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**The captive voice: Writing within restriction**

**Porterfield, Daniel Ryan, Ph.D.**

**City University of New York, 1995**

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THE CAPTIVE VOICE: WRITING WITHIN RESTRICTION

by

Daniel R. Porterfield

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in  
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1995

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## Abstract

## THE CAPTIVE VOICE: WRITING WITHIN RESTRICTION

by

Daniel R. Porterfield

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"The Captive Voice: Writing within Restriction" argues that our understanding of many literary works is enhanced when we discern how they emerge from, contest, and/or qualify the conditions of captivity within which they were composed. The dissertation examines this dynamic in the writing of two captive groups: contemporary prisoners (primarily Americans) and nineteenth-century African Americans, who faced evolving forms of oppression before and after the Civil War.

The first three chapters show how three rhetorical practices employed by contemporary prisoners and ex-prisoners are related to the authors' captivity within both the penal system and a mainstream society that holds negative stereotypes of the "criminal." These practices are the attempts by writers to create textual presences of the prison, to define themselves through credibility-enhancing personae, and to resist prison disciplinary practices through the writing of poetry. Some of the authors considered include Ethel and Julius Rosenberg, Chester Himes, George Jackson, Malcolm Braly, Nathan Heard, Jack Henry Abbott, Jean Harris, Patricia McConnel, Velma

Barfield, Albert Race Sample, and a range of contemporary poets.

Chapter Four shows how, in texts by nineteenth-century African Americans, three different forms of narrative dialogue reflect and respond to social and ideological confinement experienced by the authors. Chapter Five argues that the ever-evolving experience of oppression led African American authors to view the published text not as a sacrosanct monument to Platonic truth or beauty, but as a living resource to be published, revised strategically, and re-published to benefit the race as a whole. Some of the texts considered in Chapters Four and Five include those authored by Frederick Douglass, Harriet Jacobs, Harriet Wilson, William Wells Brown, Josiah Henson, and David Walker.

In general, the dissertation argues that the works of captive writers gain power and beauty when they are understood in the context of the authors' everyday lives. Also, it argues that captivity does not always or only stifle creative expression, but also can inspire, hone, and direct it.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Private as research and writing may be, all dissertations are in fact collaborative. Mine is more so than most.

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Donna E. Shalala and W. Ann Reynolds wanted me to finish this dissertation and gave me time off from work to do so ... along with a few pointed writing lessons.

Timothy S. Healy, S.J. nourished my aspirations and knew that CUNY would be the right fit.

Every stage of my education has been enriched by wonderful teachers and fellow students. At CUNY, I wish to thank Neal Tolchin for serving on my Orals Committee; John Brenkman and William Kelly for serving on my Orals and Dissertation Committees; and Executive Officers Martin Stevens and Joseph Wittreich for having faith in me.

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My deepest thanks are to my family, especially Karen Herrling, the love of my life.

"The young dream and the old teach, and  
in that slow process comes a tomorrow  
that we who are older may never know,  
but will have helped to shape in the  
minds and hearts of our students."

Timothy S. Healy, S.J.

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## INTRODUCTION

**"The Captive Voice: Writing Within Restriction"**

Men ... because they are aware of themselves and thus of the world -- because they are *conscious beings* -- exist in a dialectical relationships between the determination of limits and their own freedom .... Once perceived by men as fetters, as obstacles to their liberation, these situations stand out in relief from the background, revealing their true nature as concrete historical dimensions of a given reality .... Thus, it is not the limit-situations in and of themselves which create a climate of hopelessness, but rather how they are perceived by men at a given historical moment.

Paulo Freire (89)

Unlike many writers in the "freer" outside world, the writer-in-prison cannot afford the luxury of writing to entertain the reader. In prison, where every free thought is contraband, writing is serious, deadly business, and every word must count.

Jerome Washington (x)

## 1.

Published in 1967, Journey into the Whirlwind recounts the first three years of the eighteen that Eugenia Semyonovna Ginzburg spent in Stalin-era prisons and work camps. Beginning with her detention in 1937 on the charge of failure to denounce the supposed Trotskyist counter-revolutionary errors in a colleague's essay, Ginzburg was stripped of her Communist Party membership, her teaching position, her home in Kazan, and her family. After 1937,



she never again saw her older son Aloysha and was not reunited with her younger son Vasya until 1949. Aloysha and Ginzburg's husband, mother, and father all died before her release from internal exile in Kolyma in 1955. In detention, on death trains, and in work camps, the former Party member endured extreme physical and emotional mortification -- torture, filth, illness, sleep deprivation, forced labor at forty-nine degrees below zero Celsius, malnourishment, solitary confinement, and isolation from family. She and her female companions turned into ghostly skeletons, their feet contorting "like the crooked claws of an old, plucked rooster" (309). Many died miserably.

Ginzburg claims that although the Stalinists wiped out almost every attribute of her "former existence" (24), they could not destroy her personal will. Most important, they could not take away her determination to survive with dignity and to maintain her own attitude about the circumstances imposed upon her. As part of that, the authorities had no power to prevent her from forming relationships of trust and love with other prisoners (99) and from using literature and the life of the mind "to resist the onslaught of the horrors around us" (343; also 176, 204, 221, 228, 282). The sheer existence of Journey into the Whirlwind and its sequel, Within the Whirlwind, -- the monumental moral fact that it mattered to this woman to write the books -- argues to the truth of these claims.

At the same time, however, Ginzburg complicates Journey into the Whirlwind by the occasional insertion of Communist Party propaganda into the text. The most startling example comes in the last sentences of the epilogue:

How wonderful that ... the great Leninist truths have again come into their own in our country and party! Today the people can already be told of things that have been and shall be no more.

Here, then, is the story of an ordinary Communist woman during the period of the "personality cult." (417)

The passage seems like newspeak, glossing over the enduring legacy of Stalinism in the Soviet Union in the mid-1960s: the persecution of organized religion, the denial of all meaningful political rights to the population at large, the unjust detention of a new generation of Eugenia Ginzburgs. If much of Journey into the Whirlwind demonstrates a humane commitment to historical truth-telling, the book's emphatic final note may seem to slip badly from that ideal. Did the author endure eighteen years in the Gulag only to whitewash on-going state-sponsored evil? Was she cowed, broken, or bought off?

In a word, no. Journey into the Whirlwind's propaganda must be read in terms of its performative or illocutionary functions -- in terms of what the passages do as speech-acts -- and not only with respect to what they might say as constative utterances (Austin 98-102). By calling herself an "ordinary Communist woman," as well as by declaring elsewhere that while starving in the Gulag she grieved when

Lenin's widow died (237), Ginzburg is trying to manipulate the contemporary Soviet thought police into allowing the publication of a chronicle that implicitly protests the authorities' falsified version of history and continuing oppression. In doing so, of course, the author runs the risk of alienating any contemporary civilian readers who might take her for a co-opted Party apologist. However, to prevent that misinterpretation, Ginzburg leaves a number of textual markers that display her to be no adherent of the "personality cult" precepts used to exonerate Soviet communism of its historic tyranny. Perhaps the most telling of these clues emerges from her savage depiction of purged Party officials futilely and desperately clinging to the Communist dogma as the Gulag grinds them down to dust -- a depiction that cues us to read Ginzburg's closing tribute to the "great Leninist truths" as bitter, biting irony. In fact, such textual markers may have been rather too apparent, for the authorities prevented Journey into the Whirlwind from being published in the 1960s and sentenced it to burial in the Marx-Engels-Lenin Institute, where, the author was informed, her manuscript "might serve as material on the history of the Party" (Ginzburg 1981, 422). Eventually, the book was circulated in *samizdat* editions, smuggled out of the USSR, and published abroad.

Some readers may object that even when one understands in their proper aesopian context the passages meant to

placate the censors, it remains disturbing to come upon paragraphs that, as speech-acts, reenact the scene of the author/victim capitulating to the imposed ideology of stronger social forces. Indeed, one *should* be disturbed by such spectacles. It may have been in an effort to produce exactly that effect that Ginzburg chose to preserve the propaganda in the translated editions, when she could have removed it. Prevented from stating directly, "I must write the Party's words," Ginzburg responds by displaying herself mouthing the Ogre's drivel with contemptuous pro forma brevity. By dramatizing this compliance, Ginzburg exposes and opposes the "whirlpool" of state prohibition and threat that forms the condition of authorship in the early-Brezhnev era, but no longer for her the defining boundaries. Every word counts.

Journey into the Whirlwind exemplifies what I call the captive voice -- the narrative or literary voice that negotiates the boundaries or limitations, perhaps adjustable, perhaps not, within which its expression occurs. Of course, a great deal of literature -- one could argue all literature -- has been composed within some form of restriction: censorship, oppression, repression, exile, ideology, social mores, mental illness, mortality, literary genres and even language itself. My claim is not that these "confinements" are equivalent or that all writing has the same function in relation to limiting forces regardless of

whether one is George Jackson writing from Soledad or John Donne trying to find a non-metaphorical word for God. But I do maintain that it is important to be aware of the diverse kinds of confinement faced by authors, and, where discernable, the different ways that writing responds to those circumstances.

The dissertation, "The Captive Voice: Writing within Restriction" examines this dynamic in the writing of two captive groups: contemporary prisoners (primarily Americans) and nineteenth-century African Americans, who faced evolving forms of oppression before and after the Civil War. For writers in both groups, their circumscribed social positions involve various forms of ideological restriction. These include widely-shared stereotypes of the prisoner or the "negro" that undermine authorial credibility. They include prevailing ideologies that legitimize one's imprisonment or oppression, or, alternatively, that must be embraced in order to contest one's social condition in terms that a mainstream audience will accept. And they include cultural expectations, both of potential publishers and of readers, as to what constitutes a credible voice for a prisoner, a fugitive slave, or a "freeman." Sometimes the captive voice breaks these ideological chains, but sometimes it does not or cannot because the strictures are preconditions for obtaining a public voice and, with that, other types of

liberation. That is to say, for both groups of authors, writing is often an ambiguous combination of idealism and pragmatism, resistance and surrender, freedom and captivity.

If the captive voice is the literary voice that negotiates various limitations placed upon the author, then its most obvious manifestation is direct description of one's circumstances. There is an enormous body of literature by prisoners and ex-prisoners about incarceration -- from Jack Henry Abbott to D.M. Zwelonke and from Patricia McConnel to Nawal el Sa'adawi. A similarly large corpus of narratives that relate the experience of slavery has been preserved from the nineteenth century. My interest here is not to summarize those works, which certainly speak for themselves. Rather than discussing what authors explicitly say about their captivities, I will explore ways in which formal features of their writing reflect and respond to them. The advantage of this focus is that it can reveal qualities of the captive voice -- quiet forms of combat or compromise -- that authors are unwilling or unable to discuss. Three critical methods are especially helpful. The first is to place texts in their social and ideological context, on the assumption, to paraphrase Raymond Williams, that the conditions of composition are an inextricable part of the fact of composition (1983, 3). I employ this approach throughout the dissertation, but particularly in Chapter Three, which argues that some of the formal features

of poetry by American prisoners are related to, and subversive of, the disciplinary practices and ideological justifications of American prisons. The second critical method is to read the work of similarly-situated authors for recurring trends, widespread but uncommented upon, whose prevalence suggests that authors are responding to a common requirement or expectation. For example, in Chapters One and Two, I discuss two conventions of prison narratives, the construction of a prison "presence" and the creation of prisoner personae by authors, and show how these rhetorical practices are, on the one hand, virtual necessities for prisoners or ex-prisoners, and on the other hand, opportunities for authors to enhance their credibility with mainstream, non-incarcerated readers. Likewise, in Chapter Four, I analyze three overlapping forms of dialogue in the writing of nineteenth-century African Americans such as Harriet Wilson and David Walker. The third critical method is the inverse of the second: upon excavation of the cultural contexts in which works were composed, to look for telling textual silences, lacunae that function either as enabling gaps for authors -- subjects better avoided than acknowledged -- or as fissures forced upon them. In Chapter Five, I use this method as part of an argument that the ever-changing dynamics of oppression in the mid-nineteenth century led African American authors uniquely to view the published literary work as a "fungible text," a living

resource to be revised strategically and re-published to benefit the race as a whole.

I will say a few words about the concept of captivity as it relates to the imprisoned and the oppressed, but first, I would like to answer the question friends and colleagues have often asked during my writing of this dissertation: how did you become interested in the captive voice? In addition to my undergraduate and graduate studies, three experiences have influenced this project. The first was my three months living and working in a fifty-family village in Northern Nicaragua after graduating from college in 1983. I went as one of eight volunteers in an educational program to give post-graduates a formative service experience in Latin America. Our role was defined loosely: we were placed with families in small communities and told to make ourselves useful. Based on the advice of past volunteers, we expected tough adjustment periods, but ultimately that we would "become one with the people." The year before leaving, I read up on liberation theology and the Nicaraguan political scene, arguing on campus against Reagan administration efforts to overthrow the Sandinistas.

I still remember the fear of being dropped off with my *gringo* partner at the homes of our host families. Half the village of *Esperanza* had been assembled to greet us. These were rural people, or *campesinos*. They lived in small, dirt-floor huts made of wood and reeds. The village had no



electricity, no running water, no health clinic, and no school for the children. Everybody worked, from pre-school tots who gathered kindling for kitchen fires to a remarkable eighty year-old man who harvested crops despite only having one leg. This was my first time overseas, and my poor Spanish often reduced me to pantomime. I have to say that most of my "work" consisted of learning skills ten year-olds had mastered, such as cutting yucca plants, drawing well-water, running down chickens, and making cement blocks in wooden molds. In time, my partner and I hoped, we would understand the community well enough to make a difference. But we did not have much time. Our year in Nicaragua was cut down to three months when the terrorism of the U.S.-sponsored Contras accelerated from raiding border communities to bombing airports and mining harbors throughout the country. We faced no danger in *Esperanza*, but the community did suffer economic strangulation, for in the fall of 1983, soap, kerosine, rice, and, most critically, gasoline had to be rationed. Without gas, the pick-up trucks to the city of *Leon* ran infrequently, which made it hard for subsistence farmers to sell their produce before it spoiled.

I cannot say that my time in *Esperanza* led to intercultural closeness and understanding. My reading in liberation theology and Nicaraguan politics was all but useless as ways of understanding the community. After three

months, I had attained only a surface-level grasp of what the people thought about such topics as politics and history, family and faith, and culture and values.

Sometimes I would think about the people in the village and realize I had no idea how they occupied their minds when they toiled all day in the fields or cooled down after work listening to *Radio Nicaragua* and watching the rain. Living in *Esperanza* taught me how difficult it is to understand another culture. So I undertake the task of this dissertation with humility.

The second experience that has shaped this project is my work teaching college-level courses in two prisons in 1986-87. At the Maryland House of Corrections, I taught philosophy to a class of about eighteen men, most of whom were in their 30s and 40s and were taking twelve to fifteen college credits towards associate's degrees. At the Lorton Reformatory, I taught English to a group of seven men who could take only one college-level course per year. These twenty-five students were ethnically, racially, and geographically diverse; their commonalities were poverty and substance abuse. My first question in both classes was, "Why are you here?" Some said that they wanted to learn and others mentioned the need to use their time well, while many valued academic work as a way to prepare to hold steady jobs. I remember that several African American men

discussed education as a key to racial solidarity and aspired to become positive role models for young people.

For the most part, the students' personal academic histories were poignant stories of frustration and failure. Most had dropped out of high school and earned a General Equivalency Degree (G.E.D.) in prison. Many lacked self-confidence in their academic ability, and no one embraced my suggestion to think of himself as a writer, not a student, and of me as a collaborator, not an evaluator. At the same time, the men possessed very strong opinions about many subjects and were particularly well-versed in current affairs. One surprise was that, in response to a questionnaire I distributed about the syllabus, the students asked to read great works like Antigone and Oedipus in addition to some of the more "relevant" texts I suggested we might study. I found that the men viewed knowledge of high culture and the opportunity to interpret classic works as personally empowering, a way of certifying to the outside world that they were indeed "educated." This exercise taught me to be careful about my assumptions about prisoners and their values.

Over the course of two semesters, I saw my students climb high hurdles just to come to class upbeat and regard themselves as people of worth. Not only are prisons loud, hot, and stuffy, but there is usually little privacy or relief from the stigma of being a convict. Understandably,

after disturbances in the cell-block, painful meetings with relatives, or shake-downs of their cells, the men would come to class edgy and distracted. A few students lost interest, and one was placed in "isolation" for a week. Especially at Lorton, the men received little institutional support for their studies. There was no library to speak of. The administration often scheduled activities at conflicting times, forcing people to choose between the class and a prayer group meeting or the week's only basketball hour. Occasionally, corrections officers mocked the men's efforts to "go to college," and sometimes fellow prisoners expressed resentment of their academic goals or pressured them to commit infractions that would knock them out of class.

Perhaps in part because of these impediments, in prison there is no question about the value of education. Most participants see G.E.D. and college classes as two of the rare activities that honor their humanity and treat them as legitimate members of society. At Lorton, I was re-awakened to the moral magnitude of education whenever the corrections officers tried to end a class session early so they could change shifts and go home. The infringement of even two minutes of the students' allotted academic time never failed to draw angry, combative responses. For all the men, imprisonment was an on-going and unhappy struggle, but many persevered by feeding their minds. Their efforts inspired me to become a better teacher by earning a Ph.D., and to

study how the published writing of prisoners may be related to their bounded circumstances.

The third experience that shapes the dissertation is my work since January, 1993 as the Director of Speechwriting for Donna E. Shalala, the Secretary of Health and Human Services and a member of President Clinton's cabinet. During this time, my fine staff has worked with Secretary Shalala on more than 450 speeches and 200 publications having to do with politically contentious subjects such as health care reform, welfare reform, AIDS policy, and domestic violence. The job has taught me a good deal about what makes for powerful spoken and written rhetoric, but more important for the dissertation, I have been exposed to strategies used by politicians and activists to enhance their voices in our deeply combative contemporary political arena. The terms of art include message discipline, counterscheduling, coalition-building, spinning, inoculation, and leaning on the base (or expecting core supporters to compromise). As I point out in Chapters Four and Five, some of these practices have helped me understand similar techniques used by African American writers in the nineteenth century. Right now, the only point I want to make is that, for the general public, whether in the nineteenth century or today, political discourse typically takes place within a cacophony of daily worries, everyday activities, routine information, occupational concerns,

popular culture, individual interests, and personal crises. In Washington, we refer to these competing strains as "noise." No doubt, in today's media-driven culture, our *heteroglossial* hurricane is far noisier than the nineteenth century's, but one parallel remains: as writers such as Frederick Douglass and William Wells Brown worked to develop public voices, they labored against not only their political opponents, but also against the indifference, distractedness, and over-stimulation of their mainstream audiences.

## 2.

Captivity, a multifaceted concept, has been used to describe various circumstances endured by individuals and groups. Etymologically, the term "captivity" suggests two different but related conditions: to be "held captive" and to be "captivated." The former, deriving from the Latin *captivus*, conveys forcible confinement, restraint, or subjugation, usually by an external force or power. The latter, deriving from the Latin *captivare*, conveys enrapture, a recognition of one's duty, or more generally, internally-sustained confinement. Like domination and dependency in the field of international relations, the two conditions tend to reinforce each other. To be "captivated" by despair, guilt, or racial blinders may derive from

external social forces and not just from internal ones, as shown, respectively, in the literary portrayals of Edith Wharton's Lily Bart, Toni Morrison's Sethe, and Melville's Amasa Delano. Correspondingly, as Frederick Douglass makes clear in his 1845 autobiography, to be "held captive" by warders, tyrants, torturers, or slaveholders often leads one to internalize and perpetuate one's oppression:

The slaves selected to go to the Great House Farm, for the monthly allowance for themselves and their fellow-slaves, were particularly enthusiastic. While on their way, they would make the dense old woods, for miles around, reverberate with their wild songs, revealing at once the highest joy and the deepest sadness ....

