BLACK RADICALISM AND PRISONER WRITINGS

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A THESIS

Presented to the Department of Political Science
And the Honors College of the University of Oregon
In partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of
Bachelor of Arts

April 2008

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An Abstract of the Thesis of

Sarah Diane Cate for the degree of Bachelor of Arts

In the Department of Political Science to be taken June 14, 2008

Title: BLACK RADICALISM AND PRISONER WRITINGS

Approved ________________

Professor Daniel HoSang

In the 1970's when the Black Radical Movement was at its height and the United States was experiencing incredible social and political changes and challenges, there was a moment of dialogue and expression from the prisons. The experience of imprisonment fits well into the discussion of a social movement such as the Black Radical Movement because the prison plays an important part in the conception of freedom. The following manuscript will seek to engage the writings of prisoners in the complex exploration of the notion of freedom. How is freedom realized in an arena of unfreedom?

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author expresses sincere appreciation to Professors HoSang, Frank and Wood for their assistance in the preparation of this manuscript.

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Introduction Part I: Prisons

"The prison system… institutionalizes isolation and secrecy. The prison's walls are designed not only to keep the prisoners in but to keep the public out, thus preventing observation or knowledge of what is going on inside."

At first glance, it appears that prisons embody the antithesis of society and are distinctly separated from the outside world. While this quote is about absolute isolation and separation, this paper might reveal that there are more connections between prison and society than what is sometimes believed. The focus of this paper will be to examine theories of freedom relating to race and social movements and test their relevancy in the prison setting. The introduction of the paper will emphasize the importance of examining the prison system and give background on the history of the prisons that the letters examined in the paper come from. The second part of the introduction will put into dialogue several different theorists' ideas about freedom. The many different theorists will provide an illustration of how packed with meaning the notion of freedom is. The purpose of the paper is that prisoners can contribute to this dialogue. The main portions of the paper will examine prisoner writings in relation to several different topics: gender, state oppression and violence. Historical anecdotes will come at the end of each section to provide a context for why these are key arenas in the conception of freedom. The enormous prison system in the United States and its unique relationship to race provides an important area of study for examining ideas of freedom. This paper will begin to dissolve the perceived absolute wall between prisoners and the public.

The prison is a crucial place to look in the analysis of race in America. Not only is imprisonment an active and included aspect of every citizen's identity it is also an

enormous tangible system within American society. As of this year, 2008, the United States imprisons more than 1 in 100 American adults in jail or prison (Harrison). Over one million of the incarcerated are African American (Hames-Garcia xiii). People of color make up over seventy percent of this prison population. About 10.4% of all black males in the United States between the ages of 25 and 29 in 2002 were sentenced and in prison (Prisoners). The United States comprises 5% of the world population and it incarcerates 25% of the world's incarcerated population (Walmsley). The United States has the highest documented incarceration rate and total documented prison population in the world. These statistics earn the U.S. the distinction of having "the highest percentage and numbers of its people incarcerated and executed of all industrialized nations" (Hames-Garcia xiv). The massive existence of prisons and the connections they have to race in our society make them a crucial place to look to understand the dynamics of our nation and freedom.

Analysis of prisoner writings is legitimate and important. Though prisons are consistently labeled and imagined as being "non- society," they form a quite opposite position in American society. Michael Hames-Garcia writes in Fugitive Thought: Prison Movements, Race and the Meaning of Justice that, "nearly everything in U.S. society attempts to assure me that my fate is unconnected to the lives of those who inhabit the prisons of our nation" (xvi). He then counters with a prevailing thesis that this attempt is a concerted effort to suppress and hide an opposing reality. Hames-Garcia argues that prisons are inextricably bound to every U.S. citizen's sense of freedom and identity. Hames-Garcia describes that people gain a two-fold sense of justice and freedom when

someone else is incarcerated. They are not only free from prison but also free from the person being incarcerated (xvi). This mentality that Hames-Garcia describes is imbedded in the history and foundation of our nation.

In America there was an intriguing correlation between the emergence of race and freedom. The two ideas have a complicated and layered relationship. In many ways white freedom was predicated on the anti-freedom of black citizens. Barbara Fields argues that slavery came about as an economic decision by elites. It met the needs of major crop growers, and Africans were vulnerable and available for slavery (Lowndes). There are many different explanations for the creation of slavery in the United States. The bottom line is that slavery survived in a climate of American commitments to liberty. Henceforth was bred a relationship, non-opposing, between freedom and slavery.

Joy James connects slavery and prisons through the historic event of the passage of the 13th Amendment. He argues in The New Abolitionists, (Neo) Slave Narratives and Contemporary Prison Writings that the 13th Amendment transferred slavery to prison. He states, "prison is the modern day manifestation of the plantation" (xxiii). His argument is that plantations served as a site of agricultural, domestic, and industrial labor and the dehumanization of beings. The prison, James suggests, is the modern day manifestation of these principles. James illustrates the nuance of difference between emancipation and freedom in this era. He writes, "following the end of Reconstruction and large scale black (male) voter disenfranchisement, began the massive growth of the convict prison lease system" (xxix). In this system blacks were swept off the streets and

"were worked to death in mining, agriculture, and forestry in joint ventures between the state and private industry, essentially dying at higher rates than they had during enslavement on plantations" (xxix). This ironic production of emancipation along with a higher death rate and continued exploitation, serves to affirm James' thesis that the American prison system was a replacement for slavery.

It also shows the ways in which the relationship between race and freedom were formed. James argues that "the encoding of slavery or criminality onto blackness reflected a counterpart construction: the inscription of 'whiteness' and non-incarceration as freedom and civility" (xxv). This encoding exemplifies the complicated relationship between race, freedom and imprisonment. This glossary exploration of the history of race and freedom in American society demonstrate the complicated and at times paradoxical they have. The 13th Amendment was passed in 1865. Over 100 years later similar relationships and tensions exist.

The source of the prisoner writings that will be used in the paper comes from an anthology titled Maximum Security: Letters From California's Prisons. The book is a collection of letters written from Folsom, San Quentin, and Soledad prisons to lawyers from the Prison Law Project, mostly to Fay Stender and Patti Roberts. Fay Stender founded the Prison Law Project and represented many prisoners including George Jackson. All of the letters were written in either 1970 or 1971. These dates serve the purpose of the paper quite well because they occur right in the midst of the Black Radical movement. The various prisoners are all different, some identify as revolutionaries and others not. Most of the writers are black, but there are white writers

as well. The anthology provides a wide glimpse of the emotions of prisoners at the time and how they expressed feelings surrounding the notion of freedom.

The three prisons where the letters are written from in the anthology hold significant historical relevancy. San Quentin State Prison is one of the most well known California prisons. It was the first prison to be built in California in 1852. Folsom Prison was the second built, and Soledad was amongst the first 13. The age of the prisons has contributed to their legacies. San Quentin prison is the site of California's only death row and was the first to house a gas chamber. The gas chamber was then converted to a site for lethal injection. From 1893 to 1942, California's preferred method of execution was hanging. In this time, 215 inmates were hung at San Quentin (San Quentin). The use of torture was condoned as an interrogation method until 1944 (Reed). These legacies of violent prison practices have helped earn San Quentin notoriety. "San Quentin has a bloody reputation, a culture where violence and boredom make up life day-by-day, where gang culture, rape and silence run deep" (San Quentin). California prisons hold a significant place in the history of the American prison system. The enormity of the California prison system has made it a microcosm of many trends in the prison system as a whole. The demographic make-up of the state and its prisoners makes it an important example of the prison system as a whole.

The following map shows the geographic proximity of the prisons, all located in central and northern California.

In the anthology and in the writings of famous prisoners such as George Jackson it is acknowledged that the three prisons comprise a community. Prisoners were routinely transferred amongst the three prisons providing connections between inmates. Many prisoners comment that when moved from one facility to the next they saw very little difference in their circumstance. George Jackson writes in Soledad Brothers, "I'll be considered for transfer again this week, they'll probably approve Folsom for me this time. It is a maximum security prison like this, so there will be no change in my fortune. One prison is like the other" (141). This community and sense of uniformity amongst the prisons is not completely accurate. Each prison was different. Soledad was a medium and minimum security prison, San Quentin was a medium close security prison and Folsom was the maximum security prison. However, the feeling of an inter-prison community is notable given the way it unifies the prison experience for the writers in the anthology.

The prisons also have symbolic importance given their presence in popular culture. The prisons continually show up in movies, books and music. The most notable instance of the prisons being showcased in popular culture is the music of Johnny Cash. Cash performed at Folsom and San Quentin on multiple occasions starting in the late 1950's. His songs "Folsom Prison Blues" recorded in 1956 and "San Quentin" recorded in 1969 were major hits that facilitated the public's perceptions of the facilities (Johnny Discography). In "Folsom Prison Blues," Cash describes the contrast between the stagnation of prison and the motion of the outside world. Lyrics such as "I'm stuck in Folsom prison, and time keeps draggin' on" and "San Quentin, I hate every inch of you./ You've cut me and have scarred me thru an' thru" contribute to the valorization and masculinity of being a prisoner and also illuminate the horror of prison life (Johnny Lyrics).

In relation to the Black Radical Movement the prisons also hold significance. George Jackson of the Black Panther Party was imprisoned in San Quentin and Soledad. While at San Quentin State Prison in 1966, he founded the Black Guerrilla Family. His books Blood in My Eye and Soledad Brother, were bestsellers and earned Jackson world-wide attention. Jackson was the most prominent connection between the Black Panther Party and the prison society. Many inmates from these three prisons were aware of and adopted principles of black radicalism. Eldridge Cleaver was also an important voice of the prisons and the Black Radical Movement. He was imprisoned in Soledad (Cleaver). The connections between black radicalism and these specific prisons have historical basis and have also been perpetuated in popular culture. Prominent musical

artists of the 21st Century such as Tupac Shakur and Rage Against the Machine have referenced San Quentin and George Jackson in their song lyrics to connect the prisons as sites of revolutionary rebellion.

Some important information about the prisons at the time the letters of the anthology were being written will help provide context for the circumstances the prisoners were writing from. The majority of the letters in the anthology refer to time spent in the "Adjustment Centers" which is abbreviated "A/C" by many prisoners. The Adjustment Centers constituted a prison within the prison. They are also called "the Hole" by inmates. They were used to "punish those who [broke] prison regulations, or for long term confinement of those whom administrators [did] not want in their general population" (Pell 2). Lawyer Fay Stender writes in the introduction to the anthology, "the letters in this book were written by convicted felons; most of those whose writing is represented here have spent long periods of time confined in Adjustment Centers throughout the state" (4).

Another important characteristic of the prison system at this time (1970-1) was the policy of indeterminate sentencing. In 1977, Governor Jerry Brown did away with indeterminate sentencing (Pomfret). However, at the time of these prisoner writings this was a crucial part of their prison experience. Indeterminate sentencing provides a minimum and maximum term of imprisonment for each felony. The purpose of this type of sentencing was to try to fit a prisoner's punishment to the criminal rather than the crime. The idea was that the prisoner would be released when he was ready to enter society rather than be held for an arbitrary amount of time. However, "statistics show

that prisoners in states using indeterminate sentencing serve longer terms than prisoners serving fixed sentences" (2). This system appears frequently in the letters of the prisoners especially in terms of them addressing the Adult Authority of the Department of Corrections whom they sometimes refer to as the "A.A." This body was comprised of mostly retired law-enforcers who were appointed by the governor. They had the responsibility of determining the amount of time each prisoner served within their indeterminate sentencing. A parole board consisted of two members of the Adult Authority and they would "travel from prison to prison, interviewing and deciding whether or not to parole prisoners" (3).

