glue of the sounds and it represents the insurrection that black bodies perform as they beat back against white constructions of blackness. Hip-hop is the constant decentralization of whiteness in order to express black life and black pain. The
process of decentralizing whiteness is one that occurs both sonically and physically within hip-hop.

Any medium that has a relationship to capitalism is at risk of erasure and loss of agency in authorship. Around 1985 there is a shift from hip-hop as a multifaceted genre to something more singular. Hip-hop shifted from five pillars to one, and dissolved into rap music, largely in part, because this was the most marketable pillar. This moment commoditized a genre that was predominantly inaccessible to white audiences. Prior to this moment, hip-hop manifested in ghettos, and low-income black and Latino communities. In a documentary on hip-hop called “Rhyme and Reason,” director Peter Spirer interviews a number of well-known and underground hip-hop artists and examines the function of hip-hop in marginalized communities. There is a memorable segment of the documentary when the rapper known as Speech describes hip-hop as a medium that oppressed peoples use to narrate their experiences, that otherwise would be silent: “At its best, hip-hop can grab the nation by the neck and make people realize what’s going on. It’s a voice for the oppressed people that in many other ways just don’t have a voice.” Speech makes the bold claim that hip-hop can “grab the nation.” This word choice is assertive and deliberate. The extent to which hip-hop can gain attention of vast numbers, is not exclusive to the genre; Frederick Douglass sold 30,000 copies of his narrative. The distinction that Speech makes is the forcible relationship between the form and the listener. The form does not allow the listener to escape the trauma that the artists describe. The listener cannot come up for air. Hip-hop shouts, what Douglass whispers in the margins: “I am here,” and “you will listen.” Parrish Smith, a hip-hop artist from New York, asserts that hip
hop has another function as well, saying that it is collaborative; it is an exchange; it is a conversation: “We didn’t know nothing about no West Coast, we ain’t know nothing about Philly, we ain’t know nothing about Jersey until the rap came. And then we all just started communicating and just been one.” Hip-hop generates awareness of the collective conditions of black American men. He alludes to this collectivity when he states that the communication generates a feeling of oneness across the nation.

Hip-hop functions as the most influential form of the prison narrative because it is the only narrative that can disrupt cycles of trauma. The emotional detachment that characterizes the slave narrative is a performative erasure. While this detachment indicates the severity of living under the institution of slavery, it is also proof of something having been lost. Indeed, as scholar Michael Roth notes, “Narrativity…erases the very past it strives to recapture” (Gomel 2003). Hip-hop revitalizes history without re-enacting past violence experienced by the narrator, making evident the reality that black narrativity manifest differently in hip-hop.

Kendrick Lamar’s Good Kid M.A.A.D City articulates the emotions that we do not have access to in Douglass’s narrative. It is not the same emotional experience of trauma because Frederick Douglass and Kendrick Lamar are firstly, individuals, and secondly, individuals that lived in very different times under different social structures. They have endured different adversities, but these adversities were projected onto their bodies by identical institutions and the same ideologies. This is to say, slavery and prison, both have the same impact on the black male body in America. In Good Kid M.A.A.D City, Kendrick speaks to realities that permeate
predominantly black spaces because of the institution of prison. These realities include gang culture, displacement, dehumanization, death, mental health, drugs, and poverty. He also speaks to how prison has influenced black culture. The track called “The Art of Peer Pressure,” offers a vivid depiction of internal conflicts that a person who participates in criminal activity may experience. The content of the song is a story. There is a clear plot with a beginning, climax and resolution. Kendrick and his friends set out to commit a robbery. Kendrick’s voice in this song, in comparison to his voice in “M.A.A.D City,” is much more detached. His friends surround him, and conspire to commit a robbery, which would instigate some anxiety in a “good kid,” yet his voice does not waver or sound vulnerable, which would imply that he purposefully embodies indifference so that he doesn’t seem vulnerable or emotional around his peers. Lyrically, this song has one of the most descriptive verses on the album:

“Me and my niggas four deep in a white Toyota
A quarter tank of gas, one pistol, and orange soda
Janky stash box when the federales roll up
Basketball shorts with the Gonzales Park odor” (Kendrick 2012).

One chief symptom of trauma is that is a deteriorated memory but, in this verse, Kendrick’s descriptions are extremely vivid, which indicate his healthy relationship to memory. Roth speaks about this particular symptom of trauma with attentive detail to the cognitive delay that trauma can cause: “the traumatic event draws one to it even as it even as it demands acknowledgement that one can never comprehend what
happened at that time in that place” (Roth 107). He recalls a troubling history, and manages to remember how this experience engaged with his sense sound, vision and smell. He remembers, vividly enough to relay the sensory aspects of the experience. Kendrick also makes a profound statement about language and accessibility in this song. Kendrick describes the coded aspect of the black vernacular: “Bumpin Jeezy’s first album lookin’ distracted. Speaking language only we know, you think it’s an accent.” This code is interspersed throughout the album. The code invites black listeners in to participate in a conversation. This code cannot be written or read because it is communicated through inflections, tonality and physical embodiment. The people that have access to this code are people that are subjugated by the prison industrial complex. Not only the people in prison are affected, though. Also caught up in the stress are the families, and the people who are connected to the culture that prison has a role in shaping. Because the written narrative is not for these people, it does not consist of this same code. This code creates a safe space to express the trauma that he and the listener experience.

The coded language that Kendrick Lamar performs describes a language that belongs to and is created by people immersed in prison cultures. According to the Oxford English Dictionary a “cipher” is a secret or disguised way of writing; a code. Within certain cultures of marginalized peoples, which is to say, within the culture of people whose lives are narrated by hip-hop, a cipher is a freestyle rap session. These ciphers manifest in different ways that are unique to its participants. Generally, a cipher happens organically in the way a conversation amongst a group of people would manifest. Someone will start with a beat or a cappella; the only expectation is
that the rap is spontaneous and thought up on the spot. The topics rapped about in ciphers highlight culture, current events and/ or personal realities.