"I am going away to the Great House Farm!

O, yea! O, yea! O!"

... I did not, when a slave, understand the deep meaning of those rude and apparently incoherent songs. I was myself within the circle; so that I neither saw nor heard as those without might see and hear. (57)

The term *captivus* suggests that one is the object of confining power, while *captivare* suggests that one is the subject of such power. The double agency implied by the word "captivity" sometimes works to the advantage of one who perceives himself to be a captive. For example, on a Monday, a Lorton Reformatory prisoner may take heart in knowing that he is not responsible for his incarceration because he is the object of his captors; by Wednesday, he may draw strength from the antithetical proposition that, as an autonomous agent and no mere object, he can "do the time," instead of letting "the time do him." Viewed

diachronically, these two beliefs may indeed seem contradictory, and yet, at their respective synchronic moments, both may seem accurate. Unfortunately for the prisoner, this duality also works in reverse; by Thursday, he may grow despondent upon recognizing the impossibility of breaking free of his captors, only to chastise himself on Sunday for cooperating with the institution and thereby enacting his own confinement.

Both *captivus* and *captivare* are related to notions of power, which has been defined in various ways. Max Weber defines power as "that opportunity existing within a social relationship which permits one to carry out one's will even against resistance and regardless of the basis on which this opportunity exists" (Weber 117; qtd. in Patterson 1982, 1). Accordingly, those who are "powerless" either do not have the opportunity to execute their will or must submit to the will of others. Weber's formulation recognizes that human beings exercise power and experience powerlessness in relation to specific acts or desires. It implies that one person's inability to switch jobs or purchase health insurance resembles another's inability simply to obtain a job or to eat his prison meals when he wants (in that all represent the systematized frustration of personal will), but it avoids the relativistic claim that such diverse forms of restriction are morally or psychologically equivalent.



However, one problem emerges when we think of power only as the capacity to carry out one's will. Sometimes people are taught to "will" their own profoundly disempowering subjugation, as in the examples of "contented" slaves or "adjusted" prisoners. Here, the research of Orlando Patterson proves of great assistance. In Slavery and Social Death, Patterson argues that power has three complementary "facets": 1) the use or threat of violence; 2) the cultural facet of authority, or as he quotes Rousseau, "the means of transforming force into right and obedience into duty"; and 3) the psychological facet of influence, which is the capacity to affect the way that individuals perceive their interests and circumstances (1982, 1-2). These three qualities of power translate into three types of coercive *practices* by empowered groups: 1) acts or threatened acts of property destruction, arrest, imprisonment, enslavement, torture, homicide, genocide, and war; 2) acts of controlling law, legislation, the economy, and social behavior; and 3) acts of shaping thought. One of the advantages of this paradigm is that it reminds us that different social captivities such as incarceration, endemic poverty, and false consciousness may derive from the same fundamental power dynamic in society. Furthermore, the paradigm allows us to make more reasonable assessments of authors' subversion strategies -- that is, to delineate more precisely which powers are being subverted and to what

effect in a text. After all, just because an author protests, say, a prison's use of violence to prevent its captives from escaping (one manifestation of the first facet of power) does not mean that he or she subverts all the legal and ideological facets of Western capitalism and democracy, as some critics would have it.

With a nod towards Hegel, scholars sometimes claim that the extreme discrepancy of power between masters and bondsmen may cause the former to become oddly reliant upon the latter as the registers of their identities and the producers of their labor (Hegel 228-40). However, it has never been proven sufficiently that this dependency (itself questionable)<sup>1</sup> overturns the master/slave power hierarchy permanently, only that it may do so temporarily and provisionally, as in Melville's "Benito Cereno" or in exceptional cases. I do not believe that power normally gravitates to the oppressed as a consequence of some kind of pure captivity or perfect submission. It may be true that silent submission confuses an oppressor or in some cases evokes sympathy, but that is very different than saying that the tortured or the enslaved become subjects by first becoming the ultimate objects. Rather, objects of someone else's power gradually become subjects with their own power

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<sup>1</sup> I am skeptical about the dependency proposition because masters presumably have many other registers of their identity in addition to their slaves, including their families, friends, faith, community, and culture.

when they commit themselves to action: that is, when they resist their captors in (at least) symbolically significant ways; when they build community among themselves; and when they wage the struggle for justice at the level of words and ideas. The dissertation views writing as potentially one type of liberational action.

The Hegelian model implies that, intentionally or unintentionally, ruling classes aspire to ever-increasing power over their subjects. Alternatively, Antonio Gramsci argues that the truly dominant social groups are those that strategically loosen restriction and develop a "compromise equilibrium" to preserve their "essential" socio-economic superiority (161). Through the much-discussed practice of hegemony, such groups teach the general public the conditions under which they ought to consent to be ruled -- typically, conditions already manifested in the existing social order (244). Eugene Genovese applies this model to the American slave system, arguing that the fundamental power dynamic between masters and slaves was a kind of paternalism in which both groups accepted some notion of obligation to the other (1976, 4-112). Similarly, Erving Goffman's classic study of the power dynamics in total institutions emphasizes the primacy of obtaining the cooperation of the institutionalized as a means of humiliating and controlling them (16). The Gramscian model of power differs somewhat from Weber's: in the latter, the

most deeply restrictive social captivities occur when captors most fully realize their will; in the former, they occur when captives and captors collaborate to realize the captor's will. But both models correspond to circumstances in which imprisoned and oppressed authors might find themselves.<sup>2</sup>

Just as captivity is related to notions of power, it is also related to conceptions of freedom, which Orlando Patterson discusses as a "chordal triad" of personal, sovereign, and civic freedoms. Patterson employs the musical metaphor to explain freedom because, in his view, the three elements can be lived and/or understood in relation to each other or as separate phenomena. Personal freedom gives the sense "that one is neither being coerced nor restrained by another person in doing something desired and ... the conviction that one can do as one pleases within the limits of the other person's desire to do the same" (1991, 3). Sovereign freedom is defined as "the power to act as one pleases, regardless of the wishes of others" (3-4). Finally, civic freedom is "the capacity of adult members of a community to participate in its life and

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<sup>2</sup> Because it is based on the assumption that power is competed for by discrete social groups, Gramsci's framework contrasts with Foucault's agentless notion of "power-knowledge," which is a disciplinary grid thought to impose a crushing "power of normalization" upon all (1979, 308). Although I discuss Foucault's conception of the disciplinary power of prisons in Chapter Three, the dissertation does not explore the possibility that writers are engaged in a semi-Sisyphean struggle against "power-knowledge."

governance. A person feels free ... to the degree that he or she belongs to the community of birth, has a recognized place in it, and is involved in some way in the way it is governed" (4).

The flexibility of this triadic definition explains why the Solidarity activist Adam Michnik could call his 1982 captivity in the Bialoleka Internment Camp "a moral luxury and an oasis of dignity" (4). While Michnik's personal freedom to step beyond the barbed wire fence was indeed denied, and while he clearly had no sovereignal freedom in relation to General Jarulzelski and his henchmen, incarceration could not prevent him from exercising the following: the personal and civic freedoms of political resistance through the positive act of writing and the negative act of refusing to sign a government loyalty oath; the civic freedom of contributing to a national culture of resistance, a freedom that the obdurate, self-defeating state only enhances through illegal arrests, which acknowledge the "importance" of the work done by those detained (4); and the personal freedom of choosing not "to negate yourself, to wipe out the meaning of your life [and] to betray the people who have faith in you" (6). Patterson's triadic paradigm suggests that one may "play" the three notes of liberty variably, shifting the emphasis depending upon the exigencies of particular situations,

which is exactly what Michnik and some of the authors considered herein seem to have done.<sup>3</sup>

Of course, few of us will experience freedom as an unchanging, absolute state or value in any of these triadic realms. Most people are likely to experience personal freedom erratically, because they live within the innumerable restraints of law, society, culture, conscience, and even time and mortality. Likewise, individuals live their sovereign freedom within those same restraints, as well as within the ultimately limited power to impose their will upon others and, for example, force bigots to become tolerant or family members to become happy. Finally, most people probably experience civic freedom intermittently and inconsistently, since they claim membership in many different "communities of birth" all at once (globe, nation, city, neighborhood, race, class, gender, ethnicity, culture, religion) and feel differently empowered and invested in each. As the Soviet dissident Edward Kuznetsov writes in his Prison Diaries: "Total freedom in this life is impossible; we can speak only of degrees of freedom, and even these are illusory. The best of all societies is the one in which the man who is in pursuit of freedom is not

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<sup>3</sup> I will not rehearse Patterson's argument for the superiority of his model over the older notion of Isaiah Berlin that freedom ought to be defined as "freedom to" and "freedom from." See the Introduction to Freedom in the Making of Western Culture (New York: Basic Books, 1991).

forever banging his head against a wall of social and political slavery" (59).

Freedom and captivity are typically thought of as binary terms, each defining the other by its absence. Throughout the Cold War, Americans believed themselves to be citizens of the "freest country in the world" on the grounds that the shackles of communism did not afflict them. Before that, many enslaved African Americans intuited that escape or manumission would automatically bestow the transformative status of "freedom," while whites on both sides of the Mason-Dixon line knew that they were free because, of course, they were not slaves. Frequently, the supposed autonomy of an individual is measured on the basis of whether he or she can perform a single significant act: dirt-poor *campesinos* are called "free" if they can vote in "democratic" elections. Long-dead authors are considered "captive" if their work ignores an issue of interest to contemporary scholars. The danger of such dichotomous views is not only that they are usually reductive and inaccurate, but also that, in allowing ourselves to hold them, we diminish our capacity to appreciate the real complexity of each person's dialectical struggle for freedom, including our own. No attempt is made here to classify writers in absolute terms.

Another connection between freedom and captivity is that both are experienced as processes, not static, final

resting points. In everyday life -- whether in the hardship of Stalin's Gulag or in a society of such openness that people genuinely find its tolerance repressive -- individuals live their freedoms and captivities as unfolding affairs, kaleidoscopically shifting and never permanently defined so long as one retains even the minimal capacity to alter one's perspective. That is the sense of Dickinson's signature line, "Captivity is consciousness -- / So's Liberty" (#384, lines 15-16, 183). Human beings constantly qualify, seeing ourselves as "free to" or "free from" in some realms, and as "captive to" or "prevented from" in others. All at once, one feels free to raise one's children, captive to the need to earn an income, free to make new acquaintances, captive to a decaying biosphere, free to vote, captive to the choice of candidates, free to write what one likes, captive to language, lens, and the boundaries of one's intellect. In the words of Paulo Freire, people, "because they are aware of themselves and thus the world ... exist in a dialectical relationship between the determination of limits and their own freedom" (89). In different places in the dissertation, I refer to this phenomenon as the "dialectic of captivity."

But, if that is the dialectic, why coin the term "the captive voice" instead of "the free voice" or "the captive/free voice"? Three reasons. First, more so than freedom, captivity is experienced as a problem that must be



resolved or a condition that must be escaped -- and creative expression becomes a means towards that goal. Second, while Westerners may be justified in their allegiance to the ideal of "free expression," blind faith in its attainability can create an insensitivity to the fact that writers "free" of official state censorship still encounter various types of prohibition. And third, captivity often imposes rules on writers -- exigencies of law, or taste, or subject matter, or form, or popular demand. As exemplified by authors from Nathan Heard to Harriet Wilson, the literary consequence of externally- or internally-imposed regulation is not always Muse-killing confinement. Unlike freedom, captivity sometimes has the derivative benefit, by no means universal or absolute, of creating enabling restrictions for authors and artists. Vaclav Havel made this point under severe censorship in 1981, twenty-two months into his prison term in Hermanice Prison, when he wrote: "this enforced way of writing ... compels me to compromise, something which -- plagued as I am by a longing for perfection -- I would be loath to do under other circumstances and which would probably mean I would never write about such matters at all" (1988, 245).

A word about the question of focus. To some extent, I made an arbitrary decision to examine the captive voice in the works of contemporary prisoners and nineteenth-century African Americans. After all, one might have studied

writing emerging from the bounded situations of gender- or class-based oppression, or looked at how writers who are not oppressed nevertheless must work within strictures of cultural perspective, social mores, and language itself. In my early thinking about why this subject might make an interesting dissertation topic, it was helpful to think broadly, and to speculate about shared challenges faced by different types of "captive" writers, a Jean Harris and a Herman Melville or an Abdellatif Laabi and a William Styron. But when it came time actually to write the dissertation -- to prioritize my ideas and to complete the project within a reasonable time frame -- the notion of limiting boundaries became an enabling restriction of my own. Broad topics must begin somewhere; in this case, it made sense to begin with the writings of people whose confinements are intense, material, and empirically verifiable.

## Chapter One

### The Presence of the Prison

But who can describe the wretchedness of the cell, like the prisoner himself? If he is a poet, his soul breaks forth from the restraint and gloom of his confinement. With him there is no imagination. All is stern, living reality; he knows what it is to be a convict.

Charles and John M. Spear, 1847 (vi)

As Jean Genet knew, book-length autobiographical prison accounts usually are written for readers who have not done time (5). In part, the appeal of such books is the on-the-scene, inside perspective that outside readers know their own experience does not afford. Indeed, as far back as 1847, the social reformers Charles and John M. Spear understood the power of testimony from within the walls of the penitentiary. In their anthology, Voices from Prison, (which was part of a campaign for the humane treatment of convicts) they emphasized on the title page that all selections were "Written within a Cell."

Still, all insider accounts of prison (and perhaps of other closed systems) face the authenticating imperative that the text confirm its own first-order assertion that the author really is or was within the belly of the beast. Such corroboration can come in different ways, perhaps in the narrative's subject matter, in third-party introductions, in photographs and illustrations, or in particular verifying

features of the author's voice. But somehow, the author must prove or show, in the words of Melville's famous narrator, that "I, Ishmael, was one of that crew" (1851, 179). This chapter shows how prison narratives establish their authenticity as "inside" accounts by making the institution textually present to readers. I will say more about "presence," but first, a key qualification.

Ironically, authenticating one's "inside" position has the potential to *discredit* an imprisoned author, for doing so may elicit from readers the range of negative judgments typically made against the incarcerated. As I will discuss in Chapters Two and Three, because writers in prison are both dependent upon and damned by their institutional and social statuses, they face a dilemma: to publish autobiographies, they must capitalize on their privileged inside perspectives, but, having done that, they implicitly show themselves to be social outcasts and pariahs. This positional double-bind comes with the act of writing an autobiography; it is a Catch-22 confinement, a condition of authorship, built into the courageous act of daring to tell one's story. While this chapter looks at the first part of the double-bind, the next one examines prisoners' need to address readers' distrust and even contempt for them.

So what do I mean by the textual presence of prison? If an "actual" presence is immediate and perceivable, a textual presence is an entity evoked in readers' minds by

the written word or some other form of representation. Textual presences are inherently subjective to individual readers; no matter how searing Jean Harris's books about the Bedford Hills Women's Correctional Facility may be, they cannot actually materialize their stark settings for readers. All they can do is create the effect of immediacy, the sense of the place, a feeling for the influence of the prison on the writer.

Books only provide words on a page. As Jacques Derrida tells us, when we read, written words supplement the absent presence of an element in two ways: they "supply a deficiency" (filling in for the absent presence), and they "supply something additional" (adding something to the absent presence [260]). To Derrida, any presence that a text creates is illusional -- "a signifying and substitutive reference inscribed in a system of differences and the movement of a chain" (263). Of course, Derrida was not the first to discover that texts create only the illusion of presence, but not an element itself. One suspects that the earliest artists who carved animal figures into their cave walls knew that signifiers only represent their signifieds, but are not the signifieds themselves.

Authors strive to create the textual presence of the prison for other reasons in addition to authenticating their inside position. The illusion of presence enhances metonymic arguments like Rubin "Hurricane" Carter's

assertion that the United States is "a penitentiary with a flag" (210). Indirectly, it may bolster a narrative's ancillary arguments, since many readers, if moved or impressed by the author's prison experience, will grant greater authority to his or her claims on matters of criminology, faith, philosophy, or politics.<sup>1</sup> A striking prison presence can enhance human rights claims, because enabling readers' to visualize or "feel" one's confinement may increase the likelihood of helpful outside advocacy. That's one reason why I, Rigoberta Menchu, Indres Naidoo's Robben Island, and Frederick Douglass's 1845 Narrative are admired for their "literary" qualities; the practical (though highly-complex) political imperative that one powerfully display the agents and effects of human rights violations requires considerable descriptive and rhetorical ingenuity.

Of course, even before most people read their first prison account, prisons already have become textually present to them. All societies publicize the harshness of prison life as a disincentive for law-breaking, and most sustain public debate about the proper societal response to crime and the appropriate functions of prisons. In the West, television, movies, music videos, magazines, and other

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<sup>1</sup> For example, Jacobo Timerman's gripping presentation of prison-house torture in the early chapters of Prisoner Without a Name, Cell Without a Number may augment the later chapters' case for political Zionism.

forms of mass culture routinely give outsiders an inside look at jails and penitentiaries. On a different plane, we formulate notions of incarceration through the pervasive metaphorical use of the lexicon of incarceration (words such as "prisoner," "jail," and "locked up") to communicate powerlessness, captivity, and unhappiness. Moreover, in the United States, which currently maintains more than 5,000 prisons, jails, and public juvenile institutions and which incarcerates its population at four times the rates of our closest competitors (Canada, China), almost all adults have passed prisons along the roadway, and many have entered them as visitors, workers, or residents.<sup>2</sup> Thus, writers have to assume that readers on the outside possess vivid images of the inside -- and probably some very definite opinions about crime and punishment as well.

Because of readers' background familiarity, making prison textually present requires the adroit juggling of two discursive imperatives celebrated by Coleridge as the "cardinal points of poetry" in Chapter 14 of Biographia

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<sup>2</sup> In 1992, there were 88 federal prisons and 726 state prisons in the United States. See 1993 Juvenile and Adult Correctional Departments, Institutions, Agencies, and Paroling Authorities (Laurel, MD: American Correctional Association, Front Table). In 1988, there were 3,316 American jails, and in 1989, there were 1,100 public juvenile facilities (as well as 38,143 private juvenile facilities). See Kathleen Maguire and Timothy J. Flanagan, eds., Sourcebook of Criminal Justice Statistics (Washington, D.C.: USGPO, 1991), pp. 582, 575. In 1991, 445 of every 100,000 persons in the U.S. were incarcerated. Canada's and China's rates were both 111 per 100,00 people. See Mark Mauer, Americans Behind Bars (The Sentencing Project, 1992).

Literaria: the writer must gain the confidence of readers by providing "a faithful adherence to the truth of nature," while also "giving the interest of novelty by the modifying colors of imagination" (5). Consequently, too much "truth" will make an autobiography appear redundant, while too much "novelty" will make it seem implausible, one-sided, or unverifiable. Of course, truth and novelty are defined here in relation to readers' prior or intuitive knowledge of prison, and not according to objective standards.