Eligibility for parole was greatly subjective. A good record was required to even receive consideration of parole. A "bad" record was easy to acquire. At the discretion of the prison guards an inmate could be cited for "such offenses as 'magnifying grievances,' 'disrespect,' or 'agitation'" (3). Any of these infractions were cause for a denial of parole for a year. If prisoners were charged with a serious offense such as possession of a weapon or assault, the Adult Authority likely would not grant them a parole date for many years. Punishment in the prisons consisted formally of taking away "freedoms" such as "visits, the right to buy items from the prison store, exercise, yard privileges, television, and desserts" (4). More severe punishment came in the form of sequestering prisoners to a special punishment cell. Some of the prisoners spent time in a strip cell which consisted of a four-foot by eight-foot concrete room described here by Stender:

> The strip cell may be kept dark all day or have the light on day and night. This cell may contain only a hole in the floor for plumbing and a slot in the solid steel door through which a special 'restricted diet' is pushed twice a day: a ball of leftovers pressed together and baked, served with a slice of bread and a limited amount of water. Sometimes the prisoner is kept naked, with only a blanket for bedding on the concrete floor. The prisoner is isolated for days or weeks at a time from other human beings. This extreme punishment is applied to men, who in one form or another, do not conform to prison standards. (4)

The description Stender provides helps to explain the type of treatment that was commonly experienced by the prisoners who are mentioned in this paper. This gives a background to their existence in prison and the logistical backdrop of what was shaping their emotions and attitudes. Stender concludes her introduction with the following, "all the men who wrote risked severe reprisals for telling the world outside what is happening to them day after day, year after year, in California prisons" (5). This is the motivation of the paper, to offer connections between the "outside" and the "inside." This is the setting of the writings that will be examined in this paper. The next section will provide the setting of theories surrounding freedom.

Introduction Part II: Freedom

Freedom is a complicated concept. For the purposes of this paper, it will be helpful to explain the approach being taken to address issues of freedom. The first way of looking at freedom is Robin Kelley's Freedom Dreams in which he explores how freedom is something intangible, the distinct relationship it has to knowledge, the role of reliving horrors and the importance of imagination. Kelley proposes a compelling thesis that is pertinent to this paper. In his book he argues that social movements, and particularly radical movements, should not be assessed by conventional, institutional demarcations of change. He claims that social movements are generally framed by "success" (x). This barometer of success generally proves that every radical movement has failed because the basic power structures in America have remained consistent despite revolutionary efforts. Kelley then introduces the idea that perhaps these movements have been successful in other ways.

He describes the ways in which these movements have impacted emotions, world outlooks and the imagination. He then describes the importance of impacting these elements. Kelley argues that ideals and visions come first, and then things like the erasure of materialism come second. He writes, "the map to a new world is in the imagination" (2). The creation of this imagination is closely linked and spurred by social movements. Kelley states, "revolutionary dreams erupt out of political engagement; collective social movements are incubators of new knowledge" (8). In the climate of social movements new knowledge gets generated, theories are presented and questions are asked (9). Kelley argues,

> Progressive social movements do not simply produce statistics and narratives of oppression; rather, the best ones do what great poetry always does: transport us to another place, compel us to relive horrors and, more importantly, enable us to imagine a new society. (9)

The norm of historical accounts of social movements tends to place a great deal of emphasis on the "statistics" side of the story. As Kelley introduces, this is negatively biased to movements that are largely ineffective at impacting the institutions of the United States. It also ignores what he argues is perhaps the more important factor of progressive movements: the intangible. Kelley cites poet Askia Muhammad Toure who believed, "the 'movement' was more than sit-ins at lunch counters, voter registration campaigns, and freedom rides; it was about self-transformation, changing the way we think, live, love and handle pain" (11).

This way of looking at freedom and social movements is very fitting in the prisoner environment. To a large degree this paper will explore Kelley's theories in relation to prisoner writings. The tension that Kelley proposes between the tangible and intangible in social movements is well played out in prisons. In the scenario of incarceration, it will be of interest to observe the ways in which the imagination and mind contribute to and reflect feelings of freedom. In prison, the writer is physically captivated. However, examining his thoughts may provide insight to the idea that degrees of mental freedom may exist despite physical restrictions.

Another way to address freedom is to examine how it functions as a verb. Michael Hames-Garcia argues that in the context of black radicalism freedom is most generally viewed as a verb, an act, a wish, a militant demand (Hames-Garcia 14).

Related to this theory Assata Shakur's work explored how freedom is necessarily something shared. Along with this relational view of freedom are the ideas that freedom is subjective and that there is a symbiotic relationship between freedom and oppression.

Former Black Panther Assata Shakur's theory of freedom is that it is "an interdependence of connected individuals" and that it is therefore "ultimately a practice, rather than a possession or state of being" (Hames- Garcia 96). This theory of freedom will be relevant and useful in examining the prisoner writings. Shakur's theory of freedom is exemplary of a fairly universal ideal of black radicalism.

In Angela Davis' autobiography she concludes with her acquittal. She describes leaving the courthouse and speaking before a crowd of supporters. She writes, "I thanked them for coming, for all their support, and said that it was time to deploy our forces for the freedom of Ruchell, the San Quentin 6 and all political prisoners" (395). In her epilogue she follows this up with the statement, "If we saw this moment of triumph as a conclusion and not a point of departure, we would be ignoring all the others who remained draped in chains. We knew that to save their lives, we had to preserve and build upon the movement" (397). For Davis freedom is not an endpoint until all un-freedom is eradicated.

Thus, it will be this theory of freedom that will be examined in the prisoner writings. Obviously, as prisoners, the writers are not "free" individuals, therefore, it will be interesting to examine the ways in which they are engaging in this action of freedom and then observe the ways in which the act of freedom lends them a unique sense of freedom.

Hanes Walton and Robert Smith give a detailed break down of the concept of freedom in American Politics and the African American Quest for Universal Freedom. They, like Shakur, acknowledge the active nature of freedom. The authors cite Orlando Patterson who wrote in Freedom in the Making of Western Culture: "freedom, like love and beauty, is one of those values better experienced than defined" (3). This abstract view of freedom is important in this particular paper. The examination of prisoner writings will be a way of exploring the activity and experience of freedom.

Walton and Smith describe a unique relationship between African Americans and the conception of freedom. They state that there is a certain kind of freedom, which is the freedom to exploit and destroy freedom for others. It is described as "the freedom of might makes right, of the strong to oppress the weak, of the powerful to dominate the powerless, the freedom of the slave master to enslave" (5). This leads to their posit that slavery and freedom are inextricably bound (4).

Emerging from these reactionary principles of freedom is their thesis that African Americans have a unique concept of universal freedom. They write,

> from its beginning, African American political thought and behavior has been centrally concerned with the abolition of this type of freedom and in doing so African Americans developed the idea of universal freedom, a freedom that encompasses natural rights, civil rights, and social rights. (5)

Examining freedom as something universal and not necessarily dependent on specific national experiences is an important focus for black radicalism and the prison setting.

These various forms and interpretations of freedom will be observed in the analysis of the black radical movement and these particular writings from prisons. Each

interpretation of freedom will better help show the themes and purposes of the black radical movement as well as study how the notion of freedom functions in an arena of "non-freedom"—the prison. As evidenced by just a few theorists, the notion of freedom is packed with meaning. Prisoners have something to contribute to this dialogue. The following chapters will engage their thoughts and words in the discussion of what freedom means.

Chapter I: Gender

This section will explore the ways in which freedom is connected to gender. Several prisoners' letters will be examined in order to look at how issues of gender impact the concept of freedom. After closely analyzing the prisoner writings, historical connections will be made to reflect on this key arena of the prisoners' rhetoric and conception of freedom. Some questions that should be considered in the context of this discussion are: Is the achievement of masculinity necessary for the achievement of freedom? How is masculinity achieved in the prison setting? Is masculinity based on relationships with women? If so, what is to be done in a setting where there are no women? Who is responsible for the emasculation of a man? Is it plausible to have self created emasculation?

The first piece of work to be examined was written by Alfred Hassan and is titled "The Pit." The piece begins with Hassan's description of arriving at Folsom Prison. He writes about sitting on the bus and looking up at the big ominous building and feeling "small and very insignificant" (Pell 13). The piece follows his description of "The Pit" which is both a literal name given to his location in the prison and also a trope of his writing and feelings about the prison. He writes, "it is no wonder that we behave like snakes crawling around at the bottom of a deep, dark pit. When you cage a man up like an animal, how else do you expect for him to behave?" (14). Hassan comments on observing the older prisoners and the complete destruction that has come from their many years of imprisonment. He believes that long periods of incarceration are unnatural and harmful to a man's soul. He then launches into a description of the

dynamics of prison life and relationships between prisoners and prison guards. The following excerpt describes the perverse parent-child relationships that emerge in the prison setting. The parent-child dynamic introduces the connection between gender and freedom. Hassan writes,

> the ideal prisoner is one who feels that he is absolutely dependent, one who senses (or thinks) he is inferior. His blue jean uniform gives testimony to his lowly status of degradation and inferiority. He lives in a cruel world of powerlessness. Someone else is making all the major decisions in his life. He becomes, perhaps, his own worst enemy. I imagine that it is very unkind to the soul to think yourself inferior, totally dependent on someone whose integrity you doubt. But this is the world of the prison inmate who has allowed himself to fall into the weird bag of looking at the prison officials in the same light that he viewed his parents when he was a small child. He, like the dependent child, becomes an excellent imitator. The 'parent-child relation,' however, becomes a two-headed monster. On the one head, the monster serves as a good little, tattle-telling child who reports all the wrongdoings of its naughty sisters and brothers to its parents. On the other head, the monster becomes an evil to the general population of the prison, for it pits prisoner against prisoner, often causing bloodshed. The informer is the most despised and hated 'thing' in any prison. But the 'child-inmate' can't help himself. He's not just an ordinary child. No, no. He is the much talked about retarded child. His retardation came about as fatal consequence of his total dependency and his self-imposed feelings of inferiority, which are a result of the 'dependency thing.' To him, the prison guard is Big Daddy. And one must be obedient to Daddy, or one will be severely punished. It's weird. (16-17)

This passage introduces the idea of emasculation. Hassan reflects on the perversity of the child-parent dynamic and the destruction it has on a prisoner. He equates the behavior of a snitch to that of a small child and also a retarded child. These two comparisons describe emasculation because they are antitheses of manhood. The prisoner is under the thumb of "Big Daddy." Hassan suggests that a lack of freedom comes from accepting or adopting this emasculation. He continually describes the

"inferiority," "absolute dependence" and "powerlessness" that come from this power dynamic.

Interestingly, Hassan complicates his ideas about emasculation when he infers that the prisoner is to blame for acquiescing and accepting this role. He writes, "His retardation came about as fatal consequence of his total dependency and his self-imposed feelings of inferiority, which are a result of the 'dependency thing'" (17). In this sentence he upturns the thesis of the passage which is that it is problematic for the prisoner to be dependent and out of control of his behavior. Yet, at the same time, he suggests that it is the prisoner who controls and "self-imposes" his feelings of inferiority. Therefore the source of emasculation is lost. The confusion of who the author of emasculation is brings up an interesting point in the discussion of gender. For Hassan, is manhood dictated by state controlled power relationships? Or, is it self-created? Are these two mutually exclusive? Does the prisoner have a choice in his emasculation? He follows his sentence about "self-imposed inferiority" with the comment "one must be obedient to Daddy, or one will be severely punished" (17). This suggests that emasculation is coerced.

The ambiguity of who authors emasculation is echoed earlier in the piece. Hassan writes that the prisoner "lives in a cruel world of powerlessness. Someone else is making all the major decisions of his life" (16). These sentences illustrate the prisoner as entirely controlled. In the very next sentence this is complicated when he writes that the prisoner "becomes, perhaps, his own worst enemy" (16). The follow up sentence indicates that it is not so simple to relieve the prisoner of any authorship in his

oppression and in this instance his emasculation. These two sets of contradicting comments on self blame introduce the many complications surrounding gender and freedom.

Gender and the fulfillment of masculinity are central to a conception of freedom. Hassan repeats the word "weird" in this passage to indicate that emasculation is not normal or desired. Being childlike and thus unmanly is equivalent to being oppressed and trapped in a destructive pattern where one is "despised and hated" and yet "can't help himself" (17). Hassan continues on the topic of child-parent dynamics between inmates and guards by contemplating, "I imagine that it is very unkind to the soul to think yourself inferior, totally" (16). Hassan's word choice in this sentence is very interesting. He uses the adjective "unkind" almost ironically. He is talking about the torturous existence of complete powerlessness and he likens it to being "very unkind." His use of a pleasant, non-threatening, positive word like "kind" and simply negating it with the preface "un" shows his bitterness. It also reflects the absurdity of this normalization of subversive inequalities and oppressions faced by prisoners. Hassan talks about how prisoners, like children, become "excellent imitators" (17). His use of a word such as "excellent" shows his bitterness and his criticism of the naturalization of these very unnatural behaviors that are exhibited in prison. The word "excellent" connotes the behavior to be proper and "right." He is juxtaposing this idea of correctness with the illustration of how perverse and detrimental the system of informing is in prison. By emphasizing the naturalization of oppressive behavior he acknowledges the unbridled freedom that the authorities have to construct such a

perverse place. Hassan's choice to begin with "I imagine" shows his outsider existence. He, unlike the authorities, does not have freedom to construct the power relations they are playing out. Rather than say I *know* he says I *imagine*. Again he is utilizing a passive and ironic voice to create a cutting contradiction of passivity and complete disgust and anger. This contradiction echoes the dilemma of authorship concerning manhood and oppression. Hassan sets masculinity up as having control. Yet, he does not seem to be able to reconcile his emasculation with his self-blame.