A multiplicity of identities and ranges of emotion emerge in Kendrick’s album. In the track “M.A.A.D city” he lyrically vocalizes the social climate of living in an impoverished city as a young black male in America and the potential to desensitize to death and violence. Lyrics from the first verse in particular allude to this process of desensitization:

“The driver seat the first one to get killed

Seen a light-skinned nigga with his brains blown out

At the same burger stand where --- hang out

Now this is not a tape recorder saying that he did it

But ever since that day, I was lookin at him different

That was back when I was nine

Joey packed the nine

Pakistan on every porch is fine

We adapt to crime”

Similar to Douglass, Kendrick recalls vile first hand accounts of violence. He has early, close encounters with violence; as a nine year old he witnesses someone shoot a man in the head and then there is a silence. He does not report or “record” who commits this act, but rather, he internalizes it and adapts to it. After recounting this murder, Kendrick evokes a sameness and familiarity. It happened in the “same burger stand.” There is something about this space, where violence occurs, that the speaker
recognizes. The familiarity of the space connects to the familiarity of the experience.

What is distinct about Kendrick’s account, in comparison to that of Douglass is that Kendrick evokes the silence, and then later disrupts it. Even though, he did not necessarily record his reaction to the event when he was a child, the memory of the traumatic event incites an emotional response that he experiences while retelling the story. His voice sounds distinct, in this song in particular, from the way that it does in other songs. It is high and frequently cracks which evokes a sense of panic. Where words are inadequate, the sonic articulates the emotional distress rather than the emotional repression that signifies trauma. This sound does indicate psychological injury but it gives the orator and listener access to this injury and exactly how it makes the orator feel. While the written narrative evokes the sonic, it does not have the same effect on the body as sound does.

Slavery was designed, in part, to strangle the relationship between blackness and expression. Contemporarily, prison is a factor that frustrates the relationship between blackness and literacy. As a result, more often than not, the written narrative cannot fully encapsulate black experiences. There is some aspect of black reality that falls silent in the written because it is a form that evokes white ownership. The oral tradition is an opportunity for marginalized peoples to have complete agency in narrating their experiences. Contemporarily, hip-hop is the predominant black oral tradition. At the Connecticut Juvenile Training School, bringing hip-hop in the therapeutic space facilitated dialogue, engagement, and participation. There was a feeling of rage and release in the room while listening to Kendrick Lamar. While singing and moving and producing sound they narrated Kendrick’s experience and
their own. Without understanding the role of the oral narrative in black communities, one risks stripping oppressed peoples of the agency to liberate themselves with their own language in their own medium.

Kendrick Lamar directly identifies as a narrator for people immersed in prison culture. Cristina Rathbone uses her sobering accounts of prison life to focus on the prison itself. She only has access to the impact of the prison on the body but she has very little understanding about the emotions and personhood inside of that body. In stark contrast, then, we see that an artist like Kendrick is able to narrate both the prison experience and the ways in which black bodies experience it.

Kendrick Lamar Duckworth, predominantly known as Kendrick Lamar, is an American rapper from Compton, Los Angeles. He was born in 1987 during the crack epidemic in the U.S. During his early childhood, black homicides were on a steady incline. Between 1984 and 1994 the homicide rate for black males between the ages of fourteen to seventeen more than doubled, and the homicide rate for black males between the ages of eighteen and twenty-four increased at about the same rate. The drugs arrived in the West Coast and had a particularly drastic impact on Los Angeles. The consequences of this epidemic had a fatal impact on black communities especially due to government and legislative responses: “Drug offenses alone account for two-thirds of the rise in federal inmate population and more than half of the rise in state prisoners between 1985 and 2000” (Alexander, 60). The drug war is responsible for the relationship between low-income communities and prisons. It increased the initiative to police drugs but this policing only took place in predominantly black and
Latino neighborhoods, even though statistics suggest that whites committed the same crimes at a more frequent rate:

“People of all races use and sell illegal drugs at remarkably similar rates. If there are significant differences in the surveys to be found, they frequently suggest that whites, particularly white youth, are more likely to engage in illegal drug dealing than people of color…The National Institute on Drug Abuse reported that white students use cocaine at seven times the rate of black students” (Alexander, 99).

The drug war exacerbated the criminalization of blackness. This process was made manifest during Kendrick Lamar’s childhood forcibly made him apart of a prison culture. As a result, his stories are first and second hand accounts of people who have entered prison or are apart of the prison that surpasses the bars and gates and spills into homes and all over black communities. Lamar describes himself as a narrative artist, who intends to tell stories that reveal the personhood of black peoples rather than focus on the qualities of impoverished and disadvantaged environments that black people often inhabit. While Lamar’s work does engage with topics of gang violence, drug abuse and theft, his work functions to disrupt notions of criminality.

On June 20, 2015, Kendrick Lamar released *To Pimp a Butterfly*. This album is representative of a medium that has the power to narrate the lives of black bodies that Americans are conditioned to imagine as inhumane or socially dead. While the written narratives discussed in chapter two inform the reader of some aspect of the prisoner’s experience, they also participate in the dehumanization of the prisoner. The
criminalization of blackness is integral to the dehumanization of prisoners. “The Blacker the Berry” is a song that Kendrick uses to deconstruct the idea that criminal and black are synonymous.

[Hook: Assassin]
I said they treat me like a slave, cah' me black
Woi, we feel a whole heap of pain, cah' we black
And man a say they put me in a chain, cah' we black
Imagine now, big gold chain full of rocks
How you no see the whip, left scars pon' me back
But now we have a big whip, parked pon' the block
All them say we doomed from the start, cah' we black
Remember this, every race start from the block, just remember that

[Verse 2]
I'm the biggest hypocrite of 2015
Once I finish this, witnesses will convey just what I mean
I mean, it's evident that I'm irrelevant to society
That's what you're telling me, penitentiary would only hire me

The “I” and “they” terminology used here suggest that the orator is offering his own perspective but also aware of how others perceive him. The chorus speaks to the cause and effect relationship between blackness and pain. In seven of the eight lines of the chorus, the narrator is the object receiving the action of a vague subject. The
actions being enacted are slave-like treatment, initiation of painful treatment, whipping, and dooming. The speaker, along with a collective “we,” experience these violent actions because they are black, hence the repetition in the antecedent “cah’ me black.” This phrase belongs to the Jamaican dialect, which evokes the universality of black experiences.