The effort to create presence actually begins before narrative proper in prefatory textual elements such as the book's preface, publishing imprimatur, and adulatory back-cover endorsements. Titles such as "Stone Wall College" and "Cell 2245, Death Row" invoke visual images of the institution. So too do introductions summarizing the author's prison experience and book jackets displaying cinderblock walls, a forlorn prisoner's face, or other symbols of caged humanity or institutional power.

In the narrative proper, commonly-used rhetorical practices for creating presence include, 1) descriptions of warders who personify the institution; 2) present tense verb forms to suggest that the events of the author's or protagonist's incarceration are occurring as one reads; 3) the second person point-of-view to imply that "you," the reader, are or were a participant in the scenes represented; and, 4) naturalistic descriptions of the walls and



watchtowers, shackles and cells, and bars and bunks.

Abdellatif Laabi employs all four strategies in Rue du

Retour:

... In the weak light of dawn you can make out two tables and a wooden bench. In one corner of the room there are some baskets overflowing with twine rages and glass bottles. In another corner there's a heavy duty tyre.

Later you'll get to know these objects .... They stretch you out on the bench and rope you firmly along the whole length of your body. They put a rag over your face and begin to pour water over it: you instinctively breathe it through your mouth and nose.... The technique has been used so often that it has become infallible. A moment arrives when the brain becomes disconnected from the rest of the body. It is no longer the command center, the controller which takes all facts into account and distributes information, articulates the limbs and the organs. It is simply cut off but hanging on to just enough energy to continue functioning for its own sake.

In another part of your body your guts continue to churn automatically. The water becomes undrinkable. As soon as you close your mouth, someone pinches your nose. You have to open it again to gargle with this sour liquid which numbs your larynx. Like fish in the tank or at the bottom of the fisherman's basket. You weaken and offer no more resistance. A white and bitter cloud takes over your brain. To die, is that all there is to it? (26, 30-31)

In the hands of less polished writers, such rhetorical practices may fall flat. Depicting warders as emblems of the institution can seem simplistic and all-too predictable. Second person and present tense usages may draw attention to their own artifice, especially when the "you" of the text is consigned to circumstances or commits acts that readers simply will not accept as their own. Naturalistic descriptions of the prison *mise-en-scene* can appear unduly

long on Coleridgean "truth" and short on the modifying colors of imagination; after all, with their stripped-down sameness and brick and bar motif, prisons do not lend themselves to new and unusual portraiture.<sup>3</sup>

Another rhetorical strategy authors use to create presence are tableaux passages. In theater, a tableau is "an interlude during a scene ... in which the actors freeze in position and then resume action as before or hold their position until the curtain falls" (Holman 439). In narrative, then, a tableau is any freezing of the forward-moving plot or sequence of events to allow for the insertion of information that is supplementary to the main story line. Typically, tableaux tend to be relatively succinct, self-contained passages that describe a representative prison scene, character, or event. Some examples include:

The convicts, a variety of men doing variety of things: reading, studying, drawing, playing cards, playing musical instruments, making beaded bags, making inlaid jewel boxes, typewriting, laughing, cursing, coming in and out between the bunks with the sliding sidewise motion of crabs. A prize fighter dancing down by the latrine,

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<sup>3</sup> However, it is possible that prison thick description may not seem redundant to readers who, unlike me, have not read numerous prison accounts. In the past, most academics considered their intensive research to be the "knowledge" or "scholarship" that gives them authority to interpret texts or assess their value. Today, scholars sometimes disavow this authority and admit that their evaluations and interpretations are always contingent upon (and even handicapped by) their atypical reading experience (Herrnstein Smith 5), their ever-evolving sense of any given work's value (Herrnstein Smith 6) or their subjective social/historical position (Montrose 31). That said, I believe the judgments contained herein are sound.

showing off his muscles. A deaf convict studying a law course similar to the one I had once studied. A one-armed convict rolling a cigarette .... A slim, bald-headed man named Stick, wearing purple shorts, stamping a crease in his pants stretched out on the floor. (Himes 208)

The graduations in the auditorium were pathetic affairs. Diplomas were handed out as well as certificates for classes completed in cooking, painting, canning, and the like. Graduation was held on a holiday, with a program of music. The students came dressed in their best, and a synthetic "good time" was had by all. (Flynn 71)

Most of the prisoners who came out of the wards seemed happy to be going. They grinned at each other, joked with men in the other wards. All of them had something in common: they were either smiling or laughing loudly. A passerby who didn't know, would have thought the men were going home. He would never guess that they were all on their way to the state prison. But that was the way the county jail affected a man. After staying there any length of time, the men were glad to go to prison, just to get away from the sorry food, the sorry sleeping conditions, the unwholesome closeness of a lot of men shoved inside a small ward with nothing to occupy their minds. (Goines 189)

Tableau passages have the handy virtue of being readily clipped for criminology textbooks and corrections anthologies. Marie Maclean calls them "frozen moment[s] within the sequence" of a narrative, or "framed spectacle[s]" (12). Importantly, the kind of spectacles that tableaux frame are not only the particular scenes or passages in the narrative, but also the spectacle of the *author making a specific speech act* -- choosing to exemplify the prison with this panoramic description or that encapsulating moment. That is to say, prison tableaux also stand out in the act and process of story-telling as those

frozen moments when the author indirectly reinforces the Ishmaeleian claim of being "there."

Tableaux can authenticate a prison account by creating a "novel" prison presence. For example, in an otherwise brutal representation of a county jail in White Man's Justice, Black Man's Grief, Donald Goines includes a tableau that shows how, when one prisoner returns from a hearing, his blockmates politely refrain from asking about the proceedings (94). In a similar move, Jean Harris briefly departs from a harsh portrayal of her counterparts in the Bedford Hills Correctional Facility to describe some women ironing, writing letters, playing cards, and exchanging pictures of their children. The tableau ends with Harris proclaiming, as if it were news, "They're so remarkably ordinary .... They're people. They're women" (1986, 220). Novel tableaux also include vignettes of idiosyncratic prisoners or warders who help give an institution (and a narrative) a distinctive flavor. Horace Woodruff writes a few paragraphs about Frog, a witty warden who occasionally requires the guards to serve dinner to the prisoners in the staff mess hall (24); Malcolm Braly presents the legendary Angelo, who spent fifty-six years behind bars after setting his wife's severed head upon the bar at his local tavern and demanding, "Now nag, you sonabitch" (1967, 71).

Likewise, authors employ tableaux to tell readers what they already "know" about prison fare. In works by American

males, recurring "true" tableaux include depictions of incorrigible convicts, slang-filled banter, contraband economies, and power struggles between the keepers and the kept. However, the most rhetorically charged tableau scenes depict same-sex rape, the *sine qua non* of American prison stereotypes. This is a subject that, for all of its prominence in popular culture, actually has been the subject of very little research. On the basis of anecdotes and one 1968 study, Charles E. Silberman's 1978 book Criminal Violence, Criminal Justice asserts that rape is rampant in contemporary American male prisons (386-392, 415-6).<sup>4</sup> Conversely, surveys at selected institutions have indicated that although prisoners do feel terrible anxiety about the possibility of being raped, the crime occurs relatively infrequently.<sup>5</sup> The fact is, insufficient empirical research

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<sup>4</sup> The 1968 study by Alan J. Davis concluded that an "epidemic" of at least 2,000 rapes occurred among 60,000 prisoners in Philadelphia jails and prisons between June, 1966 and July, 1968 (Silberman 390). Davis's study provides the empirical support for Anthony M. Scacco Jr.'s conclusion that "The end result of victimization in a correctional setting is usually sexual aggression and domination as a political act based on a show of force" (Scacco 3). With insufficient empirical data, Scacco arranges a montage of participant testimony in support of the proposition that, in the 1970s, prison rape was primarily an act of racial bitterness committed by blacks upon whites.

<sup>5</sup> Daniel Lockwood's random 1974-75 survey of eighty men in New York State prisons, published in his book Prison Sexual Violence (1980), found that only one man had reported an assault, "but 28 percent ... had been targets of sexual aggressors at least once in institutional custody" (2). Lockwood defines sexual assault broadly to include not only physical abuse, but also abuse by threatening or insulting language, and subjection to propositions perceived as

exists for a solid assessments, either nation-wide or by region, state, or type of institution.

That said, rape tableaux are virtually everywhere in American male prison writing. The very different autobiographers Angelo Herndon (210-11), Jack Brown (40, 68), Joseph Sorrentino (63), George Harsh (53-5), Piri Thomas (1967, 283-87; 1974, 67), Vincent Teresa (3), Edward R. Jones (24), Thomas Flynn (61-3), Haywood Patterson (65-70) and Albert Race Sample (163-170) all depict sexual assaults by prisoners or staff. Wilbert Rideau and Ron Wikberg choose to include an essay on same-sex rape (with tableaux) in their 1992 collection of essays, Life Sentences. For reasons mentioned in the next chapter, Jack Henry Abbott uses the same-sex rape tableau to cast himself as a rapist: "In prison, if I take a punk, *she is mine*. He is like a slave, a chattel slave. It is the custom that no one addresses her directly. He cleans my cell, my clothing and runs errands for me .... Another prisoner can take her from me if he can dominate me" (94).

The rape tableau is equally prominent and even more graphic in prison fiction, appearing in Mack Thomas's The Total Beast (82-3), Dennis Lehman's The Getbacks of Mother

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threatening (2). Lockwood cites a report by D.A. Fuller et al "that estimated the sexual assault rate in 1976 for the North Carolina Prison system as less than one percent, based on 30-31 incidents ... yearly among a population of 4,495" (8). The Fuller study was based on reports of administrators, the Davis study on testimonies of prisoners.

Superior (29-30) and Edward Bunker's The Animal Factory (12, 130f) and Little Boy Blue (148). Goines uses it to show how a psychopath named Jug attempts to dominate an entire cell-block by forcing two men to perform sadistic sexual acts in a common area (185). Nathan Heard's 1983 novel of social criticism, House of Slammers, employs it in a particularly gratuitous way; not once before or after a lurid, chapter-long rape tableau does Heard mention either the two black assailants or their naive, passive, white teenage victim Billy (67-82).<sup>6</sup> In almost every telling, same-sex rape ruins the victim, permanently transforming him into either a sexual slave (Goines) or into a homicidal lunatic (Heard). The victim-figure Dumplin' in Sample's Racehoss combines

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<sup>6</sup> In his study of prison fiction, Dennis Massey argues that Heard's tableaux of sexualized violence "appear not exaggerated one bit" (33). But, Massey uses as his single touchstone of "reality" Piri Thomas's tableau in Seven Long Times of the necessity of protecting himself from older convicts. Leaving aside the problem that Thomas and Heard present rape differently, it must be noted that Massey's confidence that Thomas provides the facts that verify Heard's fiction demonstrates one of the conditions of practice for writers of prison accounts -- that readers often judge a work's verisimilitude according to how well the work accords with prior textual representations of the same subject, and not on the basis of personal experience or empirical evidence. Unfortunately, in order to supplement very lean data about prison rape, criminologists often make Massey's move of citing anecdotal evidence, as if the horror of single attacks measures national or regional occurrence rates (as in Bowker 4-7; Scacco 22-23). It does not. Coincidentally, Piri Thomas's writing is often made to serve this end, as his same-sex rape vignettes are quoted by the scholars Silberman (389-92) and Lockwood (7).

these possibilities, first becoming a "punk," only later to dismember his antagonist, Bull (163-70).<sup>7</sup>

Regardless of what the facts are about rape in prison, tableaux have the serviceable narrative function of confirming several "truths" at once. The passages confirm the warning widely-given to adolescent American boys (via mass culture, publicity for the Scared Straight program, and high school civics classes) that committing crimes ultimately will land them within the snares of sadistic convicts devoted to the annihilation of their masculinity. Furthermore, the passages confirm the mainstream belief (perhaps waning slightly in the last twenty years) that male homosexuality is psychopathic, self-loathing, and perverse.<sup>8</sup> Arguably, it is in this pragmatic spirit of gaining

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<sup>7</sup> In order to explore same-sex rape in more depth, some texts move beyond tableau presentations. Heard's To reach a dream concerns the proletarian hero Bart's post-release struggle to deal with the psychic damage of having been raped. One of the dramatic tensions in Miguel Piñero's play Short Eyes is whether a group of convicts will demonstrate that they are morally superior to an accused pedophile by raping him. Similarly, the plot of Floyd Salas's Tattoo the Wicked Cross revolves around whether a tough, small boy will be able to protect himself from a rapacious gang of older youths.

<sup>8</sup> A systematic study of homophobic tableaux in prison narratives would need to consider two additional hypotheses: 1) that homophobic tableaux are in some way related to the repressed homosexuality of writers and readers; and 2) that in certain instances of same-sex rape tableaux can be read as coded gay eroticism. In either scenario, homophobic tableaux illustrate that while penitentiaries remove prisoners from mainstream society, they do not remove them from the circulation of mainstream debates, ideas, and ideology.



credibility that the Scottsboro Boy and runaway prisoner Haywood Patterson subtitled his politically-important 1950 autobiography: "The Volcanic Truth about Southern Prisons: What Goes on Between Blacks and Whites .... Between Men and Boys."

In authenticating of a prison text, rape tableaux can be a powerful promotional tool. For example, in the sidebar of a very favorable review, The New York Times Book Review excerpted a rape tableau from a 1979 essay included in Rideau's and Wikberg's Life Sentences (Banks 5). No doubt, the excerpt established the authors as prisoners willing to "tell it like it is." But some of the novel material might have been chosen instead, perhaps from groundbreaking essays on older prisoners, the dynamics of parole, and the prolonged torture of electrocution.<sup>9</sup>

It stands to reason that the high truth value of same-sex rape tableaux also licenses occasional variations for their novelty value. For example, in False Starts, Malcolm Braly interrupts the chronology of his life to attack "the dominant myth" that "young prisoners are routinely screwed by older convicts":

Always as I have heard the story the kid is caught in the bath house and offered the narrow choice of putting shit on someone's dick or blood on his

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<sup>9</sup> Moreover, the article on rape, "The Sexual Jungle," is dated, having been written and published in The Angolite in 1979. Its only secondary source is Scacco's 1976 study, Rape in Prison, which is based upon the 1966-68 Davis study of one institution. Clearly, current research is needed.

knife. I am sure that this has happened. I am sure that it is happening somewhere today, but in my own experience it was always like the similar stories that you heard in high school about the girl crazed on Spanish Fly who ruptured herself on a gear shift or had a coke bottle removed from her quim -- it always happened somewhere else in another town, and it seems clear that these stories describe more of our sexual ambivalence than they do any common reality. (1976, 105-6)

In the memoir, My Shadow Ran Fast, Bill Sands uses the tableau to make the same "novel" observation, although with very different implications. Portraying himself as having been rehabilitated by a caring San Quentin warden, Sands uses the rape tableau to defend the administration against the charge of fostering or allowing rape as a means of control. Thus, his rape tableau posits that American prisons responsibly protect the general prison population from sexual assault by isolating dangerous homosexual "deviates" or "rapos" (97).

Structurally, tableaux have the advantage of being readily distributable throughout a work so that, gradually and cumulatively, the textual presence of prison can be created. For example, Nawal el Sa'adawi intersperses tableaux throughout Memoirs from the Women's Prison. She includes the strangeness of the label "detainee" (24); the pain of unbroken time (31); the hardship of lost routine (41); the prisoners' use of cigarettes as currency (81); the tedium of long, dark nights in contrast to the revulsion provoked by the illuminating light of day (87); the genesis of new senses of perception in confinement (90); the

crushing monotony of the colors white, black, and grey (102); the absence of solitude and silence (128-9); and the draining, non-stop battle to overcome institutionally-encouraged self-doubt (136). Narratively, the regular interpolation of these tableaux, which are arresting in their own right, continually reminds the reader of the book's declared *raison d'etre*, defining perspective and claim to moral authority -- the author's position at point zero.

The tableaux in Memoirs from the Women's Prison do something else as well: they make present to readers common features of imprisonment, widely-shared phenomenological moments of claustrophobia and sensory deprivation that are not personally, historically, or culturally specific to Sa'adawi's experience. Similar "universal" tableaux can be found in prison accounts of diverse cultures and eras -- from Helen Bryan's Inside to Nien Cheng's Life and Death in Shanghai, and from Hugh Lewin's Bandiet to Natan Sharansky's Fear No Evil. However, despite the use of "universal" tableaux, Sa'adawi does not second Breyten Breytenbach's oft-cited argument that "prisons are ... pretty much the same all over," (1984, 339).<sup>10</sup> Thematically, Memoirs

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<sup>10</sup> Breytenbach might have been more sensitive to variations in South Africa's penal institutions. He was subjected to less physical abuse and intellectual restriction in Pollsmoor Prison than were writers of color tortured in detention and/or sent to the Robben Island to chop rocks in the quarries (Dennis Brutus, Molefe Pheto, Alex La Guma, Indres Naidoo, D.M. Zwelonke, Michael Dingake,

emphasizes that women's prisons have unique functions and effects in Sadat's Egypt and in Islamic societies, the communication of which is undoubtedly one reason why Sa'adawi wrote her memoirs. The use of "universal" tableaux subtly furthers that goal, because making present cross-cultural attributes of prison creates a bridge of credibility and understanding with multinational audiences. These tableaux create some grounding (perhaps illusory) to ease foreign readers' frustration or impatience with knowing next to nothing about the culture and society of the text's composition. That is, when communication is threatened by the cultural gulf between the writer and her readers, "universal" prison tableaux play the stabilizing narrative role of providing readers with reasonably familiar settings, scenes, predicaments, and reflections.

Writers understand that principle: amidst what is for an American audience the unfamiliar terrain of Memoirs from the Women's Prison -- the unfamiliar Egyptian culture and history and politics, the unfamiliar language (even in translation), the unfamiliar landscape, the unfamiliar names, the unfamiliar values, and, of course, the unfamiliar subjectivity with its unfamiliar eyes and voice and sensibilities -- amidst all that, Sa'adawi provides tableaux of ugly grey walls and depersonalizing prison procedures that create a "truthful" prison presence Western readers can

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Moses Diamini, Steve Biko, Nelson Mandela, and others).

visualize and verify. The same observation can be made of the prison accounts by Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Wole Soyinka, Bobby Sands, Irina Ratushinskaya, Molefe Pheto, and countless others who utilize the international genre of the prison narrative to make specific claims about their cultures and societies. Ironically then, even fierce and heartbreaking tableaux -- say, Indres Naidoo's depiction of the humiliating initiation ritual at the Fort in Johannesburg (31) -- can be read as inherently hopeful narrative acts; for, in providing multinational audiences with an epistemological common ground, they facilitate cross-cultural understanding and empathy -- and perhaps change and justice.

So far, I have discussed rhetorical strategies authors use to create the textual presence of the prison as a *place*, as a locale. Prisons also function in *time*. Over the duration of months and years, they transform their captives, disrupting their values, sharpening or dulling their senses, hardening or softening their commitments. As we will see in Chapter Three, prisons are organized and administered to have this effect. The institution becomes a significant element of one's ever-evolving conception of self in relation to the world, just as, in non-prison life, all people live their marriages, careers, and schooling differently at various stages.