In the following letters by George Jackson, a further complication to the relationship between gender and freedom is the idea of action. The following letters introduce how action is gendered. The excerpts illuminate the common connection between masculinity and action. When this idea is addressed in relation to Hassan's passage it shows how oppression and a lack of freedom are not necessarily developed out of a lack of manliness. The idea that the prisoner perhaps is responsible for his emasculation oddly maintains a characteristic of masculinity within this role of child and anti-manhood.

The following passages come from George Jackson's Soledad Brother. The book is a collection of Jackson's prison letters. The collection of letters is written to Jackson's parents Georgia and Robert Lester, his younger brother Jon, and Fay Stender, his lawyer. Jackson's treatment of gender is erratic in the various letters. He completely contradicts himself on several occasions. He makes many chauvinistic remarks but also praises women. For example, he writes to his mother, "the black woman has in the past few hundred years been the only force holding us together and holding us up. She has

absorbed the biggest part of the many shocks and strains of existence under a slave order" (85-6). While he is praising women for the most part he asserts that women should engage in a passive role and men should adopt an active role. In one letter to his father Robert, Jackson writes,

> women like to be dominated, love being strong-armed, need an overseer to supplement their weakness. So how could she really understand my feelings on self-determination. For this reason we should never allow women to express any opinions on the subject, but just to sit, listen to us, and attempt to understand. It is for them to obey and aid us, not to attempt to think. (125)

In the passage Jackson positions self-determination as something masculine and sequesters women and femaleness to a role of passivity. In another letter to his father he repeats the same idea when he instructs his father on how he should deal with his sister Penny. Jackson writes, "women and children enjoy and need a strong hand poised above them. They need direction and someone to show concern for them and you may have to make your presence felt there" (134). One more example that sets up the gendered nature of activity and passivity comes from another letter to Jackson's father and addresses the role he believes his sister should fulfill. He writes about how his sister Frances is angry with him and has stopped writing. He states, "when I explained to her that she was not supposed to hold any opinions other than those of her menfolk, she stopped writing. Tell her that I feel no ill will toward her, but when she hears us debating method and policy, she is supposed to be silent, listen, and try to learn something" (150). The purpose of repeating these excerpts from Jackson's letters is to illuminate an important dynamic of freedom and gender. In Jackson's experience of

captivity he is asserting that inaction is contrary to masculinity. He repeatedly asserts that passivity is a female role.

This is pertinent to his conception of freedom. He believes that male freedom is found in activity. A main focus of Jackson's letters is his brother Jon. He explicitly outlines how he wants his brother to be raised in order to be a man. He is adamant that his brother escape the behaviors that will result in his imprisonment (both literally and figuratively). In his commands for Jon, action is central. Jackson repeatedly writes about how Jon must be a man. This excerpt comes from a letter written to his mother, Georgia, in June of 1968:

> And again with blacks this whole thing goes even deeper. No man or group of men have been more denuded of their self-respect, none in history have been more terrorized, suppressed, repressed, and denied male expression than the U.S. black. This is what you are up against in relating to Robert. As I said before, he is going through a breakout. He is trying to get back. He wants to express himself after years of being a vegetable. As with most of the men in our community, he is just starting to feel his strength now. But soon this will build into a rage, 'and when I rage I rage abounding.' Don't interfere with that thing. You should have never objected to the social club! You caused him to transfer just a bit more of the subconscious disregard he has for our enemies onto you.
>
> Jon's *real* problems can be solved only through community action: a massive, total, mutual effort. (181)

The most significant thing that arises in this passage is that Jackson equates masculinity to rage and action. He believes that his father has been denied "male-expression" through isolation and passivity. He writes that his father was a "vegetable," a noun that functions as something completely inactive in this passage. Jackson's solution to male-expression is solved through "community action." These sentiments are very important to the dialogue about gender and freedom. Jackson is not alone in this belief. The most

common theme found in the anthology of prisoner writings is that the men find strength in brotherhood. Acting on behalf of one another is central to their identity. Their brotherhood is distinctly gendered. The following will illuminate how important brotherhood is to the men and their notion of freedom.

Brotherhood for the prisoners lends a great sense of freedom and support. It also is met by punishment and disapproval from prison authorities because it translates to power. David E. Russell, a prisoner in Chino in 1970, wrote a letter on behalf of his friend Garry who had been denied the opportunity to write a notarized writ on civil rights. His counselor would not file the writ or help him get it notarized. In response to Garry's efforts to get the writ notarized and filed he lost his job in the prison and his cell was put on dead lock. Russell writes, "me and Garry just like brothers to each other and these cops don't like that too much" (Pell 57). Russell is taking a huge risk to write a letter and get involved in his friend's case. He describes in the letter that he has already been threatened by the authorities to find new friends "or else" (57). Despite these intimidations he is going out of his way to advocate for his friend. He signs the letter, "Garry's Friend/ David E. Russell" (57). Though a simple closing, it illustrates how much his friendship and camaraderie is a part of his identity. At the conclusion of the letter he is identifying himself relationally to his friend Garry.

Another prisoner's writing reveals the weight of brotherhood in prison. Harold William Olson, imprisoned in Folsom in 1971, writes a letter in the collection about a series of beatings that took place in the Adjustment Center at Folsom. His reports were

confirmed by attorneys' interviews and many other letters (59). Olson writes about the brutality of the beating and states,

> I heard the Prisoner's first cry of pain, followed by his pleading for the officers to stop their attack, as blow after blow was struck, the sound of the club echoing down the tier. 'Thud, Thud, Thud.' Then I became aware of the officers joining in on the attack as I heard the prisoner strangling, knowing that someone had him by the neck. The blows continued to be belted out, and above the cries of human suffering I could hear other inmates helplessly crying out of their cells to 'Leave the man alone.' Over this I could hear also the jeering voice of one officer hissing:
>
> 'Had enough, Nigger? Had enough?'
>
> The struggle didn't stop as I knew they had their victim on the floor and were probably kicking his ribs as I have seen them do on many occasions.
>
> I heard more clubbing as the sound of the handcuffs were again clicking and I knew they were being tightened tighter on his wrists, and must be now cutting into the flesh. I heard the prisoner's last cry of pain which died out in one last gag and all was quiet. (61)

The account of this response illustrates the existence of relationships and camaraderie between the prisoners. The way that Olson describes the event suggests that the other prisoners felt and sympathized with the pain of their fellow prisoner. He writes that the man being beaten, Rud, "cries" and this word is paralleled with the "helpless crying" of the other prisoners. The repetition and parallel use of the word connects the suffering of the man being beaten with his fellow prisoners.

Olson further emphasizes this idea when later in the letter he writes, "Everyone of the tier felt every blow…the more sane blacks become more angry, because they can see themselves in Rud" (62). The simple act of Olson accounting for the beating shows his commitment and solidarity to a fellow prisoner. This repetition of shared pain and suffering in the letter demonstrates that brotherhood is powerful and also very human. Olson describes the shared suffering of the men as something almost unavoidable or

involuntary when he writes that the men are crying "helplessly." The attempts of prison authorities to destroy feelings of brotherhood resulted in dehumanizing the prisoners and depleting their power. Shared political activism was a way in which the prisoners could connect with one another and also the outside world to gain more power and feelings of being human. Brotherhood is the "action" George Jackson says is needed to be a man, the action to maintain the brotherhood relationship.

In another letter written by Harold W. Olson, writing after he recently moved to San Quentin, he describes the feeling of isolation from both people and the world. He writes that in his new setting at San Quentin, "I have no news sources, and don't know a soul" (102). He has been placed in solitary confinement and does not know why, so each day he continues to ask why he is in isolation (103). At the conclusion of the letter he writes, "today I stepped out side and smelled the salt air blowing over the bay, I suddenly felt better, knowing a world still existed outside" (103). This quote shows the severe isolation and introspection he is experiencing where he has lost sight of "a world" that exists outside of the prison. Most notably he then writes, "if any of you would like to come over and rap, I'd be most grateful, as I have no visitors, and until I get released from 'B' Section it will get lonely. I'm 43 years old, young in spirit and dedicated to the revolution" (103). The conclusion of his letter shows the ways in which his connection and involvement in revolutionary activism gives him a sense of belonging and connection. Though he describes the sea breeze as an environmental connection to the outside, his plea for guests and confidants of the revolution shows that the connection he desires is also intellectual.

The preceding excerpts provide many examples of the positive nature of brotherhood for the prisoners. At the same time they put into question the complicated developing definition of masculinity the prisoners are tending to assert. According to Jackson and Hassan, masculinity is found in action and control. Both men assert masculinity as helping and providing for women. The following will exemplify this belief that they hold. Following these examples will be a discussion of how this complicates the emerging definition of masculinity in relation to brotherhood.

Prisoner Alfred Hassan's piece "The Pit" concludes with a description of the way the prison system creates powerlessness by denying information. He writes, "under the California Penal System, a prisoner has no idea at all as to when he will be released to parole supervision" (17). He then describes the torturous games that are played within this model of secrecy. Hassan was told and promised release dates that were then revoked and changed. He writes about the destruction this had on waiting family members. He states, "each time I told my wife that I had been denied parole she suffered tremendous pain. Had she known when I was coming home, I would not have had to write her all those disappointing letters" (18). In this particular instance the powerlessness experienced by Hassan is manifested in his inability to control the emotions of his family members. The act of withholding and distorting information keeps prisoners from being able to control their situation and help their family members cope with the situation of their imprisonment.

Hassan describes having to tell his wife he was denied parole and the

helplessness of the situation is clearly illustrated in his words. He writes,

> My wife wrote me a letter telling me that she sensed (woman's tuition) that I was going to get a parole date. This made me feel very good and warm inside. But the roof, the world, fell in. I was denied parole! I didn't have the heart to write my wife and tell her the sad news. I just couldn't. But the following week she came up to visit me. When I walked out on the visiting yard, she was already sitting down at the table. I knew from the way she was looking that she expected me to run up to her and hug her and tell her that I would be home in a few weeks or a few months. When I sat down at the table the first thing she asked me was when I was coming home. I swallowed hard and broke the sad news. At first she didn't believe me. She thought I was putting her on. After telling her about five or six times, I finally convinced her that I had been denied parole. When she finally accepted the truth, it seemed like all the life was draining out of her plump face. Tears came to her eyes. I had never seen her look so sad. I felt like crying myself. I knew the pain and suffering she was going through. I was hard and calloused. But my sweet Mary was so tender and soft—she couldn't understand why I had been denied parole. From that point on, my wife was a different person. I think she lost all of her soul right there on the visiting yard. A year later she got sick and died of double pneumonia. Had I been given a parole date, I truly believe that my wife would still be living today. (18-9)

This passage clearly illustrates the powerlessness that is created through information denial. Hassan believed his wife's death was caused because he could not give her the information she needed to handle the situation of her husband's imprisonment. Hassan declares that this was the uttermost agony he experienced in prison. He claims that this is what destroyed him. He was unable to control the situation and this manifested in him losing control of his wife's life. In this case the state's withholding of information perhaps created his emasculation. His emasculation could be seen in different ways. The first way is his inability to care for his female partner. The other way is that he compares himself and his pain to that of a woman. He states, "I felt like crying myself. I knew the pain and suffering she was going through" (18). In an ironic way Hassan is asserting a sense of feminization because his treatment in prison is similar to the

treatment his wife is experiencing. He understands her desperation of being disappointed and lied to and controlled. At the same time he is the one disappointing his wife.

Jackson too asserts the masculine desire and purpose to care for another person. He writes to his father about the role Jon should play in the family. He states, "Tell him [Jon] I said he is charged to take good care of his mother and sisters, that since he has grown so big and strong so soon, he should brace himself to his duties early" (Jackson 131). This passage provides fairly straightforward rhetoric of masculine protection of female family members. Like Hassan, Jackson communicates the importance of caring for women and the "duty" that is held by a man to ensure female protection.