What hip-hop and rap can do, that the written narrative cannot, are precisely what Frederick Douglass gestures towards in his description of Negro spirituals. Douglass writes that Negro spirituals could offer more feeling, descriptiveness and insight on the soul of those singing than any writings could: “I have sometimes thought that the mere hearing of those songs would do more to impress some minds with the horrible character of slavery, than the reading of whole volumes of philosophy on the subject could do” (Douglass 1845). The notion that the songs would convince people of the “horrible character of slavery” implies that these songs can narrate the humanity of slaves in ways that writing could not. Kendrick Lamar and Tupac Shakur assert that hip-hop can function to do the same thing. The last track on To Pimp a Butterfly is a series Tupac quotes that are taken out of their original context and repositioned in conversation with Kendrick. Nearing the end of this conversation Kendrick alludes to a spiritual, out-of-body force behind his music and Tupac affirms this force and names it:

[Kendrick Lamar]

“Sometimes I be like, get behind a mic and I don’t know what type of energy I’mma push out, or where it comes from. Trip me out sometimes.”

[Tupac Shakur]
“Because the spirits, we ain’t really rappin, we just letting our dead homies tell stories for us.” (Kendrick 2015)

In other words, hip-hop can lend a voice to the voiceless. It can function as a type of revival.

What the oral narrative does that the written has not done is to offer the audience and orator insight and access to emotions that traumatic experiences often prevent one from accessing. The seventh track on “To Pimp a Butterfly” exemplifies how the oral narrative affords this access. Trauma is defined as a condition in which the psyche suffers injury caused by the emotional shock of an event or circumstance that the brain has repressed and cannot remember. Kendrick entitles this track, “U,” which precedes the fifteenth track “I.” The song directly before, ends with a poem, which has a last line that says: “Found myself screaming in a hotel room.” Then “U” begins with Kendrick’s voice screaming in agony. This awful sound locates the listener in the experience that, without the narrative, would be repressed with no medium with which to express it. He screams three consecutive times. In between these screams, the scream echoes and then a piano plays minor notes that descend into another scream and then the base of the drum comes in softly and crescendos into the saxophone. The saxophone, a jazz instrument, is the antithesis of classical and composition. Jazz is a free form, spontaneous and un-composed. On this track, the jazz sounds paint a chaotic environment because the sounds do not fit together neatly or cohesively. The screams stop, and Kendrick repeats, “Loving you is complicated,” eight times. The “you” has multiple effects. It presupposes Kendrick is “I” and summons the audience to be the direct object that Kendrick is talking to. In this
interpretation, Kendrick’s words are derived from within and are directed out. It also places the listener in the “I” position as the subject talking to Kendrick, the direct object. This interpretation simulates an outside in perspective. This deconstructs the norms established in written prison narratives discussed in chapter two. There is no middleman interpreting or relaying information on behalf of a different subject.

**Discography: Re-imagining Black the Body**

It is significant to be cognizant of what hip-hop can accomplish at its best, but it is also important to be aware of moments when hip-hop participates in a narrative of blackness that white colonialists constructed and that white American government continues to reconstruct. Slavery and prison help shape the ways in which white Americans imagine black bodies, but in reality, these institutions permeate the ways in which many black communities perceive themselves as well. The idea that black and criminal are synonymous is one that permeates black communities in addition to white suburbia. This reality manifests in hip-hop culture, in fashion and visual representations in marketing, along with hip-hop lyrics and hip-hop dance.
The images above are album covers from hip-hop artist with contemporary albums that have made it onto the billboards and top 100 this year. There are many hip-hop artists on the billboards, but these artists are particularly influential and these album covers are particularly startling because of the narrative of blackness that they propagate. The image on the top left is an image of Kanye West cover from an album
entitled, “Power.” This image does not depart from images of disfigured black bodies promoted during slavery to assert that black people were not human. Kanye West is one of the most influential artists of this generation as he has received twenty-one Grammy’s and over the course of his career has sold twenty-one million albums. This album cover is one of several of his that show a dead, disfigured black body. In terms of the content and concepts discussed in his music, many critics assert that the pessimism in his music is intentionally paradoxical: “West’s work is an attempt to articulate the continuation of Black enslavement despite the artificial political and social changes that are attributed to racial progress and social equality through the lens of (the anxiety and fears endemic to) Black manhood. West’s aesthetics communicate the ever-looming threat of death, violence, and erasure seemingly married to the Black male body” (Curry 2014). While critique, Tom Curry, attempts to defend Kanye West, he actually validates the fact that his work does not deconstruct legacies of violence that is inflicted upon blackness, rather this is the exact reality that he intends to depict in order to “communicate the continuation of black enslavement.” His discography desensitizes audiences to black death.

The album cover on the top right evokes death and silence in the black body. There are tattoos of bones on his hands as if the artist, Kid Ink, is a skeleton. On top of the bones is a dove, which has biblical connotations. It evokes purity, spirituality and heaven, which, as it is a space located in the after life, represents death. Additionally, his hands are covering his mouth. This does have a tinge of irony because it is the cover of an album, a medium of sound and communication, but the image itself does not depart from destructive narratives of blackness. It rather pushes
the viewer to question what about the subject is not being narrated on the album. It alludes to the notion that there is some truth about the orator that will remain silenced.

In chapter two, I have argued that the written narrative generates a singular narrative of the black female body. Historically, in the way that Americans conceptualized it, the black female body had only two functions. While men were tools for labor, women were used for nurturing and childbirth or sexual pleasure. This manifest in the idea of the “black mammy” and the “black jezebel.” Nicki Minaj’s discography resembles hypersexual images of female slaves in the 18th and 19th century.