Some texts make present the temporal dimension of incarceration by displaying the prison's transformative power, often through its effect on minor characters: Rabbi Eliahou's son in Night, so broken by Auschwitz that he abandons his infirm father rather than jeopardizing his life to give him care (Wiesel 104); the once-dominant "Big Six" gang leader Georgie, who is handed over to a rival gang by the Robben Island warders and forced to become their "wyfie" (Diamini 111-2); and the Lithuanian political prisoner Edita, who asks her Barashevo comrades to begin a hunger strike in protest of the cancellation of two of her family visits, only later to crack under subtle pressure from the guards and claim to have been "drawn in" by the others (Ratushinskaya 256). Not all prison-caused transformations are for the worse. In Sa'adawi's Memoirs, an Islamic Fundamentalist named Boduur refuses to interact with "atheistic infidel" prisoners (42) and flatly accepts her religion's rules against women moving their bodies. But Boduur grows into an active participant in the boundary-crossing "comradeship of prison" (197) and eventually dances "with hair uncovered" (174) among other jubilant prisoners in celebration of Anwar Sadat's assassination.<sup>11</sup> Her transformation shows that in Egypt, imprisonment brings

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<sup>11</sup> Not all transformations occur because of the workings of the prison; in Charles Colson's telling, the tough con Paul Kramer's conversion to Christianity exemplifies the workings of God, and only incidentally the Federal Penitentiary in Atlanta (279).

together women from discrete sectors of society, people who in the outside world would never interact, much less rely on one another.

A more complex way that texts make present this transformative power is by depicting the *imprisoned consciousness*, which is one's sensibilities or perspective as influenced by the institution. Some novels show a prison-made change in a protagonist's thoughts and values. San Quentin conditions Edward Bunker's Ron Decker to hate all black prisoners (1977, 92); an unnamed State Prison causes Nathan Heard's Beans Butler to develop a radical political philosophy of egalitarian "humanism" as an alternative to capitalism, Marxism, and black nationalism (1983, 130, 198); the Gulag leads Solzhenitsyn's Ivan Denisovich subconsciously to absorb meager standards of opportunity and success when he reflects that bright young Gopchik could "go a long way" in a Siberian work camp, someday earning the responsibility of cutting bread rations, or "even a bigger job" (166-7). In Bunker's The Animal Factory, the self-described "habitual criminal" (38) Earl Copen fails to see how his sense of personal freedom shrinks as he grows content with his petty power and status on the yard. At the beginning of the novel, even though Earl is savvy and secure in San Quentin, he thinks he still possesses the dignity-enhancing hunger to "gamble his freedom, even his life, for real freedom -- freedom from a

life of quiet desperation" (38). However, as the novel unfolds, Bunker subtly reveals the shaping presence of the institution as Earl becomes "adjusted." In one internal monologue, Earl concludes that "coming from the hole to the mainline was similar to going from prison to the streets; he experienced the same exhilaration" (187).

One of the most nuanced, even Jamesian, representations of the imprisoned consciousness occurs in Chester Himes's neglected 1951 classic, Cast the First Stone. Due to various prison influences, the protagonist Jimmy Monroe becomes guarded, comfortable, smug, insensate, weary, defiant, self-loathing, bitter, and, when he falls in love with a young man named Dido, blissful. The novel shows that the enforced fraternity of prison allows Jimmy to gain a partial recognition of his desire for gay love, the incompleteness of which, in the end, allows him to make the compromises necessary to earn parole. All of these portrayals of the imprisoned consciousness hinge upon the use of dramatic irony, in that readers learn more about the osmosis-like power of prison from a character's testimony or outlook than the character sees himself.

Texts also dramatize the imprisoned consciousness in their very telling, in their narration (and not only in the narrative). That is, some prison works make the institution present as an entity through which passes the organizing



intelligence or subjectivity of the text. Consider the following excerpts:

Quiet and immovable I lie on the bed.... This agony -- I cannot support it. Twenty-two years! Oh, it is hopeless, hopeless. I must die. I'll die tonight .... I cannot live here. I must die. This very night .... Something white glimmers in the corner .... It is a spoon. For a moment I hold it indifferently; then a great joy overwhelms me. Now I can die .... I will force it in -- a little lower -- a steady pressure -- just between the ribs.... The metal feels cold. How hot my body is! (Berkman 96)

This is a funeral ... but whom are they burying? Let's see who is here -- only those two and I. And I! Then it is my funeral? But listen men, there is some mistake. I'm not dead. I'm still alive. Can't you see me looking at you, talking to you? Stop. Don't bury me yet! ... Is my body to lie here on its face while I watch my funeral? Comical .... Now I remember. Someone struggled to raise me up and dress me. Then they carried me on a pall, their hob-nailed boots ringing in the corridor. And then ... That is all. I don't remember any more .... But this is all absurd. I am still alive. I feel only some distant pain and thirst. The dead aren't thirsty. I put all my strength into an attempt to move my hand, and a strange, unnatural voice burst out of me: "Water!" (Fuchik 9-10)

In such passages, prison becomes present through the sensibilities it helps to create: the pent-up desperation of Berkman, the disassociation of mind and body of Fuchik, and, elsewhere, the plucky wit of Irina Ratushinskaya (40, 226-7, 294), the steely militancy of George Jackson (31-2), the claustrophobic panic (184-5) and later the dreamy, fasting-induced lightness (249-54) of Wole Soyinka. In every instance, the consciousness displayed within manifests the carceral forces at work upon it, a move that seemingly

presents an unfiltered, unmodified, authentic imprisoned voice.

And yet, the act of *intentionally* presenting one's consciousness within imprisonment involves a necessary falsification: Alexander Berkman was not twisting a spoon between his ribs while penning the suicide passage in Prison Memoirs of an Anarchist, and, it stands to reason, Julius Fuchik could not have depicted the post-torture synapse of a fractured mind and body from within that cleaved condition itself. The state of the mind in the act of writing -- remembering, repressing, reconsidering, rephrasing, inventing, arranging -- differs from any psychological state of non-writing that one might attempt to display in narrative, including the state of imprisonment. The author is at least at one remove beyond the consciousness he re-enacts for us, and -- whether cast in literal or figurative language and in the past or present tense -- such representations are always retrospective and illusional.<sup>12</sup>

An apparent exception that actually proves the rule is the following passage from the ending of Ngugi wa Thiong'o's Detained: A Writer's Prisons Diary:

*Wariinga ngatha ya wira ... Warriinga heroine of  
toil ... there she walks haughtily carrying her  
freedom in her hands ...*  
No!

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<sup>12</sup> That is one sense in which writing can be a form of escape for writers, as they transcend a psychological state of "being in captivity" for one of "being in composition."

*There she walks knowing that ... There she walks carrying ... knowing ...*

No!

*She walked outside knowing that greater struggles ...*

I try different combinations. Now and then I look at the walls for a word, a name, a sentence. The walls of cell 16 have become my dictionary of words and music. (his italics, 166)

Ngugi begins Detained with a similar stream-of-consciousness passage. Both passages simulate the movement of the author's mind as, looking to his stone cell wall for inspiration, he composes the final sentence of the novel Caitani Mutharaba-ini (Devil on the Cross), written in Gikuyu. These two framing passages of Detained make the Kamiti prison present as a helpful resource for "a word, a name, a sentence," and not simply as an utterly destructive force. Thematically, the author dramatizes that the consciousness that writes within imprisonment and the consciousness that fights imprisonment are one and the same, that writing is an act of resistance. Even so, in composing Detained, Ngugi must have been outside of this supposedly unified writer/fighter consciousness, for the passage comes to us only partially in Gikuyu, and not in the novel Caitani Mutharaba-ini.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> That authors often believe in the importance of creating the illusion of an unmediated prison consciousness -- even as they recognize the impossibility of doing so -- is exemplified in Barbara Deming's Prison Notes: "You'll excuse me for writing on toilet paper. At least it unwinds nicely, like a scroll" (57). Meant to show the author persevering within restriction and deprivation, even as we read, the very fact that the book's pages turn rather than unrolling draws attention to the fact that the

However, the fact that the author is partially distanced from the prison consciousness displayed in a text does not, to my mind, invalidate the efficacy of writing as a means of displaying the influence of the institution upon consciousness. That is because readers intuitively know, in Sidney's words, that "poesy" (or writing) "is an art of imitation ... a representing, counterfeiting, or figuring forth" (508). They understand that even the most true-to-life representations of psychological states are "counterfeits" cast in subjective and imprecise phrasing, and in narrative forms determined more by the properties of language and writing than by the properties of the interior conditions themselves. They know that Berkman's suicide attempt or Fuchik's reawakening come to them only as a textual telling of consciousness, not as consciousness itself. But that does not destroy the value of reading those accounts.

It is important (if obvious) to claim that readers will suspend their awareness of textual falsifications -- of the Derridean supplement -- provided that the narration successfully approximates the internal state invoked. What constitutes success will vary from text to text, from condition to condition, and from reader to reader. But it

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published version we read is not the "original" produced within imprisonment -- and that, quite likely, it has been revised, edited, and in other ways altered by the publishing process.

need not be limited to mimetic stream-of-consciousness narration. Indeed, Soyinka, Laabi, Ginzburg, and others abruptly depart from prose exposition to employ patently "artificial" literary language and poetry to present their prison-induced states of mind. Whatever narrative form such passages take, the key principle is that if these approximations seem trite, overwritten, too conveniently partial, or in some other way off the mark -- witness Berkman -- the text loses credibility, even if readers accept that the prison probably did have the effect the author claims.

Of course, not every writer chooses to make the prison present by dramatizing or displaying the imprisoned consciousness. The autobiographies of Ruth First, Helen Bryan, and Indres Naidoo all gain authority by communicating an air of post-release poise and distance. For Antonio Gramsci, planned self-portrayal was sometimes too painful to attempt. In 1927, he explained to his sister-in-law Tania, "It's better that I write each time whatever comes to mind spontaneously, without any kind of pre-established plan. The very act of writing has become a physical torment" (1973, 83). Other authors attempt to efface all vestiges of the personal to emphasize a group's collective experience of oppression and imprisonment; in a letter to the Romanian writer Panait Istrati, Victor Serge justified using this de-

individualized approach in the autobiographical novel Men in Prison:

There is no novelist's hero in the novel, unless that terrible machine, prison is its real hero. It is not about "me," about a few men, but about men, all men crushed in that dark corner of society. It seems to me that the time has finally come for literature to discover the masses, the link between the individual and his fellow man, where the problem of the individual's destiny will exist only in terms of the destiny of every man.<sup>14</sup>  
(Greeman xxv-xxvi)

With the range of rhetorical practices discussed so far, autobiographers make textually present features and effects of prison that they recognize. It is also possible to make present subliminal prison influences, small insinuations or incremental adjustments of which the author himself is ignorant. This also authenticates a narrative, precisely because it does not seem to be a manipulable element of one's self-presentation. Take, for example, Antonio Gramsci's Prison Letters. The writings of one five-year period display that the prison undercut several of the author's strategies for preserving his mind, doing so in a way that caused Gramsci to blame himself for his unhappiness instead of recognizing the full dimension of the coordinated institutional assault:

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<sup>14</sup> However, although Serge does not give his first-person narrator a name or personal memories and tries to emphasize the collective, the text nevertheless ends up creating the impression of a unique, individualized consciousness with passages such as, "Here I am back in a cell. Alone. Minutes, hours, days slip away with terrifying insubstantiality. Months will pass away like this, and years. Life!" (31).

[2/27/1928] Once you get used to living in an aquarium and adapt your sensory apparatus to the crepuscular, toned-down impressions flowing toward you, (always keeping your attitude ironic), a whole world begins to swarm around you, a lively world obeying its own laws and following its own course. It is something like glancing down on an ancient tree trunk that weather has gradually worn away: the closer you look, the more you begin to see. First, only a humid mushroomlike growth, or a snail dripping a trail behind as it slowly drags along; then, a little at a time, you begin to pick out colonies of tiny insects running about industriously, repeating the same actions, taking the same paths over and over. *If you succeed in holding to your original position*, there's no danger of turning into a snail or an ant, and it all becomes an interesting way of passing time. (my italics, 125-6)

[11/15/1930] Only rarely do I lose myself in a particular train of thought and analyze something for its inherent interest. *Usually I have to engage in a dialogue, be dialectical, to arrive at some intellectual stimulation ....* even in a family situation, I have to create a dialogue. (my italics, 193)

[9/3/1933] Please stop sending me copies of the letters that your mother and Guilia write to you -- I find them too distressing. The truth is that *I've lost my capacity for self-direction*. All impressions from outside leave me painfully elated or depressed. I thought I had a certain personality, a strong central focus for my will and feelings. In the past year, everything has disintegrated. (my italics, 260)

In the passage from 1928, Gramsci shoulders personal responsibility for "holding an original position" and for "adapt[ing] his sensory apparatus" to the stripped-down minutiae of the institution. By 1930, he has modulated his intellectual ethos to emphasize dialogue and exchange, no longer finding it fulfilling to "analyze something for its inherent interest"; however, Gramsci does not hold the

authorities responsible for causing this shift by confining him in a dull, denuded environment. Then, in the September, 1933 letter, he reproaches himself for finding dialogue too "distressing" to endure, again failing to acknowledge the role of the prison. It is an ironic position for the philosopher of hegemony -- chastising himself for internal changes brought on by a dominant external force, a force made present only in the letters' silences and omissions, and not in direct analysis of institutional power by the author. By dramatizing these insidious prison practices, Gramsci's Letters become one of those rare works that Vaclav Havel praises for being "somehow 'cleverer' than its author" (1988, 171).

Havel's own collection of prison letters is another of those works. Some of the ways Letters to Olga makes present the oblique workings of the prison include: Havel's increasingly meticulous structuring of material in the single four-sheet letter he was permitted to write each week; his extremely anxious directives that his wife promptly write, send small necessities, or confirm the receipt of a letter; his silence about the other prisoners; and, deep into his term, his obsession with labyrinthine philosophizing, at the expense (sometimes for months on end) of even a few personal lines to his wife.

Diaries and collections of prison letters are the best genres for making textually present the subliminal effect of



prisons. By creating week-by-week chronicles, authors surrender to the reality that one can never know or present the full ramifications of being made captive to another's power (in any or all of Patterson's triadic realms). Licensed to write because of their "inside" perspective, both Gramsci and Havel admit -- and build great books upon -- their inability to be fully "inside" their own experience. Both authors trust their readers to see the prison at work upon the text, that is, to see the prison in the text through rhetorical qualities (silence, disorientation, abstractedness, self-centeredness) that are neither planned nor recognized by the writers.

Thus far, in showing some ways that texts authenticate themselves by creating the presence of prison, I have not made a distinction between pre-release and post-release writing. In fact, non-imprisoned authors face a particular challenge: they must protect their credibility against the judgment that retrospective accounts are less authentic than accounts actually composed behind bars. This may seem strange because, after all, there are many advantages to writing on the outside that would seem to compensate for the loss of immediacy. These include autonomy, peace and quiet, privacy, nourishment, diversion, resources, dialogue, access to publishers and readers of rough drafts, and fundamentally, the freedom to write when and how one pleases. That said, ex-prisoners often imply falsely that

they are still behind bars, while those who are locked up never pretend to have been released.

Consider Ngugi wa Thiong'o. Although subtitled "A Writer's Prison *Diary*" (my italics) and purportedly penned on toilet paper (6), Detained does not provide a diary's chronological record of the author's captivity. He does attempt to make present the Kamiti Marxism Security Prison as a force at work upon the narrative, and, as discussed above, to dramatize that dynamic in the text. But he only does this in scattered places, just often enough to remind readers that they are reading a prison narrative. Otherwise, the work consists of chapter-long analyses of Kenyan resistance history, British colonial history and literature, the nature of a neo-colonial state, the colonial culture of fear, and the events that led to his detention. With its extensive research and long quotations, much of Detained simply could not have been written in the "confined space of reliefless dust and bones" (7) where Ngugi portrays himself. I make this point only by way of observation, not reproach. The author uses the sensational vehicle of the prison diary -- and the position of the insider -- to attract a wider global audience than normally would be interested in a work of Kenyan political criticism. The imperative to create a prison presence becomes an opportunity to broaden one's readership.

Another rhetorical move ex-prisoners employ to guard their credibility as "insiders" is to suggest that because incarceration is an ordeal of the mind, it does not end upon discharge. Laabi's Rue du Retour alternates internal monologues of the narrator being tortured in captivity and moving about tentatively upon release, indicating that the ordeal "lashes me / and lashes me yet" (prefatory poem, no page number). Likewise, Yehiel De-Nur's Shivitti: A Vision, alternates stream-of-conscious depictions of commingled captivities: the author's two years in Auschwitz, and his thirtieth year of post-Holocaust trauma in 1976, when he sought LSD psychotherapy to free himself of the horror. At the end of The True Confessions of an Albino Terrorist, Breytenbach claims that finishing the book felt almost as liberating as the release from Pollsmoor Prison: "I had to write it. I had to purge myself, and this I had to do before memory itself becomes obscured by the distortion of time" (337).

Rhetorically, to declare that incarceration is an on-going psychological phenomenon allows the ex-prisoner to claim that he or she still possesses the immediacy to speak of "in the cell" incarceration. To this end, Eugenia Ginzburg, who wrote Journey into the Whirlwind three decades after first going to prison, interrupts the narrative to display herself persevering through anguish: "My pain ... was so great that it brimmed over into the future and

reaches me today when I write of it after twenty years. But I must force myself to write" (118). This narrative stance also makes the prison textually present as a *looming influence upon the composition of the text*. As employed by ex-prisoners such as Piri Thomas (1974, 229), Irina Ratushinskaya (7), and Natan Sharansky (x), this rhetorical move dramatizes that the words on the page -- the act of writing -- are what Victor Serge calls "an effort to free myself from [the] inward nightmare" (Greeman, xii). Thus, this stance suggests that we are not simply reading a backward-looking account of imprisonment, but are witnessing a drama of immediate resistance, with each new sentence and page animating the author's continuing attempt to shake herself free of an oppressive carceral force.

Shades of the prison house grow upon the ex-prisoner: that is a powerful claim, but it will damage one's credibility if it looks like posturing. It can also raise the uncomfortable issue of how, if writing was necessary for one to regain psychological balance, one obtained the equilibrium needed to *begin* to write in the first place. But most perilously, it may raise the question of how one survived brutal conditions that destroyed other prisoners. Survivorship is not an unambiguous achievement. It leads to questions of character and compliance. Did you abandon your family? Steal your neighbor's rations? Betray your cause?

Rape or get raped? Survivorship demands explanation, and usually receives it.

On the whole, the "inside" position is no unconditional asset. If authenticated, it is the reason we read Edward Bunker or Dannie Martin before Norman Mailer or John Cheever. But the effort to authenticate also reminds us that the author may be a "criminal" or an "inmate," an enemy or a selfish survivor. This becomes tricky. Without guiding their readers properly, authors may find themselves stigmatized more severely for having told their stories. One of their great challenges, in fact, is to prevent readers from making the error Primo Levi witnessed among Polish civilians outside the death camps: to mistake "the effect for the cause, and judge us worthy of our abasement," (1961, 110-111).

## Chapter Two

## Prisoners' Personae

"... I've already done over four years on a lousy beer-joint burglary. I'd hate to parlay the ten I got into twenty."

"What'n the hell's the difference, kid? Twenty, fifty, five hundred, it's all the same. You're an ex-con when you leave here."

Frank Elli (74)

... it is my sincere hope that the reader after reading my life story will agree with me that I don't belong in the Texas prison system and that it is not the best place for me.