However, returning to brotherhood and the prison experience, it is unclear how this form of masculinity is realized by the prisoners. They all seem to achieve a degree of affirmation of masculinity by helping one another and engaging in brotherhood. As evidenced in Russell's letter, advocating for his friend David is not only embedded in his identity, it is worthwhile enough to risk his own security. What seems to be missing from the descriptions of brotherhood is how the men deal with being cared for by another man. This is void in the letters which only focus on the action of helping their fellow man. They do not mention their reactions to being helped. Is brotherhood, then, a substitute for the role of female protector? Does brotherhood contribute to emasculation because it requires a party to be cared for? Does being cared for by another man emasculate? How does the achievement of masculinity reconcile being both caretaker and cared for? The prisoners seem to struggle immensely with their definitions and

realizations of masculinity. This struggle is tied closely to their realization of freedom. The two seem to be importantly tied together. The difficulties surrounding masculinity are central to the difficulties of finding freedom.

Such a close tie between gender and freedom is not altogether surprising. The fact that gender is a key arena in which freedom is explored makes sense given the history surrounding black radicalism and gender. Gender played a key contentious role in the black radical movement.

It is not surprising that there would be so much confusion and complication in the different prisoners' ideas surrounding freedom and gender, given the history of black oppression. Three distinct ideologies of gender that were most prominent at the time of the prisoner writings provide insight to the complicated relationship between gender and freedom. These ideologies are cultural nationalism, feminism and black matriarchy.

The first ideology is that of cultural nationalism. The rival organization to the Black Panther Party, Us, led by Ron Karenga in Los Angeles believed in black cultural nationalism. Us purported the submission of women to "traditional" male authority (271). Karenga included the following statement in his teachings,

> what makes woman appealing is femininity and she can't be feminine without being submissive. A man has to be a leader and he has to be a man who bases his leadership on knowledge, wisdom and understanding. There is no virtue in independence. The only virtue is in interdependence…The role of the woman is to inspire her man, educate their children and participate in social development…We say male supremacy is based on three things: tradition, acceptance, and reason. Equality is false; it's the devil's concept. Our concept is complimentary. Complimentary means you complete or make perfect that which is imperfect. (272)

While the Black Panther Party attempted to distance itself from the ideals that Karenga expressed in this quote, they were not entirely successful. Bobby Seale called Us chauvinistic and criticized their treatment of female leaders (273). However, according to female Black Panther Party members, the Panthers exhibited similar chauvinistic behavior, even if it was not a main part of the party's ideology. Shakur wrote that it was a constant day to day battle for respect in the party (290). She related that women had to adopt a macho style to be heard (290). Brown also describes a similar experience in her autobiography. Despite these struggles, many women of the movement accepted the back burner status of women's rights. This was largely framed by the relationship that black women had to the feminist movement.

The second ideology to examine is feminism. The Women's Liberation Movement and feminism were very influential to ideologies of the 1960's and 70's (273). The important dynamic of this ideology for the topic of race, freedom and gender is that the movement was mostly white dominated. This led to a complicated relationship with black radicals and the movement. The black radical males were excluded from the WLM because of their gender and in many ways the black women were excluded because of their race. For the most part, black radical women chose to curtail the direct feminist demands and prioritized racial and economic equality over gender equality. Panther women stated that class struggle and national liberation had to be the focus to further the Women's Liberation Movement. They believed that for women to be emancipated there had to be a socialist revolution (243). In a piece titled

"'No One Ever Asks, What a Man's Place in the Revolution Is': Gender and the Politics of The Black Panther Party 1966-1971" by Tracye Matthews, she writes,

> Panther sisters stated in a 1969 interview that to the extent that women's organizations don't address themselves to the class struggle or to the national liberation struggles they are not really furthering the women's liberation movement, because in order for women to be truly emancipated in this country there's going to have to be a socialist revolution. (274)

Matthews' record of the sentiments of some Panther women shows that black women were adverse to some of the WLM ideology because they had unified their freedom with class struggle. However, in reality there was not such a clear delineation of the source for freedom. Kathleen Cleaver, wife of Eldridge Cleaver, spoke about how black women had different relationships with black men than white women had with white men (275). There was more to the hesitation of Panther women to join the WLM than class struggle, race certainly played a part. This particular ideology is interesting to consider in light of the prisoner writings examined in this chapter. The WLM pointed out the racial aspects of the fight for freedom from oppression and it also challenged sexism in the party. Newton eventually came out in support of the WLM in 1970 (273). Arguably the movement influenced the introspection into gender for black radicals. But, it also highlighted the tension between male and female conceptions of freedom. The debates surrounding the WLM illustrate the animosity and disconnect between male and female notions of freedom. The issue of brotherhood perhaps echoes the exclusion of female inclusion in the fight for freedom. In many instances of the black radical movement and the prisoner writings male freedom is predicated on the exclusion of females. The devotion black women gave to the black radical movement over the WLM

demonstrated perhaps a gender neutral fight for freedom. But, arguably the women sacrificed their freedom to a fight that was more strongly aimed at freeing black men.

The third ideology is the idea of black matriarchy. Emerging at this same time were ideas about the declared deficiencies of the black family. An important piece of work concerning this ideology was Daniel Patrick Moynihan's The Negro Family: A Case for National Action. His work was published in 1965 through the U.S. Department of Labor and was the source of great debate and discussion surrounding gender and race. Moynihan's work theorized that "black families were matriarchal, that Black men were unable to fulfill the roles required of men in patriarchal society, and that the resulting pattern of female-headed households was largely responsible for the 'tangle of pathology' in which Black people found themselves" (275). His report was greatly contested but many of his ideas in various forms already existed and continued to be a part of the discussion surrounding gender and race. There was serious consideration given to the idea that black women were responsible for black male castration and imposed serious burdens on men fulfilling their manhood (276). In 1967 Huey P. Newton wrote in an essay titled "Fear and Doubt,"

> He [the Black man] feels that he is something less than a man....Often his wife (who is able to secure a job as a maid, cleaning for White people) is the breadwinner. He is, therefore, viewed as quite worthless by his wife and children. He is ineffectual both in and out of the home. He cannot provide for, or protect his family...Society will not acknowledge him as a man. (276)

This sentiment is found in Jackson's writing where on a few occasions he explicitly blames his mother for blocking his ability to be a man and for emasculating himself and his brother Jon. If it is believed that black women emasculate black men, it is no

surprise that black men would oppress black women in order to regain their masculinity. In the other prisoner writings such explicit blame is not placed on women. However, the men seem to be in a way dominated by women. In the setting of the prison and because of arguably the emasculation of the prisoners, many of them are incredibly dependent on women. The men repeatedly plead to their female lawyers and desire very much their affection and attention. What arises in the passage from Newton is the idea that freedom is related to gender relations. He writes about the role of "breadwinner" and the ideas of worthlessness and ineffectuality which are all realized in the relationship that a man has to his wife and children.

A step further into the many contradictions surrounding gender is the idea that the female body was a key commodity in the history of black enslavement. Newton and Cleaver both at times expressed a belief in this idea. The theory was that during black enslavement black men were stripped of their manhood by their masters. The white slaveholders used their power and oppression to separate a black man's body from his mind. The theory proposes that this created a sense of black male castration. In Cleaver's book Soul On Ice he then hypothesizes that black women hold black men in contempt because of their inability to be "real men" (Jones 279). Therefore Cleaver and Newton believed that Black men needed to regain their manhood and unite their body and mind. Newton wrote that black men needed to unite their body with their mind in order to,

> gain respect from his woman. Because women want one who can control…If he [the slave] can only recapture his mind, recapture his balls, then he will lose all fear and will be free to determine his destiny…The Black Panther Party along

> with all revolutionary Black groups have regained our mind and our manhood. (280)

In this quote Newton connects brotherhood in the form of revolutionary groups to freedom and empowerment and also makes these something distinct and separate from the female sphere.

The Black Panther Party continually struggled with the issue of gender. The party was filled with gross contradictions concerning the treatment of women from member to member and even within one member. For example, Eldridge Cleaver, who was convicted of rape, had a perplexing record of his treatment of women. First, he was a rapist. He was responsible for developing and promoting the notion of "pussy power" (Jones 33). This was an idea that female party members would withhold sex from their male counterparts in an effort to motivate them to be "men" and work towards the revolutionary goals. In 1968, Huey Newton banned "pussy power" because of its sexist implications (33). This is a clear example of party divisions and disagreements. Ironically, it was Cleaver who wrote an eloquent statement promoting gender equality during Erika Huggins' trial. Erika Huggins was a member of the party whose husband, John Huggins was killed in the shootout at UCLA (Brown 138). Cleaver's writing advocated the eradication of sexism (Jones 33). In just one man, Eldridge Cleaver, there is a great deal of contradiction or perhaps evolution in ideology surrounding gender.

Elaine Brown's autobiography attests to the complicated treatment of gender in the Black Panther Party. She describes the machismo of the party. Towards the end of her involvement with the organization the issue of machismo was a breaking point for

her participation. The men intimidated her out of the organization. She parallels this increase in sexism and intimidation towards her with the rise of drug use and other forms of corruption. While Brown was in power, she was, along with other women, largely responsible for the day to day operations of the party. She infers in her autobiography that her departure from the party and the expulsion of other key female leaders was a major cause of the party's breakup. When Newton returned from exile in Cuba he demoted female leaders and completely relied on and confided in "the Squad," an entourage entirely comprised of men (Brown 323). This was starkly contrasted to his behavior before his exile when he gave Brown leadership of the party. This connects to the issue of brotherhood which has an even further complicated dimension concerning gender. A key problem was that asserting brotherhood masculinity tended to involve the disassociation of females. Brotherhood was achieved through the exclusion and sometimes even oppression of women. Thus, how is this reconciled with the portion of masculinity that calls for female protection?

This section shows the many complexities of gender and how its manifestations play an intricate role in the achievement of freedom. Gender is a key part of identity, power and activism. These elements are then a key part of freedom. Relationships between the two genders and within one gender are essential to feelings of empowerment and importance. The prisoner writings thus far have introduced and helped construct the impact an individual's experience, largely influenced by gender, contributes to their conception of freedom.

Chapter II: State Oppression

This section will explore the relationship between state oppression and freedom. For the prisoners there is at times a symbiotic relationship between their conception of freedom and the state oppression that they experience. A close look at several prisoners' writings will introduce the connection between these two concepts. Following the prisoners' writings will be a discussion of historical examples of why this was an important aspect of the notion of freedom for the men. Looking at state oppression and freedom will evoke many questions. Is the notion of freedom reactionary to oppression? Is freedom realized in opposition to the state? Are freedom and the state exclusive and contradictory for a prisoner? Is the state specifically contrary to a Black man's freedom? Is the state's existence predicated on the anti-freedom of some of its citizens?

The first prisoner writing is a letter written by prisoner Louie E. Hall to Patti Roberts. In his letter he begins with the following paragraph about how the negligence of a southern judge and the inadequacies of the system landed him in prison:

> I know that you didn't take my case, but just in case you think about me one of these days when you're talking to some old run-down attorney who doesn't have but thirty or forty cases going at one time, you may think to mention me, and tell him I have in only ten years now, and that when I go back to Mississippi, I will have only another four and a half years until I will be eligible for parole, and then I can spend the rest of my life on parole, and all because a nice Southern Judge refused to let me call witnesses in my behalf, and refused to let my lawyer withdraw from my case because he said he couldn't handle it…
>
> Ah, but Patti, Patti, Patti, it sounds as if I am getting smart there, and I don't mean to be; but really, I don't understand?…I thought you people there were to help us who were having or have had our Civil Rights Violated…Christ girl! The only ones around who have had their rights more violated any more than I have had mine violated…are dead! (Pell 22)

The paragraph shows the complex relationship he has to the state. He is pleading with Patti at the same time that he is blaming her and the system that he is a victim of. He asks her to put him in touch with a "run-down attorney" who might have the time to take his case. At the same time, he sarcastically talks about how his life has been ruined by an attorney who "couldn't handle it." There is a peculiar parallel between the attorney he is pleading for to act as his savior and the attorney who he feels is responsible for his wrongful imprisonment. He knows that Patti has decided not to take his case and so his bitterness is oddly expressed in the letter. He politely and intimately addresses her when he writes "Ah, but Patti, Patti, Patti" as though he believes her to be a confidant. Then he emits the frustrated exclamation "Christ girl!" because he does not understand why she would not support his case if what she is concerned with is civil rights.