Historically, images of the jezebel would function as a rationalization of sexual relations between slaveholders and female slaves:

“The idea that black women were naturally and inevitably sexually promiscuous was reinforced by several features of the slavery institution. Slaves, whether on the auction block or offered privately for sale, were often stripped naked and physically examined. In theory, this was done to insure that they were healthy, able to reproduce, and, equally important, to look for whipping scars - the presence of which implied that the slave was rebellious. In practice, the stripping and touching of slaves had a sexually exploitative, sometimes sadistic function.”

The naked black female body has historical evocations regardless of that body’s intentions. While Minaj describes her own nudity and sexual behaviors as reclamation of her body, which it should be, the historical implications of her body are resilient.
Tupac Shakur: The Narrative vs. The State

In a Garden After My Mother Died

My six year old nephew holds me while my chest heaves
He says, Don’t cry Auntie, don’t cry
He picks a white flower
For my Nana
I hold it in my dry hands
Amazed it could still
smell so sweet

--Markeisha Hill

Under the capitalist regime, the relationship between ownership and the black body is distinct. As the black body, in the New World, was possessed by the white colonizer, and then the slaver, black bodies did not own anything themselves. Their very being, according to the government and the constitution of the United States, was characterized by their dispossession. There are several moments in the constitution that define the black body and places parameters over its mobility: “No Person held to Service or Labour in one State, under the Laws thereof, escaping into another, shall, in Consequence of any Law or Regulation therein, be discharged from such Service or Labour, but shall be delivered up on Claim of the Party to whom Service or Labour may be due.” This excerpt can be found in Article IV, Section 2 of the U.S. Constitution. The word slave did not exist anywhere in the constitution, but it was implied in phrases like persons “held to service or labor.” Persons held to service or labor had no access to ownership because, by definition, they were characterized by the reality that their labor did not belong to them. Their labor was the property of their slavers.
Slavery in the United States is unique in that it was utilized as a method of production and labor. As a result, black bodies and labor are integral to American economy. The Constitution is a document that solidifies this relationship between black bodies and labor. It protects the ownership of the party to whom that labor belongs. This is the fabric of American thought that provokes Fred Moten definition of blackness; it “is the site of absolute dereliction at the level of the Real, for in its magenitizing of bullets the black body functions as the map of gratuitous violence through which civil society is possible –namely, those bodies for which violence is, or can be, contingent. Blackness is the site of absolute dereliction at the level of the Symbolic, for blackness in America generates no categories for the chromosome of history and no data for the categories of immigration or sovereignty. It is an experience without analog – a past without a heritage.” In other words, blackness is inherent displacement and constant abjection. And, violence inflicted upon the black body functions to preserve every “free person’s” right to capital.

Hip-hop is both a racial awakening and a re-negotiation of the conceptualization of blackness. This racial awakening resembles that of Frederick Douglass when he learned how to read and write and as a result became “aware of his condition.” In her writings on blackness, Saidya Hartman talks about what happens in the conceptual “space of negation,” saying that there is a celebration and reclamation of dispossession. Tupac’s life and work asserts that there is a song, here, in the space of negation. There is a dance that occurs in spaces of negation. Even in an utter state of abjection there is ownership, which is to say there is insurrection.
Tupac Shakur’s life was influenced by prison culture even before he was born. His mother, Afeni Shakur, a Black Panther activist, was in prison for bombing charges during her pregnancy. She was later acquitted and Tupac Shakur was born after her release. He was born in Harlem, New York June of 1971, when hip-hop first originates, and a borough over from the Bronx, where hip-hop first develops. As a young, black man, living in poverty, he was immersed in the economic realities from which hip-hop sprouts: “Socioeconomic conditions in the Bronx and Harlem in the 1960s and 1970s profoundly shaped the aesthetics and activities of hip-hop culture” (Nicholson 361). There is a relationship between low-income class cultures and visual and audible forms of hip-hop. As a result of increasing unemployment, and loss of low-income housing units Harlem was marked as an impoverished community in the 1970’s: “Extreme poverty tracts increased citywide since the 1970s from 84 to 311, and the population within them rose from 300,000 to nearly 1 million” (Hamid, 3). The socioeconomic reality that influenced hip-hop was poverty and the growing “underclass.” Tupac is born into this space, one that was characterized by lack and dispossession. Afeni became infamous for her radical behaviors, and, as a result, had difficulty finding a job. They moved to Roland Park, East Baltimore in search of employment. This neighborhood had cultural similarities to the ghettos of New York that they had just moved from. Tupac’s interviews, spoken word and rap suggest that he was aware of this relationship between his community, that is, the black community and abjection.
Throughout his music career, Tupac often struggled to construct his own identity that was constantly pushing against identities that politicians and government officials prescribed for him. He identified as a representative of *Thug Life*. People, living outside of low-income, black environments imagine thugs to be bodies who behave in a violent manner, participating in criminal activities, and acts of misogyny.