Billy McCune (109-110)

Imprisoned American writers battle against a yawning credibility gap. Their authority is undermined by their implication in crime and the reputed savagery of prison life; by the possibility that they are portraying their experiences as wards of the state in a misleading, personally-favorable light; and by the stereotype of the criminal mind, which I discuss in detail in the next chapter. For example, on December 19, 1993, a prisoner named Evans Hopkins published an op-ed piece in The Washington Post that called for loosened parole standards and alternatives to incarceration for non-violent offenders. Part of his argument was that the state of Virginia does not have a high violent crime rate. Three weeks later, James J. Fotis, executive director of the Law Enforcement Alliance of America, published a pointed response to the effect that

precisely because of "Virginia's high incarceration rate and its throw-away-the-key attitude, [the state] enjoys a relatively low violent crime rate." Fine. But Mr. Fotis also buttressed his argument with an *ad hominem* attack on the author. His letter called Mr. Hopkins's article a "self-serving ...plea," and he claimed that Hopkins's "prose ... [is] filled with traditional felon-think ploys," which included minimizing his own crime and implying that the court system is racist.

As the exchange illustrates, having an authentic "inside" position is often not enough to ensure credibility with "outside" readers; an imprisoned writer also must clarify exactly what sort of prisoner he is. Is he honest and above-board? Or is he a sneaky prevaricator, a vicious criminal, or a smooth con-man? Just as nineteenth-century African American authors were compelled to deal with the pejorative implications of the term "slave," prisoners must ensure that their labels become assets, not debits. To do this, each author needs to create a credible *prisoner persona*, in addition to any other personae that he or she constructs in the text. This is one of the critical elements -- one of the defining exigencies -- that runs through the history of American prison autobiography. In virtually any text, readers eventually will come upon passages of authorial self-definition -- major illocutionary moments -- when the writer steps away from his story and

works to gain our trust. Moreover, if the need to construct a credible prisoner persona is to some extent a limiting factor -- a virtual requirement if one is, unlike Mr. Hopkins, to establish a credible voice -- then a second form of constraint is the narrow range of personae that one could employ. Broadly speaking, authors only have three choices -- the "candid," "qualifying," and "transformative" paradigms. This chapter explores costs and benefits of each rhetorical move.

# 1. The Candid Paradigm

At the beginning of Lonesome Road, the 1970 autobiography of a convicted murderer who spent twelve years on a Georgia chain gang before receiving a pardon for saving another prisoner's life, George Harsh writes:

Of late we have had a spate of books written by wife-killers, baby-rapers, and what not who have been saved from their fate by Barnum-like lawyers who can turn a court-room into a three-ring circus. Almost without exception these books are protestations of the Simon-pure innocence of the writer, or tirades against the inequities and stupidities of our legal system; and the tiresome phrase, "miscarriage of justice," runs through all of them like a fugue.

I would like to assure the reader that in the following pages he will not have his intelligence insulted or his mind bored by such justifications .... I was duly indicted, tried, and convicted for a crime, and I was guilty as hell ....

For what I did there was no excuse. (9)



Later, Harsh readily confesses that in prison he once disarmed an attacker and then stabbed him to death, a crime to which he never admitted (57). This is the candid paradigm, in which the author tries to obtain the reader's trust by openly accepting the label "prisoner" and any negative stereotypes that come with it. Making a display of one's frank and forthright disposition, the paradigm is frequently employed in the sensationalistic and picaresque accounts of unrepentant rogues (the escape artist Edward R. Jones) and celebrity gangsters (Alvin Karpis).

The most infamous use of the paradigm appears in Jack Henry Abbott's In the Belly of the Beast. In the beginning of the book, Abbott describes himself as a "state-raised convict," which is someone who spent formative adolescent and young adult years in institutional custody (3). As such, he claims to have been forced to obliterate all traces of sensitivity and vulnerability to protect himself from the guards and the other prisoners (5). Abbott asserts that state-raised convicts feel no genuine emotions and define manhood in terms of the readiness to kill: "The model we emulate is a fanatically deviant and alienated individual who cannot imagine what forgiveness is, or mercy or tolerance, because he has no experience of such values" (15; see also 88-93).

Abbott's major argument is that prisons create two kinds of prisoners, predators and prey. The former rebel

against authority, protect themselves, and ruthlessly take advantage of others; they endure incarceration with their notion of dignity intact, but as a result, they can never make parole. The latter make the moral compromises to staff and fellow prisoners necessary to gain release, but doing so destroys their self-respect and renders them incapable of functioning in society (17, 78-9). Abbott adopts the predator persona -- a tough streetfighter who will kill over the slightest insult to protect his turf. In part because of this persona, reviewers in America's leading newspapers hailed In the Belly of the Beast for its authenticity and its "heroic accuracy and detachment" (as one was quoted on the book jacket), while subjecting the author to few *ad hominem* attacks.

After Abbott murdered a restaurant worker named Richard Ada while on parole, his literary credibility plummeted. Readers felt betrayed, and enthusiasts who had hailed him as a potential genius of "the largest stature" (Mailer xviii) fell silent or rued their earlier promotion of his work. These days, critics routinely disparage Abbott as a literary con-man, a hoax, invoking his case to dismiss all prison writers. This rejection is ironic, because Ada's murder was nothing if not the fulfillment of the persona that Abbott created to great initial fanfare; appalling as it is, the killing suggests that the author's once-admired self-portrayal was squarely on the mark.

We might draw two conclusions from the Abbott affair: first, the character issue is as important for prison writers as it is for politicians. While it may be true that some readers are drawn to candid personae in order to experience criminality vicariously, it is also the case that many readers regard literary communications as a moral exchange between author and audience. Believing that some acts render a writer unworthy of their readership, they will resist entering into that exchange with someone whose behavior they abhor -- and whose behavior implicitly reflects upon them for buying and reading that person's work.

The second conclusion is more interesting. Right from the start, Abbott candidly presents himself as a violent "inmate" socialized by a state-sanctioned "gladiator" culture (24). At one level, this honesty becomes his authority, but at a deeper level something else goes on. In presenting his warped values and violent behavior in prison, Abbott writes with force and conviction. Addressing essays to Norman Mailer and alluding to Nietzsche, Kant, Marx, and Engels, he describes his undying commitment (at great cost) to studying "the truly great advancements of our culture that the world we live in in the West tries so hard to suppress" (23). In short, he writes like an artist, not like the inferior creature we call the "criminal" or the "sociopath." Many non-incarcerated readers simply did not

accept that such a fine writer really was the sort of person he portrayed. The eloquence with which he depicted his anger and brutal acts became a protective shield, deflecting readers' judgments from his character to his craft. That effect was the book's genius: by embracing mainstream stereotypes with literary élan, Abbott wrote himself right out of those categories, at least temporarily.

## 2. The Qualifying Paradigm

Another strategy is to redefine the label "prisoner" as it applies to the author and perhaps others. Writers do this differently. Some stress that they are prisoners, showing in gritty detail their subordination to the warders, while working to destroy the equation, in their cases, that "prisoner" equals "criminal." Consider Let Me Live, the 1937 autobiography of a young labor organizer named Angelo Herndon. In 1932, at the age of nineteen, Herndon was sentenced to twenty years on a Georgia chain gang for "inciting insurrection" by handing out Communist Party fliers and leaflets. Because, at the time of publication, his case was on appeal to the U.S. Supreme Court, and because public support could help, readers needed to be reminded that, while Herndon may have been a symbol and a cause célèbre, he was also a prisoner living a horrid daily existence. Thus, the book vividly portrays Georgia's

wretched prison conditions, showing the shameful neglect of a dying man in an overcrowded cell (208); the institutionally-condoned rapes of adolescent boys by "perverts" and "vultures" (210); the unjust executions of African Americans, including three likeable teenagers (252-268); and the taunts and physical abuse Herndon received from his captors (254, 258). However, intermixed with these tableaux are passages reminding readers that the author is no ordinary prisoner. Herndon describes his Christian beliefs, egalitarian convictions, and righteous desire to "fortify" (246) and educate his cellmates (329). Towards the end of the autobiography he describes how, after his conviction was first overturned on appeal and he made bail, he returned to Atlanta for a re-trial he was sure to lose rather than taking flight overseas (332). By at least one measure, Herndon skillfully created this qualified prisoner persona: in 1937, six weeks after the publication of Let Me Live, the U.S. Supreme Court overturned his second conviction and set him free (Meyer vii).

Ethel and Julius Rosenberg attempt the same rhetorical move, but with less demonstrable success. In their published prison letters (most of which are nominally addressed to each other), the Rosenbergs go to great lengths to dramatize the prison setting from which they write

(obviously unnecessary for each other).<sup>1</sup> In so doing, they attempt to define themselves as likeable victims who have done nothing wrong. Julius does this by reiterating their patriotism (18, 38, 70, 97, 168, 181), their pride in their Jewish heritage (18, 25, 31, 65, 79)<sup>2</sup>, and their unshakable love for each other and their children (47-9, 148, 157, 159, 187), while Ethel frequently describes her maternal love (47-9, 50, 187) and emotional anguish (50, 54, 75).<sup>3</sup>

Doggedly reminding readers that they are "prisoners" while assiduously contesting the label's meaning as applied to them, these "private" letters are crafted to inform a public audience that the "Rosenberg Affair" is much more than a newspaper controversy for the real human beings locked up in real cells awaiting electrocutions. Rarely have the stakes been higher for creating a reliable prisoner persona. In their first book, The Death House Letters, doing so could save their lives; in their expanded posthumous publication, The Testament of Ethel and Julius Rosenberg, it could at

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<sup>1</sup> "And yet here, held fast by concrete and steel, shall our love put forth gripping root and tender blossom" (Ethel to Julius, 29). See 54, 60, 75, 97.

<sup>2</sup> "Our upbringing, the full meaning of our lives, based on the true amalgamation of our American and Jewish heritage, which to us means freedom, culture and human decency, has made us the people we are" (Julius to Ethel, 18-19). "I take second place to no other American in my loyalty to my country" (Julius to Ethel, 97).

<sup>3</sup> "I am one vast vessel of pain" (Ethel to Julius, 61).

least salvage their reputations and perhaps save future lives.<sup>4</sup>

Many activists go one step further in qualifying "prisoner," equating their position with positive virtues such as patriotism and probity. Imprisonment provides Philip Berrigan (and thus his readers) with the helpful viewpoint "of being at the heart of a moral conflict, yet detached from it" (122). For Dorothy Day, to be a prisoner is to move beyond "theoretical knowledge of ... injustice" to gain "the ugly knowledge of what men were capable in their treatment of each other" (76). For Emma Goldman, it is to have been able to "discover the strength in my own being, the strength to stand alone, the strength to live my life and fight for my ideas, against the whole world if need be" (148). For Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, to be a prisoner is to wear a "badge of honor" (29), while for Barbara Deming it is to have "gained us the opportunity to say ... more forcibly than we otherwise could have" that the social order of the 1964 segregationist South was deeply unjust (67).

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<sup>4</sup> Andrew Ross writes of the Rosenberg trial, "Every further revelation about humdrum, middle class reality served not to dull but to heighten the already 'monstrous' status of the Rosenberg's alleged crime, and in the absence of any 'real' evidence, the defendants were made to assume the spy's shadowy inventory of effects precisely *because* they themselves were all too real -- and thus boring" (61-2). If Ross is correct, the attempt of the Rosenbergs to portray themselves in The Death House Letters as ordinary, happily-married, patriotic, Jewish parents only would have amplified the immensity of their "criminality" to contemporary readers.

For Martin Luther King, it is to have reconfirmed "the companionship of God" (1963, 75) and to be able to resist unjust laws by telling the authorities, "Punish me. I do not deserve it. But because I do not deserve it, I will accept it so that the world will know that I am right and you are wrong" (1963, 30).

For such activists, the prison memoir genre can be a potent weapon. Incarceration allows one to repeat Socrates' claim about where just men and women can be found in an unjust society. It dramatizes the smallness of the resistor versus the vast power of the state. It also argues to, 1) the importance of the issues at stake; 2) the moral vacuity and undeserved power of the authorities; and 3) the effectiveness of the activists' efforts, since the authorities went to the trouble of prosecuting and punishing them.

But there is a catch. Personal claims to moral virtue can easily appear vain and self-serving, and they usually sharpen the critical eye of readers. Thus, Philip Berrigan seems naive or dissembling when he declares that, because people in jail have formed "a community of interest," an individual can enter the institution "sick, mad, foul-mouthed, brutish as regards cleanliness or human consideration, and allowances will be made for him with the most remarkable charity" (151). Dorothy Day seems too eager to play the martyr with the claim that the first six days of



a thirty-day jail term felt like "six thousand years" (75). And Sam Melville, who carried out a series of politically-motivated bombings in New York City in 1970, seems fanatical when he writes in his underground Attica journal, "The Iced Pig": "On t [sic -- "t" stands for "the"] day of Jackson's funeral, t Weatherpeople bombed 3 offices of t California Corrections Dept. Unfortunately, no one was hurt. Get it together Weatherfolk!" (171).

Non-political prisoners face a different challenge in qualifying themselves as prisoners, since it may be a stretch to say that a higher purpose inspired their crimes. One strategy writers employ is to differentiate themselves from the other "typical" convicts. This approach appears in the work of Jean Harris, the former boarding school headmistress who received a fifteen years-to-life sentence in 1981 for the murder of Hy Tarnower, a wealthy Scarsdale, New York physician. In the Introduction to Stranger in Two Worlds, the first of her three books, Harris writes: "What follows is not ... a feminine whimper from 'the belly of the beast.' I have not been there, and had I been there I would have little to offer that would serve *ordinary people like you and me*" (my italics, xxv). For the first 200 pages, Harris attempts to align herself with "ordinary" readers by describing her upbringing, teaching career, and long dependent relationship with Tarnower. With that grounding, readers are prepared for the absurdity of her new life in an

"alien world" (221), such mortifications as having to live with "unreliable" (221), "rude" (227) and "narcissistic" (232) convicts; having to submit to the "sick little bastards" (207) and "disgusting people" (301) who guard the place; and having to endure ego-invading indignities like being required to stop at "ninety" different locked doors to reach the Friday night Bingo room (249).

Claiming not to "want" to "homogenize" women prisoners (222), Harris proceeds to combine all of her Bedford Hills counterparts into one composite character, "Maggie Strong":

You probably wouldn't like Maggie very much. She has habits and qualities that would make you turn away. She can be adamant and rude one minute, contrite and vulnerable as a little child the next .... Maggie is often narcissistic and quite insensitive to others, sometimes even to her own children .... She has lived life for the present, following the line of least resistance, doing what seems easiest to her, rarely investing in tomorrow .... Maggie's hatred of the state, "the system," is prodigious. It may be what feeds, clothes, and houses her, out of prison as well as in, but it never gives her enough .... She is acquisitive on the one hand and wasteful, even profligate, on the other .... Maggie has a predisposition toward impulsive, emotional behavior, with little patience to develop skills or the motivation to work toward goals. She is inclined to live in a fantasy world. (224-232)

Merged into one figure, the Bedford Hills women become Bertha Masons to Harris's Jane Eyre. They are polar opposites with whom she feels some "kinship," but more strongly a deepening "awareness of our differences" (221). The former headmistress draws this persona even more sharply in her second book, They Always Call Us Ladies, where she

essentially argues that the only decent people in Bedford Hills besides herself are a handful of corrections officers. A striking portrait of the representative prisoner is "Auntie," who deals with turmoil by exposing "her wide, bare black bottom to the world at large" (94). Elsewhere Harris admires a sergeant who tells the women, "You should be ashamed of yourselves! Lazy! Dirty! Using foul language! Living in filth! Don't tell me your excuses. I came up the same way you did" (212). The book closes with an emphatic final slap at women prisoners:

If Dodie and her butch are stretched out on the couch in the rec making love, if Cupcake is screaming out the window to her lover, Monique has just suggested to the C.O. that he's a "Dumb nigger. Don't know where your ass is at," and the Greek chorus in the background is chanting the Bedford mantra, "Fuck dat shit, fuck dat shit, fuck dat shit," when a C.O. is finally moved to say something, you can bank on it, you can run for Congress on it, he'll call out, "Ladies, ladies." (292)

In both books, Harris's persona is that of the uncommon prisoner -- one who is every bit her readers' social equal -- the "inside outsider," insightful about but untarnished by her disreputable surroundings. To some extent, this persona worked: Harris convinced opinion-makers such as James Kilpatrick and Shana Alexander that she did not "deserve" her sentence, that she certainly was not a danger to the community, and that imprisoning her served no purpose. During her eleven-year sentence, the mailing list for the Jean Harris defense committee grew to more than

3,000 people (Barron). But the spate of letters and op-ed pieces calling for clemency fell upon deaf ears in Albany until 1992, when New York Governor Mario Cuomo granted clemency.

In the first two books, Harris further distinguishes herself from Mattie Strong by analyzing her counterparts' problems and recommending enlightened social policies that could help. But her counsel does not fly, because her vision is so relentlessly Manichean. By setting up her foils as odious human beings, Harris implies that they are beyond help and probably not worthy of it. In her third book, Marking Time, Harris softens the oppositions upon which her prisoner persona is constructed. She still claims to be misplaced, asserting that "I'm just waiting -- waiting to return to my own land" (55), and that "I am merely an observer, a listener, a reporter" (147). However, now Harris seems to have recognized that establishing her own credible persona does not mean she has to malign the other women. It is refreshing to see her recognize and celebrate her companions' good qualities. She writes warmly about one friend who gardens (17-18), others with whom she shares meals (58), and a prison-educated woman who gives a stirring speech at the Mercy College commencement. "This is the other side of prison women that I don't write about enough," she admits (118). Now, her accounts of wasted lives and ruined families read more like elegies than rebukes. This

more balanced perspective adds gravitas to Harris's calls for increased Head Start funding (107) and the legalization of narcotics (59). Make no mistake, these calls are still based on the belief that her "culture" and that of her readers are superior to the assumed monolithic culture of the prisoners, but now that superiority is not absolute:

Perhaps, all lined up in front of God, one culture may be just as good as another, but when you move from one environment to another, want the fruits of that new environment, and insist on bringing the old culture with you, it can be like an albatross around your neck. I don't mean songs and stories and dance and things that enrich any culture, but accepted rules of society and the way that we raise children. I'm sure God would make a strong case that "I ain't been had no" is just as acceptable to him as "I haven't had any," but if you want what is admired in the new environment, you can't get it, legally, dragging "I ain't been had no" with you.

There have to be standards, arbitrary though they may be, simply because they make life more bearable. Strangely, I find people whose life is most difficult clinging most jealously to what they consider their culture in spite of the role that culture plays in the tragic lives they lead. It's hard to teach in here without coming up against "Who the shit you think you is?" a question I really haven't a good answer for.

(10-11)

"Who the shit you think you is?" is the signal element in Harris's rhetorical strategy of differentiation. In all three books, the use of standard, grammatical English most epitomizes the incongruity of her situation. In Stranger, she describes one young woman who tells her, "Fuckin' old bitch .... You shit. You got a number. You just like me." Harris counters, "I am not like you. I don't live like you. I don't think like you. I don't speak like you" (1986,

212). In Ladies, Harris takes it upon herself to advise a corrections officer to try to improve the prisoners' grammar and diction: "Just tell them they're too good to sound the way they sound. Tell them: You're better than that" (1988, 168). Both anecdotes exemplify the sentiment expressed towards the end of Stranger: "Having moved into a word where *fuck* is the subject, predicate, and the dangling participle, it is pleasant to remember a better time and a better place. It is essential to remember them" (1986, 341). Or, as we are told in Ladies, "People who use the word 'shit' to replace hundreds of appropriate nouns ... not only have a vocabulary deficiency, but a perception deficiency, which makes for a very warped view of the world" (1988, 199). "We live the way we speak. Your children will too," she longs for the women to learn in Marking Time (99).