These various tensions in his treatment of Patti and attorneys suggest a tense relationship with the state. He feels both angry with the state but also victimized by the state. The two relationships are difficult to reconcile because of their opposing degrees of power. At one time he is pleading and subservient and also angry and domineering.

The letter continues with a description of his childhood. He was raised in poverty and as a "half-breed" which always gave him a sense of isolation. He never felt he belonged and he characterizes himself, "I am a why?" because his whole life he has tried to find out why things are the way they are. He states no one has ever been able to give him any answers. He then launches into a description of being a part of the white world which for him is being a part of the prison. He describes the way that prison

authorities use knowledge and mental power plays to oppress the prisoners. Hall compares prison to a cattle ranch in which the prisoners are cattle and the prison authorities are cattle herders. He writes,

> And this man-crushing, money making machine is slowly eating into the life and soul and being of me. Did you know that the men and women in prisons are nothing but cattle…? You didn't? Well, let me tell you…These prisons are big ranches with cattle in them, and the herders are running prisons as a business. They get so much money to keep us herded together and dumb, why if we really learned something in here, we wouldn't be back, and what of all the money? (23)

This correlates very similarly to the point made by Hassan that lacking knowledge grants their captors power over them. In Hall's case he is proposing that the usurpation of knowledge is the way in which the "system" ensures that prisoners will continue to exhibit criminal behavior. He writes that if the prisoners learned something they would not be repeat offenders. Their lack of knowledge ensures their pathway to imprisonment. If they were to gain knowledge and not be "dumb" he infers that they would not inevitably find themselves back in prison. With knowledge, the prisoner would be able to escape the cycle and "machine" of the prison system. However, the prisoner is denied knowledge and therefore, Hall seems to suggest, is powerless to change his behavior or avoid the pitfall of imprisonment.

Hall infers that knowledge is the key to empowerment and freedom which creates an interesting dynamic between the state and freedom. Hall also asserts that the state, the "they" keep the prisoners dumb. All of this sets the state up as the bearer of knowledge. Thus, to earn freedom might indicate a need to be incorporated and included in what the state has to offer. This does not seem to be Hall's point since he is

horrified by the system and does not express a desire to be a part of the machine in any capacity. Yet, he does not assert a path to freedom which would exclude the state.

Hall's letter includes some profound statements of identity. His letter is filled with desperation. Throughout the entire letter he uses a lot of exclamation points and repeatedly writes "oh, Christ." However, he is very assured in his comments on identity. At the conclusion of the letter following his description of the "machine" he writes,

> This isn't me, this paper isn't me, these words aren't me, I'm not a folder in a law office, or a prison office; those words in my folder are only a very small part of me, something others have grabbed and put on paper—then they smiled and nodded at each other and said, 'Yes, see, that's him…the dirty thieving bastard. Look at his record, it's all here, all the things that he's done wrong…' but I've done more good in this world that I have harm, I've helped more people than could be written into a hundred records. And paper can't catch a person. (24)

This statement is a declaration of identity through the negation of other authors of identity. It is significant that he is rebelling from the conventions of paper and legality in determining his identity. This is an example of stepping outside of the normalization of how identity is created in America. Hall is not allowing the state to define who he is. Further, he is accusing the state of *mis*-defining him.

In the passage he introduces the idea that his identity has been stolen from him. He claims they "have grabbed" a part of him and skewed it and called him a "dirty thieving bastard." This however, is not how Hall identifies himself. He states, "I've done more good in the world that I have harm" (24). He is not claiming that he is all good, he later writes, "I have all the good things of a man in me, and also all of the bad, too" (25). His point is that they have taken just a small part of him and made it his whole identity. This is the injustice he suffers, being wrongfully pegged as a "dirty

thieving bastard." Hall's identity crisis is obviously torturous for him. It is not just so much the things that the state has said about him, but more the method they have used. He writes, "paper can't catch a person" (24). Ironically, he is using the medium of a letter to dispute this wrongfully created identity.

He precedes his discussion of the inaccuracy of a paper created identity by writing to Patti, "can you hear me Patti, can you see me?…I feel like I am trying to talk to you through a long tunnel, and echoing noises keep getting in the way" (24). He is desperate to create a meaningful thread with Patti. The tunnel description is illustrative of the claustrophobia and oppression he feels. It is arguably beyond a physical sense that he is experiencing this panicked voice. Since he is writing a letter, the fact that he asks Patti if she can hear and see him is significant. It shows how limited he feels to connect to people emotionally. In response to how he feels the prison authorities identify him from just a very small part of who he is; he is desperately trying to get Patti to see his entire identity. However, similar to the other tensions he has had with his treatment by the state he is forced to use the very same tools of the state, paper, to desperately assert his identity to Patti. Hall has determined that the state, exemplified by the papers and records in his letter, is not an accurate measurement of his identity. Thus, he is imagining an identity for himself that is contrary to what the state has given him. But he is still turning to another human being to validate his identity. The assertion of his identity is very much predicated on its opposition to the state created identity. What Hall says about state oppression and identity is very compelling. But is identity the same thing as freedom? The two are not necessarily exactly the same. However, it does

seem that the characteristics one might associate with freedom: security, opportunity, autonomy and self-determination are achieved or denied through one's sense of identity.

Such a symbiotic relationship between state oppression, identity, and freedom can be further explored in the following prisoner's writing. Prisoner Sherman Warner wrote this letter to Fay Stender from Folsom Prison in 1971. He begins his letter by sincerely thanking Fay for her visits which mean so much to him. He then writes about his life history which has been almost entirely spent in captivity. He writes "all of my teens have been spent confined within the California Youth Authority, while all of my twenties have been spent imprisoned in the California Adult Authority" (104). He then describes his several parole denials and the accusations that he is a communist, revolutionary and homosexual. After his personal history he begins writing about his feelings towards the prison authorities who he refers to as "pigs." This becomes the central topic of his long letter. His paragraphs are filled over and over with the repetition of "pig." Warner states that the greatest lesson he has learned in prison is the brutality of the "pigs." He writes,

> my learning just how deadly and ruthless the pig is, and the many devious and nefarious tactics he employs to pit one race against the other, to create and agitate a continuous state of chaos, dissension and turmoil amongst the convicts, and how he uses these conditions to control each man, and greatest of all, that if your white and have black friends your a piece of shit. (110)

In this passage Warner addresses the chief method of oppression employed by the prison authorities as aggravating racial tensions and discouraging racial cooperation. Warner's response to this intimidation and ruthlessness is, "I was and still am, determined to stand by my comrades and friends, for it was evident then as it is now,

that every minute of the day, their lives are endangered by the pig machine" (110). Warner holds tightly to his commitment to protect and ally himself with his fellow prisoners because as he described earlier this is the greatest effort he can make to NOT be controlled by the "pigs." He is constantly struggling against this form of oppression. He must enact behavior contrary to the expected, subjugated behavior he is being persuaded to follow. Thus, each day and moment he is acting to avoid oppression. His fight for freedom is not stagnant but perpetually in motion. Warner is enunciating George Jackson's philosophy that brotherhood in action is essential to freedom. Here this action is being further defined in relation to fighting state oppression.

One thing that emerges in Warner's writing is the idea that solidarity is created in opposition to something. The very fact that he frames freedom as something to be fought for suggests that freedom necessitates an oppressor or an enemy. Warner writes,

> In prison today, you have according to the pig, a convict, a inmate, and a revolutionary. I have the esteemed honor of being classified, by my pig captor, as the latter. Whether he is right or wrong is here nor there. The fact is that this creates a very pertinent situation, especially as the pig has bluntly told me in the presence of others that I am a revolutionary and that it is out-right war between them and myself and my fellow comrades and friends. Really the pig is a fool to say this, for now he just makes us more aware and cautious, building our solidarity. The other day, the pig tried to install fear by killing a white revolutionary brother, then the next day they rat packed a black revolutionary brother, than a white one, then a black one. But, as I said, he is a fool, for he is only making us stronger and killing himself. This crude forwardness has opened my eyes to his pig ideology, therefore he has not been able to shoot any revolutionary brothers in the exercise yard. Maybe we should thank him. (112)

In this passage, Warner directly states that it is the "pig" that has created the solidarity he shares with his fellow comrades and friends. It is the identity of otherness that he claims has led to his identity of a comrade and a friend. The image and idea of a "war"

furthers this dynamic of identity being composed in opposition to an enemy force. The idea of a war creates a sense of a very clearly drawn line between one side and another. The function of such a clear separation translates to an affirmed identity. Warner continues this metaphor of a war when a few lines later he writes, "I have about 16 more months for discharge from Reagan's slave camps" (112). Referring to the prison as the president's slave camps illuminates Warner's belief that he is engaged in a war.

The cunning conclusion of "maybe we should thank him" is very ambiguous. It seems that Warner is being sarcastic and bitter. He is possibly inferring that they should thank the pig for his stupidity because it is leading to his self-destruction. However, it is bitter because Warner acknowledges that the prisoners are still being destructed in the process. The idea of the authorities self-destructing also undercuts the strength of the prisoners themselves. In the passage the convolution of the enemy is notable. The pig kills the revolutionaries and himself simultaneously. When the idea of thanking the authority is added to this there is confusion in knowing whose side the pig really is on. The repeated notion that the solidarity and strength of the revolutionaries is reflexive or distinctly created by the authorities points to the complex connection between state oppression and freedom. After developing the idea that Warner's identity is reactionary to oppressive forces, he writes convincingly of the active nature of freedom.

The following passage shows how notions of freedom are grown in an environment of hopelessness, confinement and state oppression. This ironic relationship is described in these closing lines of Warner's letter,

> My sister I am a revolutionary and believe in revolution with all my heart, for Fay, my sister, I know and see every day the pig and the turds of his mind. Everyday, the pig tells me how my comrades and I will never be free, and you know, so far he has proved it, for anyone with any soul or spirit is continually locked down, harassed and eventually murdered. What a waste, for really some of the strongest and most potential men of this country and era, are being kept in these concentration camps for the rest of their lives. But as I said, the pig is making us stronger and larger and maybe eventually we can demand our freedom and rights of men. (113)

In the first portion of the passage, Warner explicitly declares his identity as a revolutionary. His identity as a revolutionary is predicated on his ability to see the wrongness of the authorities, as he states, "I know and see every day the pig." He locates the prisoners as a part of American society by stating that these men are "of this country and era." At the same time he identifies them as members of "concentration camps" which locates them outside of American society. Or, it locates them as victims of American society which infers participation but not acceptance. He acknowledges the success of the pigs who declare that the prisoners will never be free and he states that "so far he has proved it." However, he also writes that the power and hope that he holds is being created by the oppressor. He claims that the "pig is making us stronger and larger" which implies that hope for freedom and power are products of oppression.

The passage from Warner's letter is filled with ambiguity and confusion. He states that it is such a waste that the "strongest and most potential men" are being held down and oppressed. But he then says that the oppression is making them "stronger." The state is both oppressing and creating strength in the prisoners.

The next prisoner writing to be examined takes the discussion of state oppression and freedom to another place. The following excerpts address the

relationship between the state authorities and the prisoners' freedom. This layered nuance is important to the overall conception of freedom the prisoners have. This letter is written by a prisoner named Nolan. He writes the letter from Folsom Prison in 1971 to Fay Stender. Prisoner Nolan explores the issue of culpability on the part of the prison authorities. This is a common theme and tension in the prisoner writings and also in black radicalism. There is tension between blaming the executers of authority and believing in the ideology that everyone is a victim of injustice. In the passage, Nolan writes "even they [prison guards] admit they don't know what they are doing, but they lie, they know all too well they destroy pride, strip integrity, murder a man's desire to think as an individual, to function with the mass" (49). In this sentence he contradicts and destabilizes what he says. Nolan is arguing that the prison authorities pretend they do not know what they are doing when in fact they do. However, he manages to frame his argument in a way that infers they really don't know what they are doing at the same time that they are aware of the specific actions they are engaging in. It seems like Nolan is saying they don't know the bigger implications of what they are doing; however, they do know that they are "destroying pride, stripping integrity, and murdering a man's desire to think" (49). Therefore it is unclear whether he thinks the prison authorities are entirely to blame, or if they too are rendered powerless by ignorance. Nolan continues this tension between specific and universal oppression in his closing argument that capitalistic oppression blindly oppresses people of every race. He writes that there are "only rulers and the damned." He does not specify who would fall into either category,

creating the possibility that prison authorities are part of the damned as well as prisoners.