Charis E. Kubrin, a rap music scholar, graduate of George Washington University and professor of criminology, conducts extensive research on the topic of youth culture in “inner-city” black communities. She performs extensive examinations of 403 rap songs in order to decipher street codes within hip-hop that function as a map to the construction of respected identities within black youth culture. These identities include, “gangstas,” “thugs,” and “hustlas,” which, according to Kubrin, and other scholars that study of hip-hop culture, are violent identities: “This research…examines the more subtle discursive processes through which rap helps to organize and construct violent social identity and account for violent behavior” (Kubrin 2005: 360). Kubrin’s assertions that rap is an agent that participates in the construction of violent identities is false. It holds within it, the logic that rap artists, who frequently occupy spaces of abjection, participate in typical American practices of ownership, when in reality, black ownership is an oxymoron that manifest in burst of insurrection. If rap and blackness are truly intertwined, and if we approach blackness with the definition that Fred Moten offers us, then rap, in part, is characterized by a profound lack of agency. According to Moten, blackness is a performance of deprivation: “The emergence and preservation of blackness, as the ontological totality, the revolutionary consciousness that black people hold and pass,
is possible only by way of the renunciation of actual being and the ongoing conferral of historical being – the gift of historicity as claimed, performed dispossession. Blackness, which is to say, black radicalism, is not the property of black people. All that we have (and are) is what we hold in our outstretched hands” (Moten 2013:238). The image of the “outstretched hands” portrays Tupac’s understanding of *Thug Life*. He reclaims the word, crafting an acronym out of it that translates to “The Hate You Gave Little Infants Fucks Everybody.” According to his definition, a thug is a product of a violent environment. People living thug lives, if they are indeed violent, do not incite violence but rather inherit it from a white supremacist government that denies them adequate resources to live and exist in accordance with the law. Despite her misassumption that rappers incite a violent self-awareness for black youth, she does address the cause and effect relationship between racial inequalities and the “thug” identity: “Growing recognition of the utility of an integrative approach has led researchers to consider the relationship between structural disadvantage, cultural and situational responses to such disadvantage, and the perpetuation of violence within African American communities. Structurally, the combined effects of poverty, unemployment, family disruption and isolation from mainstream America define the neighborhood context for residents in many inner-city neighborhoods” (Kubrin 2005: 361). The “thug” identity, even though black men primarily embody it, is produced within the process of marginalization and dehumanization. White politicians facilitate the environment necessary to produce a “thug,” and then critique the character of the person that lives in that environment.
There are countless moments in Tupac’s career where politicians and/or government representatives attempt to flatten out the three-dimensional narrative, of a thug, that he creates. Scholars and politicians that are seduced by notions of interrelatedness between blackness and criminality use the term “gangsta rap” with the intention reducing music to an object two-dimensional. Keyes and Kubrin participate in this reduction when they describe gangsta rap as a departure from conscious rap: “Gangsta rap departed from earlier rap forms, which were often characterized as socially conscious and more politically Afro-centric (Keyes 2002:88, 158–59; Martinez 1997; Perkins 1996:19). Even today, gangsta rap differs from other types of rap mainly in that it is the musical expression of ghettocentricity, an expression that engages the ‘black youth cultural imagination that cultivated varying ways of interpreting, representing, and understanding the shifting contours of ghetto dislocation’ (Watkins 2001:389). Scholars agree that other rap forms reflect a generic concern for chronicling the ‘black’ experience, while gangsta rap is specifically interested in the black underclass in the ghetto (Keyes 2002:122; Rose 1994:12, 114; Smith 1997:346). The assertion that “gangsta rap” is a departure from conscious rap suggests that music with content that engages with life in “the black underclass…ghetto” is not self-aware. It suggests that the people living in those spaces do not possess knowledge about their conditions. Tupac overtly resist the idea that his music generates violence when, in an interview with MTV, he says “I didn’t create thug life—I diagnosed it.” The term diagnose reflects Tupac’s awareness of societal inequalities that produce the traumatic realities that characterize his community. These political gestures intended to discredit and invalidate Tupac’s
character are reminiscent of American dispositions towards prisons. The legislative attempts to censure the authorship of the prisoner, like *Son of Sam* laws, reveals the American fear that the voice, which is to say, method of access to the humanity, of the prisoner is a threat to American freedom.

One instance of legislative attempts to infringe upon Tupac’s narrative occurred in 1995. Tupac received a lawsuit from the estate of a police officer that was killed by two young men who claimed that Tupac’s music incited their violence. This interview is an example of public attempts to disempower black rappers of the agency to express a three-dimensional narrative. The following is an excerpt from the deposition. Tupac Shakur is the witness and Russell Stamper is the judge:

How do you define rap? What constitutes rap?

[Tupac Amaru Shakur]

It’s what it is poetry. To me, story telling poetry…

[Judge Russell Stamper]

To music with a beat?

[Tupac Amaru Shakur]

With or without music – you can a capella rap.

[Judge Russell Stamper]

Okay. But it has some type of beat and tune to it, doesn’t it, even if you don’t have accompaniment?

[Tupac Amaru Shakur]

No, even iambic pentameter is rap, you know, it’s the way you write it, the structure, it depends on how you write it, but as to what you need a beat. I’d
guess it wouldn’t sell that much if you don’t have a beat. So the music is more of a selling tool than it is necessary to music.

[Judge Russell Stamper]

Now you were performing by the time you hit your sole album what people call gangster rap?

[Tupac Amaru Shakur]

No.

[Judge Russell Stamper]

You were not?

[Tupac Amaru Shakur]

No.

[Judge Russell Stamper]

What would you – what would you call, what you’re performing…

[Tupac Amaru Shakur]

Rap music?

[Judge Russell Stamper]

Rap music? Okay, have you ever performed gangster rap?

[Tupac Amaru Shakur]

No.

[Judge Russell Stamper]

Okay. And why would you say that?

[Tupac Amaru Shakur]

Because I’m not – I don’t know, number one, what gangster rap is? Number two, I don’t classify what my music is gangster rap.

[Judge Russell Stamper]
Have you heard the term?

[Tupac Amaru Shakur]

A lot.

[Judge Russell Stamper]

Okay.

There is next statement that: “I’m a victim for real, um, I really got my ass beat, I really don’t like police.”

[Tupac Amaru Shakur]

I didn’t – I didn’t say that – where you at right there, oh, I didn’t say that, that’s not what it says.

[Judge Russell Stamper]

Okay.

[Tupac Amaru Shakur]

It says, I am a victim for real. Everything I talk is for real. I really got my ass beat. I really don’t like them. The interviewer wrote police.

[Judge Russell Stamper]

Did you mean police?

[Tupac Amaru Shakur]

No.

[Judge Russell Stamper]

What did you mean?

[Tupac Amaru Shakur]

I really got – I really don’t like crooked police.

[Judge Russell Stamper]

Okay. So you feel okay about other police?
[Tupac Amaru Shakur]

Feel okay?

[Judge Russell Stamper]

You like other police, you just don’t like crooked police, is that what you’re saying?

[Tupac Amaru Shakur]

Police, I like everybody that just does their job. I mean it depends on, I don’t know. Personally, if I meet someone that’s kind hearted and that’s true and that’s a fair, then I like them, because, especially in a position like that. If somebody is in a position where they have to put your life online and they could still be fair to everybody they meet, I definitely like them, I admire that.

(Source: LYBIO.net)

Throughout the deposition, there is a constant stating and restating which implies that there is some form of miscommunication or tension manifesting in the courtroom.