"Maggie's idea of a good book, if she reads at all, may be your idea of garbage" (1986, 224), Harris writes, aligning herself with her readers and not her cellmates. By virtue of writing and publishing books, it may be that prisoner-authors always tacitly distinguish themselves from "ordinary" convicts. Perhaps the reflective gaze of a Jean Harris or an Eldridge Cleaver on a book jacket reassures mainstream readers that these authors, with their narrative competence and their willingness to acknowledge the outside world by writing to it, are pretty much the same as "us." On the whole, whenever a prison author effectively uses

illiteracy, silence, or ignorance to symbolize prisoners' moral degeneracy, she enhances her own authority because, patently, she can and does write.

This principle plays out with respect to the ubiquitous same-sex rape accounts. Showing sympathy for victims displays an author's moral superiority to the rapists. At the same time, publishing implicitly confides that the author himself has not been raped, which is important to one's credibility with outside readers. This works as follows: almost every rape account portrays victims as being stripped of reason and the capacity to speak. Nathan Heard's Billy hears an inner voice crying "You are dead!" and then cuts off his own penis (81). In Floyd Salas's Tattoo the Wicked Cross, set in a juvenile facility, a youth named Barneyway becomes a timid mute incapable of self-defense, while his friend Aaron refuses to speak to concerned adults after being raped and then launches a vengeful rampage of mass murder. The convention is for rape victims to be portrayed as shredded husks incapable of verbal or moral mending, much less of writing a book. Hence, the author was not violated.

Another way writers qualify the label "prisoner" is by redefining their incarceration in terms of societal forces acting upon their social group. The focus shifts away from one's self, as "I" becomes "we." Authors write about the causes of imprisonment -- racism, poverty, poor schools --

and not just the consequences. One's persona as a "prisoner" is qualified to suggest persecution and resistance -- and thus the memoir becomes a form of social criticism.<sup>5</sup>

Consider Patricia McConnel's two-novella novel, Sing Soft, Sing Loud, which explores gender-related injustices that weave through women prisoners' lives. The author begins with a Dedication that prods readers to think of McConnel as a member of a larger community:

For the women I lived with in various jails and in prison, who, though barely hanging on themselves, always seemed to have at least a little to give. That little bit of something -- a story, a song, sympathetic listening, a good laugh, a spirited fight, truth, consolation, a lie told to protect me, a gift of food, a bit of contraband shared, jail-wise advice -- was often all that saved my sanity.

If this book is a song, it is sung for them. And this time gals, I'm singing loud.

Other books have been dedicated to one's blockmates. Jean Harris offers They Always Call Us Ladies to "those women of Bedford who should not be incarcerated." At the beginning of Animal Factory, Edward Bunker acknowledges "my

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<sup>5</sup> To Bruce Franklin, this shifting of prisoners' perspective from individual to collective concerns is the major advance of contemporary American prison writing: "The works of today's prisoners, though predominantly autobiographical, are rarely intended to display individual genius. Whereas the literary criteria dominant on campus exalt what is extraordinary or even unique, ... most current autobiographical writing from prison intends to show readers that the author's experience is not unique or even extraordinary, but typical and representative" (250). As Chapter Three argues, I believe that Franklin's point is overstated.



brothers -- inside and out. They know who they are." Thomas Flynn dedicates Notes for My Brothers' Keepers to three friends who kept him "alive." Each of these citations distinguishes "good" or sympathetic prisoners from the larger horde, implying that decency is the exception. But McConnell's Dedication is different from these because it addresses all women prisoners, implicitly defining them as a community of moral equals that helped save her sanity. McConnell does not suggest that her companions created a formal resistance party or are simply a community of victims; instead she acknowledges their imperfections ("a spirited fight"), while affirming their supportiveness and individuality.

The novel itself reinforces the collective identity McConnell hints at in the Dedication. The novel's two protagonists, Iva and Toni, turn tricks and run drugs in part because of their emotional and economic reliance on crooked men. During their respective jail and prison terms, Iva and Toni meet other women whose poignant life-stories reveal similar self-defeating dependencies: Moaner, a wealthy woman who shot her abusive spouse (14); Millie, who is resigned to returning to "my Merv" (68); and Lou and Angie, who try to impress the other women with tall-tales about their boyfriends' stature in the underworld (172). At first, Iva and Toni feel that they have hit rock bottom in prison, but as they hear the common chords in the other

women's lives, and as they form caring friendships, both women realize the importance of making their own decisions. Thus, in prison, Toni begins a diet that gives her a satisfying "feeling of control" (188), while, upon release from jail, Iva leaves her pimp Arnie to look for a legitimate job. Once Iva begins running her own life, she takes pleasure in small freedoms, like freely choosing to spend a Sunday afternoon reading the newspaper in her boarding-house room:

Maybe this room is only mine 'til Monday, but today it's mine, and nobody around to hassle me, and I'm my own boss and don't have to do nothin' I don't want to do. That's about the first time I can ever remember it being like that.... I been running my own life! And I like it, and I like my room. It's sleazy man, but it's mine. (44-5)

However, McConnel's story of feminist awakening is no fairy tale. Both women fail in their quest for freedom as neither possesses the education, the job skills, or the emotional buoyancy to stay economically afloat on her own. Iva simply cannot hold a job. Toni receives provisional financial support from her domineering father, but no personal support, and so she abandons his rehabilitation regimen and returns to the streets. Lacking money, both women resume their dependent relationships with exploitative men, which leads to deeper degradation and more crime. Notably, Toni's and Iva's sad stories do not redefine women prisoners only as victims of these men; rather, their tragedies show that poor, unskilled women are trapped in a

society that offers only desperate, self-denying dilemmas: for Iva, whether to be Arnie's hooker or an unprotected street person; for Toni, whether to be the property of her father or of a hustler named Leon. Having qualified "women prisoner" in this way, Sing Soft, Sing Loud advances a subtle ethos of feminist solidarity: the novel shows that if women do not take individual and collective responsibility for their lives in the "free" world -- as they do behind bars -- no one else will.

Similarly, George Jackson and other authors qualify their "prisoner" persona in terms of race and class. In 1961, at the age of eighteen, Jackson was sentenced to one-year-to-life in the California prison system for robbing a gas station. In 1970, with the publication of Soledad Brother, he attempted to redefine himself as a member of a vanguard class that shares a collective political consciousness:

These prisons have always borne a certain resemblance to Dachau and Buchenwald, places for bad niggers, Mexicans, and poor whites. But the last ten years have brought an increase in the percentage of blacks for crimes that can clearly be traced to political-economic causes. There are still some blacks here who consider themselves criminals -- but not many. Believe me, my friend, with the time and incentives that these brothers have to read, study, and think, you will find no class or category more aware, more embittered, desperate, or dedicated to the ultimate remedy -- revolution. The most dedicated, the best of our

kind -- you'll find them in the Folsoms, San Quentins, and Soledads. (31)<sup>6</sup>

Jackson maintains that a prisoner is someone who has experienced racial and class-based oppression and who has obtained a purified ideological perspective from "the bottom," allowing him to demystify the ideological fictions of bourgeois white society. In his view, society must be held responsible for its crimes: "I am his victim, born innocent, a total product of my surroundings. Everything that I am, I developed into because of circumstantial and situational pressures. I was born knowing nothing; necessity and environment formed me, and everyone like me" (103). From this position, ignoble street crime becomes "political crime" -- the expression of social alienation and latent political rage. That said, the assertion that all street crime and all working class or African American prisoners are "political" loses considerable force if the author too conveniently seems to benefit from the qualification.

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<sup>6</sup> Jackson dated this letter 4/1970. Two years before, he had written several letters that reinforced the mainstream stereotype of prisoners, including the following: "I almost got sucked into more foolishness yesterday. All the blacks tilting at windmills again. Mindless, emotional, childish abandon, without a thought of winning. Just an attempt to prove their manhood to themselves, to any who may be watching .... I had to turn my back on them when they wouldn't listen .... They have locked me up with a bunch of twenty-year-old cretins who don't know anything about the ways of the world, hate books, can't think, and won't listen" (121, 1/31/68).

At the extreme, the hazard of trying to qualify the label "prisoner" is that readers will dismiss an author as a manipulator who refuses to take responsibility for his crimes. The Autobiography of Billy McCune fails in this way. In the 1950s, McCune was sentenced to death (a sentence later commuted to life in prison) for raping a woman. In the autobiography, published in 1973, the author claims to be a pathological sex offender with an 87 IQ who should receive secure care mental health treatment, not maximum security imprisonment. Think about the narrative challenge here: McCune (with the help of a professional writer) must show, and not simply say, he needs psychiatric care. Thus, McCune unrepentently describes two rapes he committed, displaying a moral inability to distinguish right from wrong. He recounts urinating on himself and amputating his penis in prison to make the state's job of castrating him easier. And, in rambling, vulgarity-laden prose, he makes a number of absurd assertions that few sane people would commit to print:

... if one of you readers happens to be a citizen of Fort Worth, Texas and should you know old Effie Leon [his victim], the woman who put me in this cell, I'd appreciate it if you would recommend my book to her. (44)

You can imagine that she had been fucking and sucking for all her thirty-nine years .... It remains in my memory all these years that Effie Leon was interpreted as a child and that is why my punishment was so severe .... But she was not a child and I maintain that I paid for more than I got. (56)

[to the reader] Tell me how a winner feels, my friend, wishing for a cigarette. I just never learned how a winner feels, wearing clothes and eating pussy. (103)

I do want the Texas people to love me but I don't want to come to them sucking their asses. I want to face Texas as a man and not as a shit-ass. I want to be equal. I don't want to crawl on my hands and knees .... I want to have nothing to be ashamed of. (110)

Who knows if McCune is clinically "insane"? Words on a page cannot prove the matter definitively. What this case demonstrates is that showing one's need for therapy does not mean one will appear to deserve it. Indeed, just how miserably this author fails to gain his readers' sympathy was made evident in the margins of the public library copy of The Autobiography that I read. Near the end of the book, after a litany of remorseless passages, McCune writes that it his "sincere hope" readers will "respect" him, believe that he is their "equal," and agree that he does not "belong in the Texas prison system" (110). On that page, four different readers have scribbled in their overheated responses:

"He Definately [sic] Belongs there -- the son of a bitch";

"He doesn't deserve respect";

"Equal My Ass -- you didn't treat your rape victim equal"; and,

"YOU HAVE SOMETHING TO BE ASHAMED OF!"

So much, in this case, for the qualifying paradigm.

### 3. The Transformative Paradigm

The third broad way of constructing the prisoner persona is to confess one's crimes while asserting one's reformation. When well-performed, this narrative stance defines an author both as an "authentic" criminal insider/observer and a restored, reliable member of society. The strategy is employed in Woman on Death Row, written by Velma Barfield who became in 1984 the first woman in twenty-two years to be executed in the United States. Published by Billy Graham's ministry and unmistakably prefigured on the book jacket and in the Foreword, Preface, and prefatory epigram as the narrative of a murderess who found God, Barfield's autobiography divides roughly into two halves. The first section flashes back to her ostensibly drug-induced state-of-mind when she poisoned several people, including her mother, while the second shows her opening her heart to Christ for salvation and forgiveness. Once "reborn," Velma serves as a model prisoner and Christian until her lethal injection. Other texts that hinge the author's (or protagonist's) credibility on such a transformation include Heard's House of Slammers, Mack Thomas's The Total Beast, and the autobiographies of Eldridge Cleaver, Eddie Harrison, Jack Brown, Ron LeFlore, Iceberg Slim (1969), Richard Shoblad, and Horace Woodruff. Malcolm X's Autobiography performs this rhetorical pivot not

once but twice, first when the author abandons his street hustler persona in Norfolk Prison Colony, and later when he renounces racial separatism after his pilgrimage to Mecca.

Almost all of the conversions move from criminality to repentance, although occasionally the transformation runs the other way. Narrated and published after the author escaped Kilby Prison in 1948, Scottsboro Boy presents the prison experiences of Haywood Patterson one of the defendants in a famous 1930s criminal case. In 1931, Patterson was one of nine black teenagers convicted of raping two white women in Alabama. Although the prosecutors had no evidence of the crime except specious testimony by the alleged victims, the author and his co-defendants were sentenced to death, and later, on appeal, to long prison terms in a case that created a firestorm of public interest. Perhaps surprisingly, Patterson depicts himself developing the traits of a "devil" (70, 113) to survive seventeen years in Alabama's inhumane prisons and jails. By admitting this personal decline, he may be trying to establish himself as someone who will tell the truth even when it reflects badly on him and thus gain credibility for his more important claims that the Scottsboro Boys were framed and that the Alabama penal system is barbaric. There is a difference between Patterson's transformative approach to his authorial persona and the "candid" approach of Jack Henry Abbott: Patterson identifies two discrete periods in his moral



life -- innocence and corruption -- while the "state-raised convict" Abbott claims no time of original purity during which he experienced positive feelings (15).<sup>7</sup>

The transformative paradigm allows the writer to affirm with an Augustinian provisionality what he must reject ultimately -- the pleasures and perspectives of his pre-rehabilitated condition. Consider Iceberg Slim's (Robert Beck) popular 1969 autobiography Pimp. The narrator allots almost 300 pages to depicting his "former" sadistic misogyny and to describing how to turn a woman into a "money-tree" (88); finally, eight pages from the end, Slim announces that, in prison, the combined realizations that his mother is ailing, that he is aging, and that his crimes were wrong lead him to retire from his suddenly "worthless" profession (305). This transformation provides the protection of a politically-correct posture; it allows the author to glorify the deeds and attitudes of his pimping days and then to disavow everything with the claim to have become "an 'Iceberg' with a warm heart" (312).

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<sup>7</sup> In some novels, the protagonist changes from a respectable, middle-class citizen into a hardened con because of the "schooling" he receives in prison. See Aaron in Tattoo the Wicked Cross, Ron Decker in The Animal Factory, and Alex Hammond in Little Boy Blue. These portrayals of an individual's degeneration may enhance the author's credibility by suggesting (by opposition) that the author himself (who writes and makes moral discriminations) has not been transformed negatively; however, the portrayals imply nothing about whether the author himself did, or needed to, transform positively.

Eldridge Cleaver employs the same strategy in Soul on Ice. In the first essay, "On Becoming," Cleaver identifies himself as a different kind of rapist (14). He writes that for him, as a black man, raping a white women was a political act -- a repudiation of the rules, status, and power of white-dominated society.<sup>8</sup>

Rape was an insurrectionary act. It delighted me that I was defying and trampling upon the white man's law, upon his system of values, and that I was defiling his women.... I felt I was getting revenge. From the site of the act of rape, consternation spreads outward in concentric circles. (14)

Cleaver raises this explanation of his crime as an off-hand provocation, not as a thesis requiring an extended defense. Because he makes no intellectual commitment to this position, he is able to follow up immediately with the conversion account that renounces the crime and defines who he is at the time of narration:

After I returned to prison, I took a long look at myself and, for the first time in my life, admitted that I was wrong, that I had gone astray -- astray not so much from the white man's law as from being human, civilized -- for I could not approve of the act of rape.... I lost my self-respect. My pride as a man dissolved and my whole fragile moral structure seemed to collapse, completely shattered.

That is why I started to write. To save myself. (15)

Thus, Cleaver first qualifies his discrediting violent crime as political; then, using the transformative

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<sup>8</sup> Cleaver explains the rape of black women as his way of working up the courage to rape white women (14).

paradigm, he claims to have moved beyond such immature forms of political protest. And the proof of his transformation? If we are to believe the author, the existence of Soul on Ice itself. Having begun to write in prison "to save myself," the book itself -- the fact that Cleaver got himself published -- represents the fulfillment of his quest for salvation. "I was very familiar with the Eldridge who came to prison," he goes on to say, "but that Eldridge no longer exists" (16).

Conversion accounts tend to be front-loaded, informing the audience very early that the text was written by a *reformed* criminal. The paperback cover of Woman on Death Row encapsulates Velma Barfield's story: "In 1978, despairing of her crimes and drug addiction, she found God in prison. Until her 1984 execution, Velma powerfully influenced hundreds of people's lives." Iceberg Slim prefaces Pimp by expressing "remorse for my ghastly life" and hope that his autobiography will save others from "the destructive slime" of the "secret inner world of the pimp" (17). Richard Shoblad's Doing My Own Time is introduced by a university professor who testifies that the author worked diligently in his writing seminar and did not try to manipulate him. In My Shadow Ran Fast, Bill Sands receives a similar endorsement from his former San Quentin warden, Clinton T. Duffy. In all four works, the textual material introducing the narrative proper establishes the

interpretive spin most beneficial to the author -- that, having reformed, he or she will honestly recount, but not condone, the criminal acts of his or her past. Establishing these personae early in the text gives the reader a context in which to read brutal and vile crimes; even as a text deluges one with beatings and killings and rapes, the reader can take comfort in the fact that the author and publisher condemn these acts, and that eventually the narrative will do so as well.

One challenge writers face with the transformative paradigm is to explain the prison's role in their reform. Malcolm X, Caryl Chessman, Bill Sands, and Ron LeFlore -- hardly brothers-in-arms -- all openly credit their respective institutions for being positive catalysts of personal change.<sup>9</sup> However, most writers declare that their reform (or their protagonists') has nothing to do with the prison, except by way of their resistance.<sup>10</sup> For these

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<sup>9</sup> Malcolm X: "In the hectic pace of the world of today, there is no time for meditation, or for deep thought. A prisoner has time that he can put to good use. I'd put prison second to college as the best place for a man to go, if he needs to do some thinking. If he's motivated, in prison he can change his life" (391-2). Chessman, having spent five years on Death Row: "I had made up my mind the Row wouldn't change me, wouldn't touch me. It finally did. But don't mistake 'change' for 'break.' I didn't break" (1954, 312). LeFlore dedicates Breakout to the State Prison of Southern Michigan. See Sands, p. 50.

<sup>10</sup> See Cleaver (15-17), Nathan Heard (1983, 34, 195), George Jackson (21), Patricia McConnel (Dedication), Albert Race Sample (335), Iceberg Slim (17-26), Mack Thomas (346), Richard Shoblade (212), and the anonymous narrator of the 1938 Female Convict (252).

writers, to attribute rehabilitative powers to the authorities is to risk appearing broken or coopted. This danger is reflected in the work of Piri Thomas, who became a youth counselor in Harlem after serving seven years. In Down These Mean Streets, he portrays himself as willing to risk parole to stand in solidarity with protesters because "these damn cons are my people" (302). In Seven Long Times, he claims that rehabilitation was "nothing but a game" (94); emphasizes that the high school diploma he earned at Comstock reads *State University of New York*, not Great Meadows Correctional Institution (92); and includes a confrontational letter he wrote (but never sent) demanding meaningful social services for convicts. "After seven long years of hate, tension, and verbal and sometimes physical abuse," he is careful to note, "whatever rehabilitation came to me, most of it came from other inmates and from myself" (1974, 226).