This sentiment is further illustrated in another letter written by George Jackson from San Quentin in 1970. He writes, "the days and months that a guard has to spend on the ground (sometimes locked in a wing or cell-block with no gun guard) are what destroy anything at all that was good, healthy, or social about him before. Fear begets fear. And we come out with two groups of schizoids, one guarding the other. The spiral extends outwards and up" (51). His passage is eloquent and directly illustrates the confusion and layered nature of oppression in the prison. Jackson quite clearly is putting the prison guards in the category of the damned. His passage has a common theme of endless, circuitous feelings that many prisoners seem to express.

Angela Davis further illustrates the complication with blame and victimization concerning prison authorities. In her autobiography she writes about the ways in which prison guards are very much victims and prisoners themselves. She writes,

> in a way these officers were prisoners themselves, and some of them were keenly aware that they were treading ambiguous waters. Like their predecessors, the Black overseers, they were guarding their sisters in exchange for a few bits of bread. And like their overseers, they too would discover that part of the payment for their work was their own oppression. (43)

Davis describes the demographic that was drawn to work at the prisons. She writes that in New York being a prison guard was one of the highest paying jobs that did not require a college education. By connecting the guards to Black overseers she is addressing the Field versus House Negro dichotomy. The passage shows the layered aspects of oppression and contrarily freedom.

This holistic view of the oppressive force that prison is compels a theme of the nation itself being captivated. Various prisoners describe prison as a place that exemplifies the ways in which the United States itself is imprisoned by injustice. In a letter written on July 6, 1970, Thomas K. Clark uses an ironic tone to criticize the establishment of not only the prison but of America as a nation. After describing the many perversions of the prisons, the ways in which prisoners are dehumanized and psychologically tortured due to environment and treatment, he writes, "yes, comrade mine, these and a thousand more instances represent the value of a twenty-four-hour night and daymare of society's long evolution from the cave of insensitive brutality to the enlightened 20th Century" (Pell 21). In this declaration there is a paralleled bitterness to the language used in Hassan's piece. Like Hassan, Clark uses a positively connoted word like "enlightened" to describe the prison existence that is negative and torturous. This bitterness and irony shows the way in which he cleverly uproots conventional wisdom.

He is able to do this also with his use of the word "daymare" This invented word powerfully transforms a deeply perpetuated dichotomy of night and day. It shows the ways in which horror and badness are not confined to the "night" or to the places that we expect them to be. Like Hassan's use of "crime," Clark is able to resituate the idea of "nightmare" to a place often perceived to be impervious to irrational horror, the daytime. The complexity of oppression is revealed in his language. Clark states "Folsom Prison is a place where *legal* injustice nourishes a monster in the depths of

man" (21). Clark is breaking down the conception of justice and legality. He weds two supposedly incompatible words "legal" and "injustice" in his sentence.

He frames this description of twenty-four-hour despair with the preface that it is a "value." The word "value" echoes the irony of the statement Clark is making. He again uses a positive word such as value to describe an entirely negative description of prison life. This has the effect of calling into question every idea that is classified as "value." If relegating a man to "live in a 4' by 9' space sixteen hours a day" and "spreading paranoia" are values, then what is a value? Clark plays with this word and destabilizes its meaning. He deconstructs "value" so that it can not be accurately defined.

Clark points to another irony of America in his attack on consumerism and the role it plays in the prison. In his description of the messed up environment of Folsom Prison, he writes that it is a "community where the products of the American Tobacco Company are a social religion, and God himself is a pack of cigarettes; where dominos, homosexuality, and the pursuit of cigarettes rule the mental faculties of man" (20). While Clark is specifically describing Folsom Prison, he is also making a broader comment on American society. The hypocrisy of religious ideals in America and consumerist commitments becomes apparent in this line that Clark writes. Americans worship consumerism in this metaphor. While it may just be in the prison that this sacrilegious code is carried out, nonetheless it is American companies and interests that profit and therefore an extension of American interest in general. His use of "the pursuit of" harkens to the bill of rights where it is the "pursuit of happiness" and yet he inserts

cigarettes for happiness. This rhetorical strategy has the effect of showing how the prison is a distortion of the generally perpetuated ideals of America.

As seen in many of the writings, the prisoners, in a nuanced way, are able to distinguish their maltreatment as "unlawful." It is interesting when the prisoner refers to actions done by authorities of the law or a legal institution as illegal because it illustrates their ability to de-legitimize the state. This is a major goal of black radicalism because it aids in the effort to universalize human treatment and to question the status quo. Robert D. LaBlue, in a letter written from Chino prison in 1970, writes, "the Administration at Folsom is so corrupt that it does all kinds of unlawful things, such as assaults and in some cases murder" (58). This quote is incredible because it pegs the law as unlawful in a very logical and almost unsurprising way. LaBlue distinguishes things such as assault and murder as unlawful *even if* done by an authority of the law.

Such confusion and inspection of the relationship between the state and ideas of "lawfulness" is not surprising given the political landscape of the time. In light of the Vietnam War and the civil rights movement this distinction was crucial to radical ideology. Actions by the state such as invading Vietnam, using fire hoses to expel crowds of protesters and the FBI's use of surveillance put into question the legitimacy of the state. The state's activities and its *own* criminality were a central part of the political setting during the time these letters were written and were also a crucial component of the black radical movement.

There are many historical examples of how black radicals held the same belief that the nation itself is not free. One example is the Black Panther Party "defending"

U.S. law by patrolling to ensure just prosecution of black citizens. One of the aspects of the Black Panther Party that is most famous is their early idea of police patrols. The object of the patrols was to be present during police interrogations in order to ensure fairness and non-violence towards black suspects. The men would go on the police patrols with guns, cameras, law books and tape recorders (Jones 180). Of course, it was the guns that became the central focus of the Party's police patrol; however, they were very much concerned with abiding by and enforcing the law.

The following quote by Malcolm X about police being just as brutal as the press shows a questioning of the state and suggests that the nation is captive to bias and perversions of truth. In 1962, Ronald Stokes, a member of the Nation of Islam was shot and killed by a police officer in Los Angeles (Peniel 63). The event galvanized militant black radicals to take serious action against the police force in Los Angeles. Peculiarly, however, Elijah Muhammad instructed Malcolm X to "play dead on everything" (64). This was a surprising reaction given the brutality against a member of the NOI. Malcolm obeyed the order and as a result the NOI lost many members. The decision made by Muhammad and then carried out by Malcolm X showed that the Nation of Islam "would not engage in open race war" (64). Despite the physical restraint to fight back or form any riotous reaction, Malcolm X was outspoken on the matter. Malcolm accused the Los Angeles police force of murder, citing many inconsistencies in their version of events (65). In an interview with a reporter he said, "There was police brutality and atrocity and the press was just as atrocious as the police" (65). The Stokes

case capped a mountain of evidence that Malcolm believed revealed America's cruelty, desperation, and hypocrisy (67).

The destabilization of the words "law" and "justice" in the prisoner writings is interesting to observe in light of the extensive importance placed on language by black radicals. Black radical instances of redefining language exist throughout the movement. As early as Marcus Garvey, language was an important factor in the effort of the movement. Garvey's influence shines bright in the effort he made to reverse gross perceptions of the role and purpose of black people.

In his book Transition, John Clarke writes in a chapter titled "Marcus Garvey: The Harlem Years," "Garvey gave them the vision of a new dream, a new promise, and a new land" (14). He reversed the notion that black people were bound to American soil and service. He instead promoted the idea that they had the right to self-determination, that they had their own land and that they were not inferior to white people. As Clarke cites, Adam Clayton Powell Sr. wrote of Garvey, "he is the only man that made Negroes not feel ashamed of their color." He transformed language. In number eleven on the UNIA's "Declaration of the Rights of Negro Peoples of the World" it is stated "we deprecate the use of the term 'nigger' as applied to negroes, and demand that the word 'Negro' be written with a capital 'N'" (UNIA 574). This is a clear example of Garvey's effort to combat former articles of oppression and replace them with empowering ideas of identity. This is a further suggestion that identity and freedom are closely linked. Defining someone else's identity or taking it away is perhaps synonymous with taking away freedom and oppressing.

Carmichael, amongst many other radicals of his time, urged black people to reject negative stereotypical images about their appearance and positively align black features with a prideful black identity (Peniel 151-2). He was a proponent of celebrating the natural beauty of black people and urged them not to fry their hair to conform to a "white" standard of beauty and not be ashamed of broad noses and thick lips (152). Angela Davis was famous for wearing a natural afro. Elaine Brown also recalls converting from wearing hair extensions to her natural hair style and the sense of empowerment and authenticity this gave her (Brown 98). The celebration of black stereotypes was a crucial component of Black Power. As evidenced by the slogan, the idea was to convert distinction and difference from a means of oppression to a means of power.

The state is complexly defined and addressed by the prisoners and black radicals. The culpability of the state is complicated in the prisoners' writings and in the movement. Issues of language create ambiguity in the definition of the state. At stake is whether or not the state performs in accord with or against the freedom of citizens. Is an absolute destruction and elimination of the state necessary for the prisoners to realize freedom? Or, is their enfranchisement, cooperation and involvement in the state the path to freedom?

Chapter III: Violence

This section of the paper offers insight to the connections made between violence and freedom. To reiterate the context provided in the introduction of the paper, the various prisons where the selected writings come from are saturated with histories of violence. The prison setting and the black radical movement are closely tied to issues of violence. These will be central questions to the topic of this section: Is violence a means of gaining power and freedom? How is violence used to oppress? How does the definition of violence change when used by the state? Is violence gendered? Is the morality of violence predicated on the race of the author of violence?

In 1970 George F. Myron wrote a very long letter from San Quentin prison about his childhood, early adulthood, his imprisonment, and the events of prison life. One thing that he writes about early on is being coerced to be a sexual partner for another prisoner. He writes about how a group of men in prison had raped and killed another prisoner. These same men came to Myron and told him that he would have the same fate as the man they had killed if he did not turn homosexual (Pell 30). Myron writes, “I had a choice of buying some silk panties and letting my hair hang down; or getting hold of a knife, and stabbing somebody; or seeing that my keepers did their job” (30). His list of choices represents the lack of freedom in prison. The first choice is to adopt a typically female identity, contrary to his own, in which he would be subject to male rape (as he has no desire to have relations with the men intimidating him). The second choice is violence where it would appear he has control but, as evidenced a little later, it is reactionary control rather than autonomous control. The third choice is to be

dependent on other authors of authority. In a way, this identity is that of a child who is dependent on protection and the directives of someone else.

He chooses the third choice and is rewarded with no help from the authorities. Thus, he spirals into complete paranoia and fear. He describes, "I ate with my back to the wall. I showered with my back to the wall" (31). He is utterly convinced he will be raped if he makes one wrong move. Illustrative of his isolation and lack of comradeship, he writes, "at night all my cellmate had to do was so much as move a muscle—or even think about it—and I would be wide awake. (In easier days I had always been considered a 'Heavy sleeper') (31). Myron is a changed man. He has adopted different behaviors and habits that are quite dissimilar to the man he used to be. This emerges from being in a situation in which he has choice, but only choices that require him to change his identity. The fear of violence cripples him. It appears that his identity has been entirely destroyed because he writes, "And this was the way in which I had to live—if you can call it that" (31). Essentially he is describing that he does not even feel alive or perhaps even human.

The second choice of violence is later described in more detail and becomes increasingly obvious to be no choice at all, but rather a painful reaction. Myron writes,

> Each day a prisoner is tortured psychologically and spiritually (if there is really a difference), until, finally, he just leaps in one direction or the other. Maybe he will stab someone else for no reason at all: I've seen that. Or maybe he will take a razor blade and slice himself up from head to toe: I've seen that, too. Or then again, maybe he will just hang himself like one fellow who lived a few doors away.
>
> All these 'small, insignificant things' cripple hundreds—thousands—of men for life. They will never be the same again. What they will be, though, are the 'repeaters' that everyone talks about, who spend their lives in and out of

> prison. If they weren't criminals when they came here—and many are not—they are almost guaranteed to be by the time they have been through the 'Vegetation Process' of this A/C—or the whole institution for that matter.
>
> As I was saying, I did months of it. Miserable time, that is. And not because of any wrong that I had done. I was punished for 'Protection.' (39)

This passage echoes his early set-up of a list of "choices;" however, reading the two passages in conjunction illustrates the ways in which Myron constructs "choice" but at the same time shows the complete lack of choice. In this passage he states that a prisoner "leaps in one direction or the other," but it is apparent there is little will behind the decision to kill oneself or another person. It appears that the "choice" is reactionary and a result of psychological damage. Resolutely, the theme of confinement within choice is illustrative of the prisoner's existence. But there is also the possible interpretation of the violence being a release. He says that the prisoner is tortured *until* he acts out in a violent manner. Thus, the violence could be viewed as a form, however constrained, of control and freedom.