The tension between Judge Russell Stamper and Tupac Shakur is derived from Stamper’s attempt to flatten Shakur’s narrative. First, he attempts to flatten the entire genre of rap; he ask what rap is and Tupac responds saying that it is storytelling and poetry, which, according to the second entry of the Oxford English Dictionary is the definition of a narrative. Then Judge Stamper attempts to reduce it to something less multifaceted, insisting that it is poetry but only when spoken to a beat. Tupac Shakur resist this attempt at reducing rap to a monolith and asserts that it could even be what people conceptualize as “high art”, hence his reference to Shakespearian work, a “high art” form that uses Iambic Pentameter. Judge Stamper then shifts the conversation and describes Shakur’s music as “Gangster rap.” Tupac frequently vocalizes his disassociation with the phrase. It is not a subgenre that he affiliates with.
Prior to this deposition, he responded to Dolores Tucker and Bob Doyle efforts to push his music into that box saying, “No matter what these people say about me, my music does not glorify any image. My music is spiritual. If you listen to it, it’s all about emotions; it’s all about life.” Tupac fights for the right to identify and create the personality of his music on his own terms. The spiritual and emotional characterization of his music departs from violent narratives of dehumanized black bodies that cannot feel or express themselves.

Tupac Shakur’s music vividly expresses rage directed toward American institutions and the criminal justice system. The song “Trapped,” specifically illustrates the mobility of the black body in relation to the state. Similar to the written narrative, the speaker’s body moves in relation to the prison. Themes of darkness and constraint exist throughout, but Tupac speaks specifically about occupying a space of negation in between a “prison cell” and the outside world which he feels is a “living hell,” largely in part because of constant policing.

“Couldn't see nothin' but bloody blood
Now i'm a fugitive to be hunted like a murderer
Ran through an alley
Still lookin' for my getaway
Coppers said Freeze, or you'll be dead today
Trapped in a corner
Dark and I couldn't see tha light
Thoughts in my mind was tha nine and a better life
What do I do?
Feelings of entrapment provoke intense rage. The speaker wants to take flight from this place of abjection, but feels as though the only opportunity of escape is death: “I’d rather die than be trapped in a living hell/ They got me trapped.” Rage manifests in suicidal thoughts that are both violent but empowering. The speaker also contemplates using a gun to respond to his attackers and to participate in the violence that he receives: “thoughts in my mind was tha nine and a better life.” A nine is a colloquial term for a small gun. The recurring “they” in the song represents crooked police officers that place unconstitutional constraints on black bodies.

**Conclusion: Inside Connecticut Juvenile Training School**

The Connecticut Juvenile Training School is located in an isolated area in Middletown. It neighbors a medical facility and a mental health facility. In the juvenile training school, there are huge open spaces with freshly cut grass along with outdoor and indoor basketball courts, football fields, trees and tall silver structures that make a modern art piece. This is where I go once a week to facilitate poetry and music therapy workshops with a group of five to eight young men between the ages of thirteen and twenty years old. They are told when to wake up, when to brush their teeth, how to walk, when to speak, when to shower, what to wear, how to wear their hair and clothes, among other things. The slightest violation of these protocols of behavior and interaction almost always functions to lengthen their stay. Despite the
restrictions that the facility places on the incarcerated youth, I was still incredibly surprised by how infrequently the guys I worked with expressed themselves or communicated any emotion at all. As they got to know me better, they shared more about where they were from and what they had experienced, but even the most traumatic experiences were described in a stoic and detached manner. Even when sharing their own writings, many of them tripped over words and stumbled over the structure, which complicated the role of writing in narrating their truths, identities and experiences. After several sessions without much of a breakthrough, I reached out to Evan Okun, a member of violence prevention group called Circles and Ciphers, for advice. He suggested that I begin the session with a hip-hop song, hand out the lyrics to follow along, and then facilitate dialogue around the song afterwards. With Kendrick Lamar’s song, Rigamortis, playing, they listened, sang, moved and then proceeded to facilitate their own dialogue in which they not only analyzed his lyrical and sonic content, but also discussed where and how they could locate themselves in that content. Their relationship to the group sessions ever since led me to believe that hip-hop was the medium that afforded them agency in narrating their own voices.

Similar to Douglass’s experience, the manner of speaking and writing while in the juvenile detention center takes on that of a stoic nature. There are several distinct images I have in my mind of residents of the facility describing traumatic experiences with little to no detail, or describing it with detail but without tone, passion or emotional attachment to the words they were saying. In my first year working at CJTS, there was one resident who had long braids that covered his eyes and nose completely so that no one could see his face. When introducing himself to me he did
not look up or push his hair back, but rather while I waited with my hand out for a handshake and an introduction, he allowed the staff to tell me his name and didn’t speak one word to me. As time passed, I noticed that he would use his words sparingly with other residents and staff, but there seemed to be more tension in the moments when he interacted with me, a person from outside of the facility. I also remember interacting with residents who were eager to speak to me. One in particular, always looked at me when he spoke, and spoke freely, often with much humor. For this resident, when it came to describing his experience being separated from his mother and physically and psychologically abused by his father, he spoke freely with plenty objective details, but he offered no indication of how this trauma made him feel. He was so removed from the events, he didn’t mind sharing them with a complete stranger. His descriptions of traumatic experiences were the only moments where he spoke without animation or inflection of voice. It was as though he were telling a story about a completely different person. It became evident to me that many residents there had lost the ability to process their emotions in that space, out of fear of being perceived as weak by other residents or staff.

Another observation that comes to mind involves a resident whose lack of passion made it seem as though he was bored and unenthused. In this group session, the residents used a hip-hop song to have dialogue about personal moments of disempowerment. Then they wrote after having received a writing prompt that allowed them to explore disempowerment in more depth. This resident sat quietly and participated seldom. He participated the least and seemed completely removed and disengaged from the session up until the very end when residents were given the
opportunity to share what they had written. He was the first to volunteer to share what he had written. Then, he asked for more writing prompts similar to the one he received in the session. His actions communicated his interest in the session, but his expressions and voice did not.