The transformative paradigm backfires if the conversion seems implausible -- and a large part of making it ring true is approximating it convincingly. In general, writers have two options here. The gradualist paradigm presents internal change as steady evolution -- on-going and at times undetectable -- while the cataclysmic model portrays change as a sudden rupture, a clearly-demarcated divergence from a previous condition. Examples of the former include rehabilitation caused by accrued experience, a process of

learning, long-term psychotherapy, or a gradual weaning from an addiction; while the latter include abrupt metamorphoses such as those caused by powerful revelations, religious epiphanies, or determined vows to "just say no."<sup>11</sup>

Claude Brown's Manchild in the Promised Land presents the author's reform as gradual. The first third of the book depicts the author as an unruly child of the Harlem streets during his picaresque pre-adolescent years. As a teenager, after being released from the Warwick juvenile institution, Brown still thinks of himself as a street hustler (174). Slowly (over several years and many pages), having never made a definitive decision to change his life, Brown finds himself working a little harder in school (only because it was new, 183), holding legal jobs, giving up marijuana (225), and eventually moving out of Harlem. None of these steps come from a transformative epiphany or even a larger motive. Rather, "reform" is depicted as an osmosis-like process -- steady, unpremeditated, almost beyond the realms of planning and desire. However, at the end of the book, Brown describes coming upon a pitiable former friend who never escaped heroin and the streets. The author feels guilty for his own survival, but rationalizes, "He'd ...

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<sup>11</sup> Plainly, the paradigms contain within them elements of each other. As Gerhard Joseph observes, gradual processes can be shown to contain within them markedly different increments, while even abrupt sea-changes, after the fact, can be seen as the culmination of a building process (195-96).

made his choice, and I'd made mine" (426). Ironically, the 425 pages that precede this exchange suggest the opposite, that Brown's wise "choice" was really a kind of a happenstance -- vague and undirected -- no more an act of will than all the ruinous "choices" he and his boyhood companions made when they were younger.

In contrast to Manchild in the Promised Land, a majority of American prison accounts depict the author's conversion from criminality as an intense inner explosion parallel to a religious awakening, and often cast as such. In My Shadow Ran Fast, Bill Sands describes his future-saving first encounter with Warden Duffy, whose counsel to reform Sands greets with the thought, "Why the goddam hell should I? .... Nobody cares" (50). Then the transformation occurs:

... Warden Duffy was looking into my eyes with an expression that few men are privileged to see. The thief on the other cross, the one who repented, must have seen a face like that when he cried out in his agony.

When he spoke, I knew at last that my long descent had ended. My life was not over. It was just the beginning. He called me by my first name. And the only thing he said was:

"Bill -- I care." (his italics, 50)

Likewise, Richard Shoblad pinpoints his rehabilitation to the precise moment when a prison chaplain shows brotherly concern. Unlike for Sands, this psychological transformation includes violent physical upheaval: "The pain of admitting his love into my soul was so sharp I could scarcely breathe. I was so affected I did not even hear the

thundering slam of the cell door as he departed .... [When] I stepped out [of solitary confinement], I knew I was a different man from the one who had gone in" (212).

From there, Shoblade goes on to convert to Christianity. In Monkey Off My Back, a religious awakening precedes Jack Brown's decision to renounce a lifetime of crime. The pivotal moment transpires when he inexplicably finds himself rising at a prayer meeting to confess his sins:

... Suddenly I was no longer making intellectual statements, I was pouring myself out in a conversation with a very real and powerful God. For an hour I confessed and asked forgiveness .... And then it happened. The very real Presence of the great God Himself touched my own spirit. Inside me a marvelous joy sprang up .... What rejoicing accompanied God's grace! (120)

For "Elly Brown," the narrator of the 1938 novelized and ghost-written autobiography Female Convict, the reformatory moment takes the form of a non-denominational, post-meditation transcendence:

The four walls of my cell melted away as my own desire and every fear became as nothing, and suffering and death seemed utterly insignificant compared with the infinite fact of Life itself. ... [My] life was the Life of God and ... anything that might happen could not reach or touch the real me .... My thought-life was revolutionized. I became a new person. (200)

No lofty metaphysical epiphany visits Ron LeFlore, who became a major league baseball star after being released from prison; rather, his conversion occurs in an earth-bound instant of pragmatic insight:

... I wouldn't say I was thinking about going straight and becoming an upstanding citizen when I



got out, but I realized that if I didn't change my ways, I was never going to get out of that institution.

Sitting in my cell in solitary, I thought, "You fool, you dumb fucking fool! You're not doing yourself any good ...." (68)

These passages exemplify the rhetorical convenience of portraying reform as a single, sharp moment, rather than a more fluid process. First, because of America's diverse tradition of religious revivalism, readers are well-accustomed to stories of spiritual revelation or rebirth. Second, it simplifies matters to locate internal change in a single, identifiable event in one's life and in one's text. To pin down Claude Brown's reform in Manchild, one must juxtapose at least six different passages spread out over hundreds of pages. However, the scenes where Ron LeFlore chastises himself for being a fool, where Richard Shoblod hyperventilates in the hole, and where Bill Sands melts beneath a kindly warden's gaze allow readers to focus on one precise moment, an exact biographical and textual point after which the author intends for us to approve of his actions and attitudes. Such before and after clarity is no doubt at odds with academic literary values, which acclaim textual ambiguity and indeterminacy, and with influential schools of psychology, which emphasize the difficulty of breaking behavioral patterns and the importance of long-term therapy. We have to remember the context in which convicts and ex-convicts write. Because they are subject to harsh social judgments, depicting an unmistakable reformative

movement provides an aegis of moral respectability -- an opportunity to outflank their likely detractors by pointing out exactly when and where they changed. Of course these accounts may seem superficial. But having inoculated themselves against discrediting judgments, they can then go on to write with greater depth about other issues. Perhaps not a perfect strategy, but workable.

Occasionally, writers go one step beyond recounting the transformative moment, and also try to *display* the moment of reform as if from within. This is the "imprisoned consciousness" discussed in Chapter One -- the presentation of one's individual sensibilities as influenced by the on-going phenomenon of incarceration. Some authors do this by inserting an interior monologue into a narrative otherwise dominated by past tense explication. For example, in describing the day in San Quentin when he received his first book contract, Malcolm Braly interrupts the retrospective account to show the stirring of his soul: "*You can live. You can live*" (his italics; 1976, 307). Velma Barfield uses the same technique in Woman on Death Row. First she sets the scene for her transformative moment, recounting an evening in 1978 when the voice of an evangelist coming over the radio interrupted her thoughts of committing suicide. Then she uses internal monologues to display her spiritual rebirth as if it were transpiring as we read:

*I want to die. I want to die .... Everyone can see the guilt and hatred in my face .... I'm so*

*miserable and hateful and worthless .... Nobody could ever love me. Not after what I've done ....*

*"Yes! You can be forgiven. It's so simple. Invite Him in! Confess your sins to Him this minute. Let Him make you a new person and give you a new beginning. Do it! Do it now!"*

*God loves me. No matter what I have done, He is ready to forgive me.*

*... on that Saturday night, I knew that God had gotten through to me and that I would never be the same again. (her italics, 95-97)*

Other authors, such as Albert Race Sample, approximate the intense drama or passion of conversion with past tense descriptions that carry a heightened rhetorical pitch:

*... I felt like I was smothering, buried alive .... I panted for the thin air and squeezed myself tighter and tighter .... With outstretched arms, I clung on the low ceiling by my nails. I mauled myself, scratching and tearing my body. Slumped, exhausted on the slab, I covered my face with both hands and cried out, "Help me, God!! Help meeee!! ..."*

*A ray of light between my fingers .... The soft light soothed and I no longer was afraid. Engulfed by a presence, I felt it reassuring me .... No pressure anymore, I breathed freely. I had never felt such well being, so good, in all my life. Safe. Loved.*

*... My capacity to love was restored, and it proved I wasn't without feelings; I wasn't dead ....*

*After that, God was real. He found me in the abyss of the burning hell, uplifted and fed my hungry soul, and breathed new life into my nostrils. (277-8)*

In Sample's, Braly's, and Barfield's autobiographies, the representation of the author's transformative moment also enhances the textual presence of the prison discussed in the previous chapter. All three texts seek to display the institution's power over the narrator's mind and voice. In Racehoss, the Retrieve Prison is made present as the

pain-causing power whose attack on the body opens the soul to God's grace. In False Starts, San Quentin is seen as the soul-killing force to which "You can live" is a life-enhancing reply. And in Woman on Death Row, the prison appears as a protective agent that removes Velma Barfield from the world, thereby allowing for penitence, contrition, and salvation. Thus, in focussed passages of personal transformation, these three American accounts of imprisonment attempt to resolve the twin narrative imperatives of dealing with the negative implications of being a prisoner and making the "inside" present for "outside" readers.

Of course, we must not mistake intention for effect: just because we can identify places in a text where an author attempts to create a credible persona as a "rehabilitated criminal" does not mean that his or her efforts will succeed with readers. Consider Shoblod's Doing My Own Time. For about three-quarters of the book, the autobiographer shows himself committing appalling acts: stealing U.S. Army weapons while stationed near Hungary during the 1956 Soviet occupation; abandoning a woman he had impregnated in Europe and raping another woman in America; tricking a crippled heiress into running away from her family and marrying him; beating his vulnerable new wife, spending her money, and finally scheming to kill both her and her father. After absorbing this litany of misdeeds

-- described in overzealous detail -- only the most credulous of readers will accept that a single gesture of fellowship by a prison chaplain could produce a total character reversal.

Iceberg Slim's Pimp has the same shortcoming. Ninety-nine percent of the book depicts the violence against women from the author's supposedly pre-repentant perspective. An extremely ugly and graphic book, Pimp deluges the reader with sadistic scenes glorifying one's power to hurt, humiliate, and dominate women. In spite of Slim's short conversion scene eight pages from the end, one wonders if a truly "rehabilitated" man would have chosen to write something so saturated in misogyny. Indeed, the *pro forma* reform passage raises more questions than it answers. Doesn't the pimp persona totally dominate his persona as a reformed convict? Why doesn't the author flush out his "conversion" just a bit -- maybe exploring his guilt or efforts to make amends -- anything to make the change ring true? Why include a perfunctory transformation scene at all?

Albert Race Sample's Racehoss suggests answers to such questions. The author, who identifies himself as the child of an African American prostitute and a white man he never knew, targets the work for a primarily fundamentalist Christian audience. This is evident from the brief biography of Sample at the end of the book (339), which

notes that, since being paroled, he has received the "Angel" and "Gabriel" Awards from Pat Robertson's "700 Club." The cover advertises a "shattering and unforgettable story" of one man's passage "from a brutal Texas prison camp to a life rich in meaning and faith."

However, at first blush, Racehoss seems to be spectacularly ill-suited for the intended audience. Among the anecdotes Sample includes are the gruesome rape of "Dumplin" by "Bull," Dumplin's subsequent amputation of Bull's penis (162-170) and the decapitation of "Red Wine" by another prisoner (293). Furthermore, Sample mentions his "rich faith" just once in the 335-page book, in the conversion scene excerpted above. So what gives the book its credibility? The answer: a narrative that may play into the racist attitudes of some members of its presumably white audience. In the first third of the book, Sample depicts his upbringing in an African American community as utterly depraved. He portrays scenes of beatings, drunken binges, and prostitution that are decontextualized completely from the larger social and economic injustices faced by African Americans in the deep south in the 1930s and 40s. Seemingly everyone in Sample's community is a thief, gambler, bootlegger, prostitute, or john, and all are made to jabber at one another in an ignorant, curse-filled dialect that suggests inferiority as surely as the thick-lipped, bug-eyed figurines still sold on Bourbon Street

today. The rest of the autobiography presents Sample's horrifying seventeen years in prison, full of stern correction officers and African American prisoners who treat each other like quarry. While Sample does not explicitly credit the Retrieve Prison for his rehabilitation, it is because he is a prisoner that he learns one particular skill through which he reforms, in which he takes enormous pride, from which the book's eponymous title derives, and with which he brings honor to the prison farm by winning competitions against the "nigguhs" (249) of other prisons. That skill is picking cotton.

The hungry years under the Band forged me a body "'thout a ounce uv fat on it." My legs were lean and muscular like a distance runner's; like a racehorse's. My chest looked like I'd been pumping iron. I'd been slow baked in the sun's oven like the men of the desert. Hands rough as sandpaper with layers of hard calluses lining the palms. No more blisters from the brogans without socks.

Boss Band [the overseer] pushed me beyond any limits I dreamed I had. He forced the word *can't* out of my vocabulary. He gave no alternatives, it was do or die. At times I felt like throwing up both my hands and screaming "Kill me! Kill meeee!!"

He compelled me to recognize, to look, to become aware of where I was and what was going on all about me. I became confident .... (222)

Racehoss puts a black author's imprimatur on some tragic white stereotypes -- black men as rapacious sub-humans, black women as prostitutes, black "culture" and community as debased, and whipped black men as proud, diligent cotton-pickers. In other words, among the presumed interpretive community for this book, the ultimate authority

of Sample's prison account may not depend on how well he executes the transformative paradigm. In this case, the deeper authority is the book's alignment on issues of race and the causes of crime in the black community. Likewise, for some readers in the marginalized urban black target audience of the \$3.95 dime store autobiography, Pimp, the real source of authority is the glorified depiction of street culture and a self-made rogue who finds a way to make it.

And then there's Velma Barfield, whose credibility with some of Billy Graham's followers probably does not derive solely from the power or plausibility of her conversion scene. More salient are two points announced on the cover and in the introduction: first, that the author received spiritual counsel and nourishment from Graham's wife and daughter right up to the day of her death; and second, that she went to her execution accepting the justice of capital punishment. Thus, for the target audiences of Pimp, Racehoss, and Woman on Death Row, the transformative moment may be most important not because of the "rehabilitated prisoner" persona it establishes but because of its plot function of bringing the story to a close, like the ultimate triumph of the sole survivor over the mass murderer in a slasher movie.

Hence, the limits of my argument. For writers in prison, creating a textual presence of the confining force



and dealing with the stigma of imprisonment are important to establish narrative authority, but they are not always determinative. Many readers do not evaluate a work's subject matter and implied ideologies on the basis of authority established independent of these factors; instead, the subject matter and ideology contained therein become elements in their unfolding sense of a text's authority. Some readers will not be overly disturbed by a ridiculous conversion scene or an absent prison presence because, for them, the text's real authority lies elsewhere -- in this stereotype, in that theme; in this central ideology, in that core position. It is interesting that this idea came to me from Racehoss, Pimp, and Woman on Death Row -- three works whose subject matter I thoroughly despise.

## Chapter Three

## Poems, Prisons, and the "Criminal Mind"

To remain human in prison, one must  
break the rules.

Jerome Washington (19)

I died in Korea from a shrapnel wound, and  
narcotics resurrected me. I died in 1960  
from a prison sentence and poetry brought me  
back to life.

Etheridge Knight

## 1.

In his seminal study, Prison Literature in America, H. Bruce Franklin argues that prison writing is a "coherent body of literature, not just works by individual criminals and prisoners" (1989, 234). Franklin makes four major points: that prison writing expresses a collective rather than an individual viewpoint (251); that it provides a radical critique of American capitalism (xiii-xv; 239-249); that it exposes the penal system as one instrument of the larger class and race oppression in America (244-6, 272-76); and that it gives voice to an emerging "class unity in prison consciousness" (273) -- a consciousness informed by African American political and cultural sensibilities but that ultimately "transcend[s] the experience of one people" (234, 260).

The problem is that Franklin overstates his case. Yes, the radical left and polemical writing have their places in the history of American prison writing -- from William Lloyd

Garrison to George Jackson and from Emma Goldman to Angela Davis. But that is hardly the entire picture. Prisoners and ex-prisoners have tackled a wide range of topics, in most literary forms, with varying emphases on personal, penal, aesthetic, philosophical, cultural, and social concerns in addition to an ideological spectrum of explicit political concerns. The act of writing is always complex -- an evolving process, different for every person, bound up with many facets of our identities, our lives, and our societies. In Prison Literature in America, Franklin ignores that complexity, analyzing instead only those moments when, in his view, "unity among [America's] domestic victims" reaches a "revolutionary level" (276). The book treats incarceration more as a common biographical fact among Americans on the left than as a signal experience that influences people's writing in both similar and different ways.

Correspondingly, Prison Literature in America says little about the actual effect of incarceration on prisoners' writing. This is a significant oversight, because the everyday conditions of life have a *shaping* influence on the act and fact of writing and must be considered in any ideological critique of a body of literature. To fill that vacuum, this chapter examines ways that social and institutional strictures influence the practice of poetry in prison. How does poetry reflect and

respond to pervasive institutional practices such as the attack on individual identity and the extensive regulation of prisoners' lives? Do mainstream attitudes towards convicts influence the form and content of their work? Are there any ways that incarceration enhances one's poetic voice? These are important questions, for, as Mary Louise Pratt argues, subject matter and style in any discourse must be read and understood as context-dependent phenomena (1977, 87). Chapter Three explores how the form and subject matter of poems by prisoners are related to, and often reactions against, the daily reality of being incarcerated in America.

## 2.

As they struggle to view themselves as poets and develop literary voices, prisoners confront social and institutional forces that discourage expression, while relegating them to years of civil death. Perhaps the most difficult of these is society's contempt for those we lock up. In a democratic society, incarceration is implicitly a judgment by the people that an "offender" is not fit to live freely among the rest of us. Perhaps the denunciation would be less severe if we tried to make our prisons truly worthy of the name "correctional institutions." But in the main, our prisons are custodial and punitive in focus, not

rehabilitative,<sup>1</sup> and their disciplinary regimens, lack of services, and staff/resident power relations combine to pass on a stark moral message to convicts. One way to estimate public disdain for those we lock up is to consider the implications of two prominent labels, "criminal" and "inmate."

It is widely accepted that convicts possess "the criminal mind." According to Stanton Samenow, a Justice Department appointee in the Reagan administration, the "criminal mind" maintains a "fundamentally different view of the world than that of people who are basically responsible" (96). Selfish, angry, amoral, and violent, those who have the criminal mind do not respect authority, delay gratification, or honor community. Samenow argues, "If there is something that the criminal wants, he knocks down every barrier until he gets it. If this requires maiming or killing, so be it. There is no need to justify a crime to himself either before or at the time he commits it. In cold-blooded fashion, he does whatever suits him; he is the only one who matters" (162). Because such "criminals" respond only to power, the rest of us must protect ourselves

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<sup>1</sup> Most prisoners have very limited exposure to academic programs, job training, work release, mental health services, drug treatment, family counseling, or parenting classes. Parole has been abolished in the federal system and is under siege in some states. In most states, the juvenile justice system has failed its constitutional mandate of providing care and treatment for children.

with firm laws, swift justice, stiff sanctions, and secure prisons.

Although Americans' beliefs in this area have never been uniform,<sup>2</sup> during the last twenty years our society has become demonstrably less sympathetic to convicts. Overall, the United States is in the midst of the biggest prison expansion in our history. From 1979 to 1991, we increased our combined federal and state prison population more than 150 percent, to more than 789,000 sentenced prisoners (Maguire 1993, 608). We increased the rate of sentenced prisoners in federal and state institutions from 120 per 100,000 American residents in 1976 to 216 in 1986 and to 310 in 1991 (Maguire 1993, 608). The numbers of people in jail, in juvenile facilities, and on parole have also risen accordingly.<sup>3</sup> These swelling numbers are not accidental, but directly stem from an assortment of new sentencing laws enacted by elected officials. At the federal level, narcotics offenders now occupy sixty-one percent of federal

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<sup>2</sup> Law-breakers have also been viewed as rugged individuals, charming rogues, good-hearted scamps, tragic figures, social heroes, victims, rebels, and revolutionaries. We have depicted criminal life as exciting and unfettered, and we have celebrated the criminal for being able to resolve conflicts decisively with violence.