The complicated nature of violence continues in the ironic "punishment for protection" idea that Myron actually repeats several times throughout the letter. The paradoxical relationship between confinement and protection is common in the ideology surrounding prisons. The punishment and physical constraint of prison is supposed to protect society and the prisoner. Myron theorizes that the prison actually creates criminality. If criminality is the basis for imprisonment, or anti-freedom, then violence can be seen as a main ingredient for losing freedom. However, in the case of protection, Myron introduces a nuance to the notion of freedom. He has been told that his punishment is for his own good and that it will protect him. This infers that the violence

and torture of being held in the Adjustment Center (A/C) is actually a perverse way that the authorities are granting him a version of freedom. If freedom entails the absence of fear of sexual violence, then the A/C grants him this freedom. Yet, it is not that simple because the A/C is "miserable" for Myron and does not translate to a sense of freedom.

Myron's experiences with violence in prison reshape his ideas of freedom. His letter continues by describing his time in solitary confinement in "the Hole." His placement in "the Hole" was a result of attempting to testify against a prisoner who was threatening him. He describes finally getting to move to "normal" prison, "except for no contact visits…I was allowed full freedom and privileges. And, after having been in the Hole for over a year—fourteen months to be exact—it was, for me, a veritable Utopia, which I did my best to enjoy" (41). The most alarming thing that pops out in this passage is Myron's description of being allowed "full freedom and privileges." It demonstrates how his measurement of the world has become microscopic and solely contained to the prison. What he means is full freedom *in* prison. However, he has abandoned any comparison to the outside and is describing a world confined to the prison.

He then goes on to describe his freedom in more relative terms. He states, "after having been in the Hole," which shows that his conception of freedom has been shaped and changed by his experience in the Hole. He also writes, "it was, for me" which signals too that he defines freedom in a relative sense rather than a universal holistic sense. His definition of freedom is subjective and extremely limited. He acknowledges that his standard of freedom is unique to himself and his particular situation. While he

celebrates the new layer of freedom he has gained it seems that he realizes too the shortcomings of his situation. He states "I did my best to enjoy," inferring that true appeasement with the situation is difficult for him and must be forced. A division between the prison's definition of "full freedom and privileges" and Myron's own definition of freedom arises in this passage.

In the next prisoner writing the relationship between violence and dehumanization furthers this discussion. If violent treatment dehumanizes can it be blamed for feelings of entrapment? Is violence different when performed from a position of power than from a position of subservience? The following is the entire letter written by Lewis Moore from Soledad Prison to Fay Stender:

> Dear Mrs. Stender:
>
> You cannot rehabilitate a man through brutality and disrespect. Regardless of the crime a man may commit, he is still a human being and has feelings. And the main reason most inmates in prison today disrespect their keepers, is because they themselves (the inmates) are disrespected and are not treated like human beings, I myself have witnessed brutal attacks upon inmates and have suffered a few myself, uncalled for. I can understand a guard or guards restraining an inmate if he becomes violent. But many a time this restraining has turned into a brutal beating. Does this type of treatment bring about respect or rehabilitation? No! It only instills hostility and causes alienation towards the prison officials from the inmate or inmates involved.
>
> If you treat a man like an animal, then you must expect him to act like one. For every action, there is a reaction. This is only human nature. And in order for an inmate to act like a human being, you must treat him as such. Treating him like an animal will only get negative results from him. You can't spit in his face and expect him to smile and say thank you. I have seen this happen also. There is a large gap between the inmate and prison officials. And it will continue to grow until the prison officials learn that an inmate is no different then them, only in the sense that he has broken the law. He still has feelings, and he's still a human being. And until the big wheels in Sacramento and the personnel inside the prisons start practicing rehabilitation, and stop practicing zoology, then they can expect continuous chaos and trouble between inmates and officials.

Moore echoes Myron's sentiments that violence begets violence and that the behavior of the prison authorities that is often violent and criminal is adopted by the prisoners themselves. Moore is questioning the ideology of the prison. He is arguing that rehabilitation and violent control are incompatible. Moore claims that brutality and violence cause hostility and alienation. While the letter is very articulate and straightforward, when examined closer there is a bit of circuitous logic.

Moore does not condemn violence absolutely. He states that there are certain times when he understands "guards restraining an inmate if he becomes violent." He also explicitly states that if a person experiences violence it is "human nature" to react in a negative way. The problem that arises between these two projections is that whether or not justly started, he is giving violence a legitimate reason to be perpetuated. If the captors have turned the inmates into animals then he is stating that it is "understandable" to then react towards their behavior with violence. Of course, the key point of his letter is that this cycle must not be initiated in the first place. This supersedes any of the problematic ideas he has about the legitimacy of violence. But, it shows the complexity of violence and the undercurrent support of violence that he gives in a letter that seems to abhor violence.

When Moore writes "an inmate is no different then them [prison officials], only in the sense that he has broken the law" he complicates the culpability and legitimacy of violence. This sentence can be viewed in different ways. Moore perhaps believes that violence is wrong no matter who executes it and that it is unfair that the state excuses its

authorities for the behavior that incriminates a normal citizen. Or, perhaps he believes that the violence or criminal behavior exhibited by the inmates is not bad, is done for a purpose, and just unfairly gets punished when those who exhibit similar behavior for the state do not. The question that arises is whether the legitimacy of violence is dependent on the executer and purpose and therefore can in certain circumstances contribute to freedom. Or, is violence an absolute obstruction of freedom no matter when and where it is committed?

In this following letter these questions are addressed by a prisoner named Hugo A. Pinell. In his letter from Soledad in 1970 to Fay Stender he describes the unfair racist treatment of black prisoners. He tells Stender about a fellow inmate who he identifies as L.D. as an example of someone who has been perpetually bullied and mistreated by the authorities. Pinell writes,

> L.D. is back in isolation and I don't know if he has addressed you as yet, but that brother (L.D.) is not sick or crazy. He is tired, depressed, aware of the police harassment towards his person and thus, he reacts in a self-defense manner, but yet showing he really doesn't project violence or hate against these officials by merely throwing liquid or some powder in return for their unkindness. He is really relaying this message 'officials drive us to the point of belief that our only meanings of protection is strictly on our own hands is we aim to survive.' Other words, these staff members don't show us cooperation, respect—they don't show us either physically or mentally!! There is not fear involved in our behavior—then again, there is no violence in our behavior! (145)

In this passage an important distinction is made by Pinell between violence and self-defense. He describes that what the state may label as "sick or crazy" or violent is actually behavior of self preservation. In the passage there is a distinction between the action of "throwing liquid or some powder" at the authorities and projecting "violence

or hate." This positions a division between physical acts and the idea of violence. In the passage violence requires a multi-part definition. It is not strictly confined to the physical act of force against another human being but is dependent on the emotional setting and purpose of the act. If to "survive" functions in this passage as a form of freedom then violence is acting both as the obstruction of freedom and also the last means to preserving freedom. For Pinell, his and his fellow inmates' behavior is not violent because it is reactionary.

While Pinell distances the behavior of L.D. from any definition of violence he also points to the power, though extremely limited, of "our own hands." Pinell points out that when everything has been stripped away from a man and he is severely "tired, depressed" that the only means of protection left is "strictly in our own hands." Pinell has completely broken down the definition of violence; however, in this sentence he seems to be acknowledging the strength of physical force which could be conventionally defined as violence.

Violence is perhaps the most characteristic element of the history of black Americans and the black radical movement. It is at the forefront of histories of oppression and brutality towards the black population. It is also at the forefront of the struggle to combat these forces of oppression. On both sides of the equation, violence plays a crucial role in the conception of freedom. Looking at some cases of the presence violence has had in the black radical movement will provide a backdrop to contrast against the sentiments expressed by the prisoners in this section of the paper.

Principles of self-defense were present in the black radical movement from a very early date. Southern activist Robert F. Williams in 1959 nearly eclipsed Martin Luther King's stardom. At the time, Williams, a veteran and well-traveled former industrial laborer called for armed self-defense in the South (Peniel 20). His radical tactic alarmed the United States. He assumed leadership of the NAACP and was asked by a long list of progressive groups to be their leader. He remained with the NAACP until, in response to a white man beating a black woman in Monroe, North Carolina, he stated, "we must be willing to kill if necessary" (21). This comment was met by harsh criticism in the white media and the national NAACP suspended him. The NAACP vilified him "as an advocate of racial violence, just as black radicals greeted his statement with cheers" (21). Williams formed alliances with Malcolm X and the Harlem Writers Guild. His connection with the NOI earned him attention from the FBI who stepped up their surveillance of Williams' activities (29). His contentious views on violence were a major factor in his popularity with black radicals. These same views also contributed to him being fairly effectively silenced by the American government.

Another key player in the early stages of the promotion of self-defense was Stokely Carmichael. Carmichael's creation of the Lowndes County Freedom Organization became a model for self-defense. In Carmichael's "What We Want" essay he wrote about the LCFO,

> Their ballot symbol is the black panther: a bold beautiful animal, representing the strength and dignity of black demands today. A man needs a black panther on his side when he and his family must endure—as hundreds of Alabamians have endured—loss of job, eviction starvation, and sometimes death, for

> political activity. He may also need a gun and SNCC reaffirms the right of black men everywhere to defend themselves when threatened or attacked. (164)

Carmichael's statements about Lowndes County and the political organization he helped lead there are paradigmatic of black radicalism. His statement above also illustrates how controversial his ideas were. It is hard to understand how non-violence and gun ownership go together. It is also hard not to perceive strength and power as being "over" someone. Which is why there was the understandable, but nonetheless ironic criticism that black power was oppressive and racist. Peniel writes that "critics feared that Black Power hinted at a perverse inversion of American's racial hierarchies;" however, Carmichael envisioned "a black community with the resources, will, and imagination to define the past, present, and future on its own terms" (171). The idea of imagining and defining the past present and future exemplifies the ways in which black radicalism addressed the intangible as well as the material interests of black people. The idea of defining the past is crucial to understanding how black radicalism addressed the grievances of black citizens and the racist history of the nation. Part of instating the black populations' "own terms" was questioning the American government's violent presence in Vietnam.

Carmichael's strong anti-war allegiance fueled a contentious relationship between himself and President Lyndon Johnson. Unlike one of his counterparts Bayard Rustin who was a social democrat and a pacifist who supported Johnson, Carmichael was a harsh critic of the president (162). His reaction to Rustin's support of the president is illustrative of black radicalism which was suspicious and wary of

mainstream politics. Carmichael, disappointed that Rustin had claimed Johnson was the lesser of two evils, maintained that "Black Power offered a radical alternative that refused to compromise with corruption in public life" (173). This refusal to acquiesce and join in the corruption of politics, as seen in earlier moments of the movement's history, continued to be in tension with the need to use the political machine to further widespread attention to the movement. At the center of the debate over Vietnam was the legitimate use of violence.

In 1966, King and Carmichael joined together to plan and execute the Meredith March (137). This important moment in the history of civil rights and the black radical movement was motivated and spurred by violence. The Meredith March was started by a young black student named James Meredith (Freeman). He was the first black student to attend the University of Mississippi in 1962 after winning a federal court decision that he could not be denied admission. The march was organized to encourage and inspire African Americans to register and vote. The march began in Memphis, Tennessee and went to Jackson Mississippi. Just one day into the march Meredith was shot and wounded (Freeman). This was when King, Carmichael and the notable Floyd McKissick of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) decided they would continue the march. It was significant in the history of black radicalism because it was a unique moment where the two "sides" came together and was also the first public and widespread exposition of the newly developing idea of "Black Power" (Peniel 131).

Carmichael was largely responsible for introducing Black Power to the black radical movement. During the Meredith March and beyond he would use the slogan in

his speeches and would interact with the crowd by asking, "what do we want?" to which the crowd would reply "black power!" (142). The slogan would be chanted in rallies and on the march. The idea of Black Power began a debate and controversy that would extend to the following decades in which the public and the participants stood on a thin line between self-determination and power and violence.