Prison, like slavery, eats away at the humanity of everyone who comes in contact with the space, both those imprisoned and those who enforce the laws of the institution. Prior to working at CJTS, I wrote frequently with relative ease. I often wrote without form, free-writes that communicated how I’d felt in that day, week or moment. While co-facilitating writing workshop in the juvenile detention, I experienced intense writer’s block and felt extreme disconnect from my own emotions. Additionally, I observed that the member of the staff there that co-facilitates with me never shared her music or spoken word poetry in the group. When I asked her about her relationship to poetry, she said she loves writing and singing and frequently creates when she is outside of the space, but when within the walls of the facility, it becomes immensely difficult to express oneself. Initially, this was difficult to believe because of how aesthetically pleasing the space is. There is beautiful artwork throughout the space. There are trees, grass, flowers and basketball courts. The space looks more beautiful than the average, public school or church, but there is something about the space that infringes upon ones ability to process and understand emotions.

In addition to the stoic nature of the space, in dialogue with several residents, it became evident that many residents and staff underwent forms of displacement and dehumanization upon entering the space. Often times, residents are sent to the facility
during their school year and are displaced from their learning environment. Many times their time at CJTS results in suspension, or being held back a grade and prevented from graduating with people whom they had developed bonds and friendships with. I also observed that when describing their lives outside of the space, they often described living absent of a father, or living with Grandparents, or cousins or in a group home. There was barely any description of a family unit with both a mother and father present in the home.

The member of staff that I work with when I volunteer gave me insight on the ways in which people change after having worked at CJTS. Her description of shift in character and mood bares a resemblance to Douglass’s description of Ms. Auld: “Under its (slavery’s) influence, the tender heart became stone, and the lamblike disposition gave way to one of tiger-like fierceness” (Douglass, 60). Similarly, my supervisor at CJTS observed a shift from friendly to cold, peaceful to impatient. This manifested itself in shortness of tone, disempowering residents through dialogue, verbal micro-aggressions towards residents or inflicting physical violence upon residence.

**An Interview with Lori Williams**

Lori Williams has worked with the Connecticut Juvenile Training School’s music therapy program for what will be seven years this May. The music therapy room is the one space where incarcerated youth, or as we colloquially call them, “the guys” do not receive charges. A charge is any violation of behavior that could result in delayed court dates and extended imprisonment. When asked, in her observations,
how the guys she works with process their emotions, she said: It’s an individualized thing. They don’t, or will rarely share. With that being said, this space (the music therapy room) is where they do process. Clinicians approach me and ask what’s wrong with this kid? What does he talk about in music group? They process through music, or even sometimes listening. They come in sometimes and just listen. They’ve been through a lot of trauma. They’ve seen their parents killed, their friends killed, and they’re desensitized to it.” The death and emotional violence that these young men have been exposed to have infringed upon their capacity to feel and process their emotions. This mirrors the relationship that Douglass has with his emotions, as described in his second narrative.

Poetry

The written, void of lyricism, can be a dissociative practice for me. As a result, while immersing myself in the histories and presence of prison and slavery, I performed. I narrated my experience through spoken word and rap forms in order to create something that belongs to me and belongs at my dinner table, in Flatbush, Brooklyn. Elite educations can be spaces of erasure. And, in all honesty, there are aspects of my research that cannot be encapsulated by narrative forms that I’ve learned in “prestigious” institutions. Without lyric to evoke the sonic, it is impossible to communicate, in totality, the three-dimensional experience of my immersion into these topics and into spaces of abjection. This section contains dialogue, music and spoken word that are in conversation with themes discussed in earlier chapters; themes of dehumanization, displacement, identity and ownership. This section also
contains spoken word pieces that I created while physically in the Connecticut Juvenile Training School. As a result, some of these pieces are fragmented, static and rigid which is reflective of the barren energy of prison cultures. Some of these pieces make known the desire to shift from objectification to the center, to the subject.

**Origin Stories**

1.

In the beginning, there was a curly mustache. Then

There was a textbook, 1000 textbooks,

In the textbooks were fire. The pages

Did not burn.

Brown skin got stuck to the teeth of the readers.

I was here,

The white colonizer says

2.

In the beginning was a paper.

My sister was born in the negative space of

A separation,

My parents were getting a divorce,

I found the divorce paper beneath

The passenger seat of my mother’s car,

I sat quiet,

A paper, a courtroom, a cold bedroom,
A childhood, Brooklyn, A belly swollen
With hunger. An absence.
In the beginning there was a tree,
With leaves,
Leaving, shadows behind
a pink tongue in a brown mouth.

Someone in Brownsville is laughing
There is an abandoned warehouse in
Brownsville.
The windows were walls, the walls
were thin, so when they put they ear up
To it they heard a leather
Belt tighten around a wrist,
exhale,
They heard the bellies of
Rats drag against the floor
They heard brown bodies rubbing
Against each other.

I woke up from a dream and
Was here. So I wandered.
Mostly looking for something
Familiar. Something I could

Share. I looked through the wall,

The left wall,

And found the motion of my

Grandmother’s

Wrist stirring a pot full of something.

We dance.

America

America
You pretty
You shiny black shoe
You shiny teeth
Yellow
You don’t shine
You get shined
You fine as hell
You stand
You wave like unworn flags
You wave at the ugly black animals behind the glass
You wave and they put their hands up too
America
Keep smiling
That smile is charmin
That smile convinced the Nigerian queen to raise her kids over here
She took a plane 7 months pregnant
Her sweat rolled off her face and onto yo shoe
You rubbed it in till you could see your teeth
Yellow
That smile, conned the Yoruba prince into thinkin his children could have a better life here
America you sly dog
You sly mother
America you most wanted
You getawaycar nitro

You the rotten sweet child that never took the blame
You stole her sweat to shine yo bad apple
America
You are every color but black
America
You beat the black out of politicians
America,
You convinced America Obama was only almost black
You convince broken brothers Black got everything but light
Black got nothing but culture

America you got black too
You borrow words from ghettos and stick them in the bricks in the walls
It echoes and sounds like everything Mike, Eric and Trayvon never said,
It bounces off of the tongues of politicians’ children
The politician’s kids go to school with a belly full of culture,
They pick their teeth and sing Tupac on the way there
Tupac’s aunt was exiled from America
America wanted her words for free
America took her words and told they children that revolution is beautiful
America, you made Mike Brown famous
You put Mike Brown on a white ally’s t shirt
They wore him while they screamed Black lives matter
America
Who we protestin?
When’s the last time you convinced someone you matter?
Who da criminal?
What the criminal look like?
Cops got guns
Why we da only ones getting locked up
America, who’s the criminal?
What they got on?
How long they in for?
When they get out, where they gon go?
Back to America?
America you sly dog,
You ain’t got no color but gold
You ain’t but nothing but sold
And owned
And burned
And bought
And stole
And stole
And killed
And stole
And killed
But look at Obama
Look at his daughters pardon the Turkey on Thanksgiving
Look at me,
Look at how soft my hands are from never havin to pick the cotton or soften the dirt
Look at my smile shined yellow
Listen to my voice shined yellow
You understand me now
I can be anyone I wanna be
I can make money and move to America
I don’t have to listen to the words in the wall no more
Those words aint mines no more
I’m American, America
I made it
I am American
The Cycle

Cops drew my brother’s face in chalk on concrete

With concrete chunks of blood between his teeth,

Then they say,

“stop making traffic on the sidewalk.”

My brother walks on the yellow dotted line in the

Middle of the street

Till he gets home,

The cop laughs,

Then tucks my brother’s masculinity in his pants

Till there’s a bulge in his pocket,

All cops have one face.

In my 8th grade writing class,

I tell my students to write about a moment they felt powerless,

A student raises her hand and tells me she doesn’t know what to write,

Write about July 4th,

When the sound of firecrackers

Might really be firecrackers,

(Write about how I hate cops)

I take every cop and draw their face in chalk on my blackboard.
Bill Cosby Sweater

I used to wear plaid
Plaid socks up to my calves,
Plaid skirts my Grandmother could only get me to wear on Sundays,
And, most definitely plaid overalls

I used to slip my older brother’s baggy Bill Cosby sweaters into my laundry
So when I wore it, I could hide the things that made me vulnerable.
It didn’t look the same on me as it did on my brother.
And it itched
And smelled like old people
And thrift stores
And comfort.

My older sister never wore plaid
And she’d put on dresses on days she didn’t have to.
She and I have different fathers.

My father is not here.
Men grab at my clothes with their eyes and he lets them.
My brother does what he can but his hands are not as big as my fathers.

Now I like wearing stripes.
I like how it oscillates back and forth
Between
2 colors
White,
Then blue,
Then white,
Then blue—like a an interrupted thought
Or an interrupted emotion.
Uninterrupted emotions are scary,
They leave
Too much room to fall,
And I’m committed to shallow living,
And half full
The last time my lungs were filled, my cheeks turned black from all the smoke,

My childhood is a room full of smoke,
And locked doors,
And movies about love,
I was desperate to know what love looked like,

My childhood was a room full of thoughts about love,
In other words, my childhood was a room full of things that were not love, (!!)
My mother’s quiet,
My father’s voicemail,
And one boy who spray painted his name all over the walls until pink paint dissolved red,
It read
I was here, I was here,
I was here
I was here,
When I told my brother what his best friend had done, he laughed and said
“my walls were as pink as they’ve always been,”
I stopped looking at them and taught myself about bodies of water that were not big enough to consume,
Love is massive, but I’ve never seen an ocean that does not swallow,
I like the rain,
I like the potholes raindrops crowd into,
I can step in and out whenever I want,
I don’t have to explain the color of the walls,
That thought will get interrupted and I’ll pretend I was thinking of you,
Thinking of the rain rather than the hole it does not fill,
My pretend lover will see me staring at wet cement and ask,
“What are you thinking about?
And I’ll respond, “Nothing, I just love you.”
I have a habit of saying I love you when I mean to say,
“the walls are red and I cannot swim,”
Where is dad? I’ve been getting his voicemail all winter,
It sounds like everything mom is not saying.
My pretend lover will respond, “I love you too,”
And the walls will stay as pink as they’ve always been.

America is Most Wanted
Everytime I turn on the news I see a black-bodied obituary
I hear some old white folks sayin’ some shit bout how black folks need dictionaries
Then I change the channel and I realize, black folks need dictionaries
Like can I be real?
Can I?
Igght so my thing is…
Even if crooked cops got got,
There would still be brown bodies on the cement,
Concrete turned red from young boys strapped up hopin they could be men

But how you gon be a man when you ain’t never seen a man
And everything you do, you do just not to appear weaker than,
An absent father, an empty belly, or people with worn feet and eager hands
Or the abusive uncle/ or meager minded wannabe preacher man
Of course we gon’ look to the streets to teach me man

Everytime I turn on the news I see a black-bodied obituary
I hear some old white folks sayin’ some shit about how black folks need dictionaries
Then I change the channel and see a black dude getting locked by some cop with a bulge in his pants

And I know we all seen Ferguson and Brooklyn and Chicago and Middletown
But can I be real?

Can I?
Cuz real talk, all cops don’t bother me,
Only the ones who leech from the hoods that probably,
Have sisters and brothers with culture and souls of sovereignty,
But welfare reduces gold souls from gold to poverty
Who molds the policies?/ probably not the gold badged man that’s holler/ing hands up/nah nah he just following
Orders from a system that thrives on collaring/ black bodies
Or atleast watching them dangle
As long as we die, it don’t matter the angle
Cops are just following orders
bout what the government decides is criminal
Decides Obama is president so white supremacy stay subliminal

Who’s responsible, who decides when and where to crack down on crime?
Who decides that if I read a book than my black aint mine?

What does black even look like?
How come black doesn’t have a name?
How come it rains everyday?
How come we dyin in vein?
How come we locked up as if we need to be tamed?
How come we livin in fear, as if we need be tamed?
How come there’s still love here?
How can there still be love?
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