The Black Power slogan was interpreted as being violent and overbearing. Carmichael on the subject of black power was outspoken and did not censor himself despite the attacks he received from the media and white citizens. Carmichael directed his political expressions towards the black community, "network television coverage routinely featured Carmichael in outrageous news clips designed to scare white Americans out of their *wits*, fears Carmichael did nothing to mitigate" (151). He urged black men to refuse to serve in Vietnam and called for black people to reject negative stereotypical images about their appearance (151-2).

In an interview between Martin Agronsky and Carmichael, this dance between violence and power is visible. Agronsky asked Carmichael, who always asserted his support for non-violence, "but you seem to be arguing that wherever the Negroes cannot get what they wish they are entitled to use violent methods to achieve it" (144). Agronsky's questions reflected the perception that Black Power meant unrestricted license for violence. Carmichael replied that he had never said that but then asserted, "when I talk about black power I talk about black people in the counties where they out-number them to get together, to organize themselves politically and to take over those counties from white racists who now run it" (144). Both Agronsky's questions and

Carmichael's response illustrate how gray this area of debate was. Agronsky's language reflects the point of view that black power is overstepping. He states, "get what they wish" as though the effort of the movement is akin to a child "wishing" for a sundae. Carmichael also uses language such as "take over" that contradicts or at least destabilizes his stance on non-violence.

The attempt to gain power was frequently met with confusion and critiques of racism and separatism. Black Power was ironically associated with the very things it sought to combat. In an essay titled "What We Want" Carmichael wrote, "for once black people are going to use the words they want to use—not just the words whites want to hear. And they will do this no matter how often the press tries to stop the use of the slogan by equating it with racism and separatism" (164). According to Peniel, in this same essay, Carmichael provided the clearest definition of Black Power to date, when he described it as "the coming together of black people to elect representatives and to force those representatives to speak to their needs" (164). What continually emerges is the theme of self-determination. This is a central component of black radicalism.

In 1967, Black Power, rather than civil rights was shaping and framing public perceptions of racial politics. Civil unrest in America was growing as a result of Black Power activism of antiwar protests, self-defense organizations and expressions of cultural pride and racial solidarity (174). At the forefront were questions of violence as related to the war, racism and the black power movement.

Another key leader at this time was Malcolm X. Malcolm X's career was spotlighted by his view on violence. To this day, Malcolm X is often characterized as a

violent revolutionary. His statements about violence were a major part of his strained relationship with mainstream America and the Nation of Islam.

The Nation of Islam's security unit was named Fruit of Islam (FOI). They were an all-black, unarmed, quasi-military regiment (10). They would stand at events "impeccably dressed and exhibiting discipline honed through a rigorous physical regimen that was rumored to include expertise in the martial arts" (10). The FOI exemplified the principles of self-defense. This would also be a common necessity in the formation and existence of black radicalism. While it is a notion mostly attached to the Black Panther Party, it was present in many other organizations. Even Martin Luther King Jr. had personal bodyguards and people who served to protect him. The principle of self-defense and non-violence are not always mutually exclusive. In many areas and instances local police enforcement could not be trusted to step up when protection was needed.

Malcolm X's split from the NOI marked a crucial turning point and period of re-identification with black nationalism and revolution. Malcolm famously made the statement concerning Kennedy's assassination about "chickens coming home to roost" (92). The statement was a clear violation of the instructions Elijah Muhammad gave forbidding any comments against Kennedy. This began the rupture between Malcolm and the NOI. Malcolm was suspended and began an important relationship with Cassius Clay. Their relationship helped Malcolm gain popularity and also develop independence from Elijah Muhammad. In March of 1964, Malcolm declared his political independence (97).

During this period of disassociation with the NOI, Malcolm evolved his political orientation. In one of his most famous speeches, "The Ballot of the Bullet," which he delivered in many cities in the north, he outlined his evolving approach to the struggle. In the speech he stressed, "self-defense, electoral politics, and Pan-Africanism" and also asserted that "America's civil rights struggle was part of a global movement" (102). These values became typical of black radicalism and show that violence was at the center of the evolution of ideologies. Though Malcolm split from the NOI for many reasons, many of which were personal between he and Muhammad, in terms of emerging ideologies and public expressions, issues of violence were at the forefront. Malcolm X's career and life were concluded in violence. Malcolm X was assassinated in February of 1965. The death of Malcolm X shocked and galvanized many black radicals. The event also contributed to an increasing climate of violence.

Six months later, in August of 1965 the Watts Riots of Los Angeles began and persisted for six days. The Watts riots illustrated that legal equality was limited by the many other cultural and economic factors that contribute to the freedom of a person or group. The Watts riots were large in scale. At the end a total of 34 people had been killed, 28 of whom were African Americans, 1,072 people were injured and 4,000 were arrested (Watts). Martin Luther King Jr. came to Los Angeles and had a contentious meeting with Major Sam Yorty and police chief William Parker. The reaction of the two men was, "Parker praised fearful white residents who purchased guns to 'protect' their communities, while Yorty dismissed black residents' charges of police brutality as a Communist conspiracy" (Peniel 121). The hypocrisy and ignorance of these reactions

were exemplary of the battle black radicals faced. An important lesson of the Watts riots for King and America was the awareness of the "limits of legal equality without parallel economic strides" (122). Again, this marked recognition of the deeper and more culturally embedded sources of injustice rather than just the tangible legalities of inequality. It also highlighted the hypocritical and complicated view authorities and the nation had concerning violence.

The violent act of assassination continued to shape the progress and events of black radicalism with King's death. On April 4, 1968 James Earl Ray shot and killed King in Memphis, Tennessee. Following his assassination there was an eruption of violence (227). Many evaluate the historical backlash of violence as evidence that King acted as a buffer zone between militancy and non-violence. Just two days after the assassination the ripple hit Northern California.

On April 6, 1968 Bobby Hutton a young radical was shot and killed by police in Oakland, California. Eldridge Cleaver wanted to ambush police officers in protest of the assassination. Party member and childhood friend of Huey P. Newton, David Hilliard writes in his autobiography that he was firmly opposed to the idea (Hilliard 183). However, he lacked leadership power to stop Cleaver. It is contested whether or not the men actually provoked the police or if the police ambushed the two cars filled with Black Panther Party members. Either way, the confrontation made Cleaver and Hutton run for safety to a nearby house. The house was extensively shot at and tear-gassed (188-9). Cleaver and Hutton both agreed to surrender when the tear gas had been thrown in the basement where they were hiding. Cleaver, however, was unable to move

because he had injured his leg. He instructed Hutton, the Panther's youngest member, to strip off his clothes so that the officers would have no cause to think he was concealing a weapon. Hutton only took his shirt off. When he emerged from the house he was shot 12 times and died at the scene (Jones 344). This was one of the most crucial events that contributed to the rise of the Panther Party. Violence and reaction to violence authored many of the most important events of the black radical movement.

The values and histories surrounding violence and the black radical movement were inherited by the Black Panther Party which emerged in the wake of Malcolm X's assassination and the Watts Riots. Central to the Black Panthers' ideology was their theory that the U.S. had a monopoly on the so-called legitimate use of violence and that it was a racist violence (Jones 76). This was a crucial part of the party's ideology: the attempt to break down and universalize violence. This is seen in many of the prisoner writings in which the prisoners are able to identify that violence in the name of "legality" is still violence and unjust. The Panthers sought to break down the monopoly of violence that they perceived existed. This was the basis for the Party's self-defense focus. Part of the universalizing notions of freedom requires redefining the meaning of language. Many prisoners effectively attack the hypocrisy of language and seek to find a truer meaning of words such as "law" and "justice" in order to create a more realistic picture of what they are experiencing.

The Black Panther Party newspaper was a crucial part of their cause and organization. Similar to the Meredith March, the paper was started in response to violence. The paper helped give the community a voice and combat their exclusion and

oppression. The Black Panther Party paper lent a great deal of pride to the community. It was empowering for community members to see a publication that addressed their concerns and even had pictures of people they knew in the paper. The paper had strong ties to the community and was a great example of the grass roots make-up of the party (195). The Black Panther Party paper was started in response to gross media distortions. The newspaper was created in response to the brutal death of Denzil Dowell who was shot in the back by police in Richmond, California in 1967 (196).

The death of Dowell enraged a community that had been brewing with fear and discontent of mistreatment from local police officers. Dowell's death inspired the creation of the Black Panther Party newspaper and galvanized party activism and membership (196). Dowell's death and the reaction of the community set the tone for the party's community solidarity. The paper would become a medium of expression for black communities in the United States. The incident provided a strong example of the consequences and injustices of police brutality. It established the party's strong stance against such behavior. Dowell's death illustrated both the victimization of black people at the hands of police authorities and also illustrated the power of fighting against this victimization.

These highlights of the history of black radicalism show how interwoven violence was in the events and ideologies of the movement. Violence created oppression and victims and it also stimulated the events that empowered the black population. The paradoxical relationship it has had to African Americans is expressed in the ambiguous treatment of violence in the prisoner writings. Freedom's enemies and

friends are often one in the same. The large degree of circumstantialities and subjectivity make the concept of freedom elusive.

Conclusion

Freedom is a frequently used term that is very much the basis of our society and nation. America has a unique relationship to the word and concept given our unique history of rebellion, revolution and slavery. In the rhetoric of war and American politics freedom is an idea that reigns supreme. Yet, our nation also incarcerates more people than any other nation in the world. The enormity of our prison system somehow does not frequently get placed at odds with this devotion to "freedom."

This project complicated the notion of freedom in the specific showcase of prisoner writings from 1970-1 and the black radical movement. This period of time and this social movement lent a dialogue between the prisons and the public. The publication of memoirs such as Soul on Ice and Soledad Brothers brought the prison experience into the homes of many Americans. The period of time also illuminated the many echoes of imprisonment that existed outside of the prison institution. Problems concerning gender, the legitimacy of the state and the use of violence were explored and challenged during this time in American history. The prisons were not isolated from these problems, nor was the public truly isolated from the horror of prison life.

The several theorists that were briefly described in the second introduction propose unique ways of looking at freedom. Simply putting their ideas into dialogue exemplified the complexity of freedom. The prisoner writings then echoed these complexities. The various theories of freedom were both affirmed and questioned in the writings of the prisoners. George Jackson and Alfred Hassan's writings about the activity involved in freedom supported Assata Shakur and Michael Hames-Garcia's

ideas that freedom is a verb and only realized through practice. Harold Olson's piece about looking out at the ocean showed the tension between physical and psychological notions of freedom that Robin Kelley explored in his theory of freedom. Walton and Smith's interesting notion of the African-American position of achieving freedom through the abolishment of the freedom of others to oppress is highlighted in the section on state oppression. The various prisoners frequently address state oppression as the road block to their freedom. Ending this oppression is the means to freedom for many of the prisoners. The passages concerning violence complicate the ideas that freedom is intangible and that action is freedom. Violence is not only a very tangible form of oppression but it is also a very tangible tool for resisting oppression. Yet, it still remains plausible that the feelings of freedom, while perhaps not the means to achieving it, are intangible. In this particular selection of prisoner writings no prisoner provided evidence that freedom is *only* psychologically determined, but many of the prisoners evidenced the importance and existence of the psychological factor of freedom.

Emerging from these connections and contradictions is the root subjectivity of the concept of freedom. Notions of freedom are largely predicated on one's identity and life experience. Gender, one's relationship to the state and violence are key factors in shaping one's life experience. Historical evaluations were necessary to provide the framework for understanding the diverse and unique experiences of black Americans during this era. Literary analysis was the method of exploring the attitudes and emotions of the prisoners. Since the paper was based on this method it is important to explore the validity of this format and approach.

Literary analysis was an effective method for this project because a major goal was to get a glimpse of the "truth" of the prisoner's subjective existence. Rather than rely solely on factual accounts of the prison system, looking at the testimonies of prisoners gave a more complete account of the prisoners' positions. Some readers may believe that personal testimony is invalid or questionable because it is contaminated by personal bias. For the purposes of this paper, personal bias was explored as an essential component of the "true" experience of prison.

The overarching implication of this project is that prisons are not as isolated as we may perceive them to be. Ideas, like freedom, are not restricted to any real specific meaning. In our society we believe that the physical existence of prisons creates a clear distinction of who is free and who is not. This is not necessarily true and ideas are not so easily confined by the physical world. As Huey P. Newton once said, "You can jail a Revolutionary, but you can't jail the Revolution."

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