<sup>3</sup> The average daily population in American jails rose from 157,930 in 1978 to 422,609 in 1991 (Maguire 1993, 590, 592). The one-day count of public and private juvenile facilities rose from 43,234 and 28,688 respectively in 1979 to 56,123 and 36,290 in 1991 (Maguire 1993, 573, 579-580). The rate of persons on parole rose from 136 per 100,000 residents in 1980 to 287 in 1990 (Maguire 1993, 659).

prison beds because of strict drug laws passed in 1986 (TIME 56), while Congress's 1987 Sentencing Guidelines Act eliminated parole and good time from most federal sentencing formulas. In other words, the changes we have witnessed reflect our choices as citizens, our collective democratic will, both to incarcerate more people and to allocate more tax dollars to prisons and jails.

Other trends demonstrate society's growing antagonism toward "criminals." Public support for the death penalty has risen dramatically,<sup>4</sup> and the truth in sentencing movement has grown in force. The U.S. Supreme Court has steadily narrowed the rights and protections of criminal defendants and convicts. Politicians continue to tap (and inflame) popular sentiment against criminals, as exemplified by George Bush's Willie Horton ad campaign in 1988 and the recent posturing in Washington, D.C. over such elements in the 1994 Crime Bill as the "three strikes and you're out" sentencing rules and the establishment of some fifty new federal death penalty crimes. To measure American attitudes about the criminal justice system, a 1991 Gallup Poll survey asked the following question: "In general, do you think the courts in your area deal too harshly, or not harshly enough,

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<sup>4</sup> Witness the Gallop Poll's annual survey question, "Are you in favor of the death penalty for persons convicted of murder?" In 1966, about 40 percent of respondents answered "Yes." The figure rose to 50 percent in 1969, 60 percent in 1978, 70 percent in 1986, and almost 76 percent in 1991 (Maguire 1992, 199; Maguire 1993, 205).

with criminals?" The results were breathtaking, given that the country's rate of incarceration had grown by two and one-half times in the fifteen years preceding the survey. Eight percent of Americans answered "About right," six percent had no opinion," three percent said "Too harsh," and eighty-three percent replied "Not harsh enough" (Maguire 1992, 191).

A different but related set of assumptions underlies the label "inmate," which is a term that some prisoners dislike because of its associations with mental institutions (Martin 38) and psychological surrender to authority (Braly 222). As "inmates," prisoners are stereotyped as pathological denizens of chaotic and fratricidal sanitariums. Brawls in the yard, gang rapes in the showers, and shank stabbings in the dining halls are regarded as typical incidents among them. "Inmates" are also morally sullied as abject cowards who lack the wherewithal to stand up to their captors, something that people situated in free society typically insist *they* would do.

My claim is not the radical or romantic notion that all prisoners are victims of a tyrannical society, but rather, that within the mainstream discourse about crime, stereotypes of prisoners as "criminals" and "inmates" are systematic and clearly articulated. Prisoners themselves are influenced by this fact. Although "removed" from society, they are not removed from the everyday world of



social attitudes and opinions. They read and watch television. They interact with prison staff and go to court. They feel the shame of their families. They endure a fenced-off exile and daily rituals of humiliation that they know the law sanctions. As Patricia McConnel writes, "You [receive] messages on every level that you are a pariah" (237). Or in the words of Malcolm Braly:

That single thing that grinds you down and finally begins to erode your confidence, your vitality, your most basic sense of yourself, is the moment-to-moment condemnation implicit in this situation. And when the prison begins to seem like the only world, you know that it isn't, you know that there is always a larger world, full of nice people, who would not understand how you had become a part of this small disgraced minority. (251)

Poetry by prisoners begins right there, with that disgrace.

For American convicts, the act of writing (and all decisions about subject matter, form, and style) is in large measure defined by one's alignment towards the labels "criminal" and "inmate." Raymond Williams defines "alignment" as the fact that writing "variously expresses, explicitly or implicitly, specifically selected experience from a specific point of view" (1977, 199). The reason poets' alignment towards the labels matters so much is, of course, that they live with them every day, and also that their implications legitimize prisoners' lack of freedom and can be invoked to discredit any opinion they express.

Some poems wage open war on the stereotypes, reflecting a confrontational alignment. In "Does Anyone Understand



A Blk militant  
 with all the rest of' the stereotypes'/  
 classifications'/conotations' [sic] /&Cle-Shays  
 that companies' that .... (Bruchac 1974, 17-21)

There are also poems aligned in the opposite direction, accepting or reinforcing the pejorative labels. José Y. Terán, Jr. condemns rapists by depicting one's perspective during the crime: "she pretends / to be asleep / I push back her eyelids, / she stares / as though she emptied herself / into space" (Bruchac 1984, 303). In "Beast at the Zoo," published when he was eighteen years-old, Michael Anthony Walford portrays "Blood curdling screams. / Beasts dying to be free. / Life in the zoo. / A sadistic fantasy" (Bruch, no page number, lines 9-12). Other poems present stereotypical images of the deviant "inmate" as a way of castigating those who run prisons. Etheridge Knight's "For Freckle-Faced Gerald" eulogizes a sixteen year-old boy handed over by the prison administration to "buzzards" to be raped (Knight 19). In "Pacified," Thomas G. Nickens lashes out against "inmates" who are conditioned into depravity and compliance:

A prisoner  
                   lost his visits  
                   for excessive kissing  
                   so he molested another inmate

A prisoner  
                   was beaten by guards  
                   so he whipped another inmate

A prisoner  
                   got raped  
                   so he hung himself

And tonight  
 all the prisoners  
 are rushing to their cells  
 (stopping of course for ice cream popcorn 'n  
     coke)  
 to watch the late movie (Bruchac 1984, 247)

As discussed in Chapter Two, re-inscribing stereotypes of the prisoner has the advantage of defining the prisoner-poet by opposition. That said, on the whole the orientation of Terán, Walford, Knight, and Nickens in these poems is atypical among poets in prison (and is not sustained consistently in Knight's and Nickens's work). In fact, most poems are aligned against the labels "criminal" and "inmate," but their alignment is more subtly oppositional than in works such as "This is A Recording." One such poem is Jimmy Santiago Baca's "I Am Sure of It":

Just after supper sheets were passed out,  
 the sheets smell clean as I make my bed,  
 warm from laundry dryers and soft.  
 I spread the first sheet over my mattress,  
 smooth it out and tuck it in.  
 "32581 ..." I look back and there's a guard.  
 "32581 ..." and I nod affirmatively.  
 He leaves the letter on the bars and goes on.

It's from a magazine I sent three poems to.  
 On the envelope in bold black letters,  
 It's rubber stamped, FUNDS RECEIVED ... AMOUNT  
     \$10.  
 I open the letter and read the first paragraph.  
 They usually don't pay for poems, they say,  
 but wanted to in this case,  
 to help me out. My poems were beautiful,  
 and would be published soon.

Holding this letter in my hand,  
 standing in the middle of my cell,  
 in my boxer shorts, it's now, times like this,  
 rapt in my own unutterable surprise, I wonder  
     about people ...

I take a few steps to the toilet and pull myself  
 up,  
 my mouth at the back grill at the back of my cell,  
 just about to holler to my buddy in another cell  
 when I am struck silent by the window across from  
 me,  
 and look outside, upon a few convicts at dusk,  
 running in pairs around the baseball diamond,  
 or some close to the fence that separates them  
 from freedom,  
 they walk, pointing arms to freedom.  
 The grass is green, trees lulled in deep spring  
 slumber,  
 sun going down at the west edge of the earth.

Shadows cover hovering sunrays, shaking sun out of  
 leaves.  
 boughs dark, fields darken perceptibly leaving  
 one solitary walker, hands down with a blue beanie  
 cap over his head, thinking,  
 thinking, as he walks around the field one last  
 time, then disappears.  
 The baseball diamond is empty now.  
 The smell of cool spring is in the night air,  
 above all things,  
 and toy-sized cars crawl in black distances,  
 headlights roving into long roads of darkness,  
 leaving small towns behind, sparkling in  
 streetlamps,  
 a single car slides into a great wave of darkness,  
 a nightworkers, searching stars and breathing  
 fresh air,  
 the hum of engine and whir of wheels,  
 drone on in the silence of a Tuesday night.  
 Grass crickets tune their fiddles in the wind;  
 by rumbling trucks on the freeways,  
 construction workers coming and going into homey  
 bars,  
 greasy caps cocked to one side, smoking  
 cigarettes,  
 stroking pool cues through gritty thick fingers,  
 suck their unbrushed teeth watching intently,  
 as Tammy Wynette wails out her country hits  
 to dimes and quarters plunked in the jukebox,  
 among the bearish beer-drinking, smoke-swirling  
 workers,  
 coughing and cursing and smiling,  
 while their fathers push on screen doors,  
 enter yellowed kitchens and drink coffee with  
 married daughters,  
 as night darkens over the city  
 and porch lights collect bugs in their nets ...

All the while we convicts live in a smooth  
 block of rock,  
 convicts scan through their TV guides,  
 and through all the different blubbering channels,  
 an old Mexican song floats out from someone's  
 cell,  
 recalling memories; under the screams and  
 gunshots  
 tumbling out of TVs, memories float heavy in me,  
 and I think of tennis shoes my grandfather  
 bought for me as a child for my birthday.

My life is so filled with simple things!  
 With beds and people crying and laughing and  
 fighting,  
 towns and voices and kisses and forgettable  
 nights,  
 walking on sidewalks or through grass at dusk,  
 this is life, I am sure of it ....  
 I step down from the toilet, grab the sheet and  
 tuck it in.  
 I spread the blanket over, then sit down,  
 thinking all the time, this is life,  
 even in prison, respecting each other,  
 helping each other,  
 close or far away, it doesn't matter,  
 I am sure of it. (Bruchac 1984, 27-9)

Santiago Baca does not dwell on the stigma of being a prisoner, only alluding to it twice (in line 6, where the guard calls him "32581," and in line 11, where he indicates that the authorities have opened his mail and "received" his ten dollars). But indirectly, the poem is a venture for self-restitution; within the context of years of diminutions, the poet reconstitutes himself as a gentle, feeling person, as someone who sees the good in life and in simple things. Unobtrusively, the poem counters the popular belief that prisons are jungles. Here, the institution is an ordinary place "with beds and people crying and laughing and fighting" just like the great world beyond. While the

penitentiary is no substitute for home (some prisoners point their arms to freedom), the men nevertheless have made their lodging habitable. The speaker treats his living space with respect, tucking in his sheets. Prisoners jog in pairs, reflect amidst hovering sun rays, and feel good about themselves. All of this obliquely subverts our Manichean understanding of "criminals" as a twisted class categorically different from "us."

At the same time, the poem shows that the speaker's self-restitution is neither easy nor secure. The affirmation of the speaker's humanity that sparks the epiphany comes from the outside world, from the literary journal, and not from within a cold institution personified by the guard who calls the speaker "32581." His sense of fulfillment flowers because of a truly extraordinary event. The speaker cannot forget that he remains on the wrong side of the bars -- that out there in the free world construction workers are shooting pool and fathers are visiting their married daughters. Indeed, he must repeat "This is life" and "I am sure if it" as if to fortify his epiphany against the sure counterarguments.

It does not particularly matter whether Santiago Baca *intentionally* wrote the poem to subvert the labels affixed to him. What matters is that the lens through which the poet views himself is far more expansive and affirming than the lens through which society views him as a convict.

Santiago Baca has rejected the notion that "inmates" cannot express tenderness or exercise self-control as they experience pain. He has rejected the Scarlet "C" that society would have him brandish across his chest. But he is not solely aligned against these stereotypes or overly responsive to them.

This point requires some explanation. Some mainstream evaluations made about a subordinate group are so basic -- so pervasive -- that we should not expect group members always to respond to them directly. Such evaluations have become a given -- an accepted context -- of everything group members say and do and write. As Mikhail Bakhtin observes, such evaluations "are usually not articulated: they have entered the flesh and blood of all representatives of the group; they organize behavior and actions; they have merged, as it were, with the objects and phenomena to which they correspond, and for that reason are in no need of specific verbal formulation" (1989, 398).

Correspondingly, many of Santiago Baca's poems give no specific indication that the poet is imprisoned. "Three Friends of Mine" celebrates the rhythms of a day -- the green dawn, the lemon-knuckled afternoon sun, and the wine dark night (Hogan 1977, 14). "Another Love Poem" presents the speaker's love for a unnamed person "landing easily ... / dancing on / very real in my heart" (Hogan 1977, 15-17). "Ancestor" is a touching elegy to his father, a gypsy who



passed in and out of his life, handing down a kind of love

**"Beyond the ordinary love, beyond the coordinated life":**

Papa gave us something: when we paused from work,  
my sister fourteen years old working the cotton  
fields,  
my brother and I running like deer,  
we would pause, because we had a papa no one  
could catch,  
who spoke when he spoke and bragged and drank,  
he bragged about us: he did not say we were  
smart,  
Nor did he say we were strong and were going  
to be rich someday.  
He said we were good. He held us up to the world  
for it to see,  
three children that were good, who understood love  
in a quiet way,  
who owned nothing but calloused hands and true  
freedom,  
and that is how he made us: he offered us to the  
wind,  
to the mountain, to the skies of autumn and  
spring.  
"He said, "Here are my children! Care for them!"  
And he left again, going somewhere like a child  
with a warrior's heart, nothing could stop him....  
And I am the blossom of many nights.  
A threefold blossom: my sister is as she is,  
my brother is as he is, and I am as I am.  
Through the sacred ceremony of living, daily  
living,  
arose three distinct hopes, three loves, out of  
the long felt nights and days of yesterday.  
(Bruchac 1984, 26-7)

What we see here is a breadth of perspective, a poet who lays claim to the fullness of his experience rather than limiting himself only to doing battle with stereotypes. Undoubtedly, Santiago Baca thinks of himself as a man, a father, a Chicano, a poet, and much else before he is a prisoner. The same can be said of most women and men who have composed poetry in prison, writers as diverse as Carolyn Baxter, James Lewisohn, Gene Fowler, and Stephen

Todd Booker.<sup>5</sup> Hostile stereotypes of the prisoner may be well-articulated in American society, but that does not mean that the best or only ways for poets to contest their (mis)representation is by taking overt and decisive positions against them. Quite the opposite. Why should poets limit themselves to overly-defensive parries -- to writing poems that are ultimately only variants of their stereotypes? After all, it is usually the work of the larger culture, and not the poets, to define prisoners, their motivations, and their lives in reductive terms.

### 3.

Then there is the influence of penitentiaries themselves on prisoners' poetic voices. To understand how prisons work, it is helpful to recall Erving Goffman's classic definition of the "total institution." While in the basic arrangement of society people "tend to sleep, play, and work in different places, with different co-participants, under different authorities," the "total institution" breaks down barriers between these spheres (5-6). In such places, "a large number of like-situated individuals, cut off from the wider society for an appreciable period of time, together lead an enclosed,

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<sup>5</sup> In fact, Michael Hogan and Diane Bickston, who directly attack the stereotypes in the poems cited above, rarely use head-on confrontation in their other poems.

formally administered round of life" (xiii). This enclosed life is directed by administrators and overseen by line staff, with little or no input from prisoners. The division between managers and the managed must be absolute, with the lowest-ranking employee having indisputable hierarchical status above all captives (7-9). To create and sustain authority over prisoners, institutions employ four major types of mutually-reinforcing practices, all of which condition compliance, give prisons an air of order and easy control, and influence the writing of prisoners.

First, as a matter of daily practice, institutions objectify their captives, treating human beings as batches of things to be efficiently counted, stored, and kept secure. One way they do this is by imposing the same inflexible schedule upon everyone. Officers herd prisoners to their cells for the "count" at preset times. Meals are provided, laundry is collected, and lights flicker on at preset hours. Visitors and intramural basketball are scheduled on preset days. Prison regulations create standard operating procedures for virtually any activity and often punish the many for the transgressions of the few. The all-encompassing regimen always has an internal logic, but that logic typically has little to do with the personal needs and desires of prisoners, and everything to do with administrative considerations such as the seating capacity of the mess hall, the best time to change workers' shifts,

and the necessity of memos.<sup>6</sup> Over time, the practice of objectification can undermine creativity by rubbing away the singularity of one's life. Prisoners experience the same brick-framed vistas, the same in-house dramas, the same events and activities and rhythms of life. What can be elided is the sense of living one's own unique life -- and the belief, so important for writers, that one has something unique to share with readers.

Objectification contributes to the second institutional practice, mortification. As Goffman found in his study of St. Elizabeth's Hospital, total institutions force prisoners "to engage in activity whose symbolic implications are incompatible with [their] conception of self" (23). Upon entrance to the prison, individuals are numbered, deprived of their autonomy, thrust into a world based on rules and codes they do not know, defined predominantly by their criminal records, and stripped of much that is central to their identities. Systematic mortification goes on for every day of one's sentence, for months and years. It ranges from the drab clothes prisoners must wear to the sharp-voiced directives they must obey; the shake-downs

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<sup>6</sup> We must remember that while prisoners experience incarceration as a lived phenomenon, prison employees experience it in terms of their job duties, and therefore as a series of bureaucratic and logistic challenges. In the novel, Cast the First Stone, Chester Himes describes the evolution of Classification Bureau employees: "They became callous and indifferent and cynical as does everyone else, sooner or later, when dealing with convicts" (165).

they must suffer to the impulses they must quell; and the petty permissions they must obtain to the little liberties they must forget. Jean Harris observes, "There is a terrible and constant fear in here that we are not being punished enough, that permitting us the luxury of looking like women is a sign of weakness in them that may make the public angry and loosen their grips on their jobs" (1991, 71).

The implications are unmistakable: prisoners see that they are viewed as lesser creatures, as people who are inherently stupid, deceitful, degenerate, and weak. In turn, mortification creates among captives a culture of acquiescence, eroding their self-esteem and teaching them to put up with all but the most extreme infringements and humiliations. Bob Robinson dramatizes this process in the poem, "only a word":

Stop me and frisk me  
arrest me and convict me  
but pig--  
what about my rights

Dress me and ship me  
number me and beat me  
but shit--  
what about my rights

Drop them and bend them  
spread them and lift them  
god--  
what about my rights?

Strip me and break me  
zoo me and make fun of me  
but sir--  
what about my rights

Work me and degrade me  
until you finally parole me  
watch me and hound me  
but--  
please don't violate me

And I promise to never again  
ask about such a thing  
as...my rights. (Inside 5)

In each stanza, the speaker becomes more worn down by the practice of mortification and more tolerant of abuses against him. Devolving from one who calls authority figures "pig" to one who calls them "sir," he learns to give up on the notion of personal rights and, by the end of the poem, is reduced to making a last ditch promise of obedience to stave off his ultimate humiliation, violation. In large measure, the smooth daily operations of jails and penitentiaries require the kind of acquiescence (if less dramatic) that Robinson depicts. Even with weapons, a relatively small number of people cannot manage the lives of a much larger group without obtaining their cooperation. Prisoners must consent to eat tasteless mush with plastic spoons; they must consent to make license plates for twenty-five cents an hour; and they must consent to appear before their loved ones in visiting halls in positions of total subordination to the guards standing watch.

In discussing the difficulty of writing in prison, Malcolm Braly notes that "as a social act and as a psychological act, writing typically requires a sense, the feeling that you have something to say, something to

contribute." Mortification grinds down this sense of worthiness, reducing it to shame and self-loathing. Succumbing both to major compromises and minor indignities in a bounded system, the individual can become a helpless spectator of his own degradation. Sometimes even mental avenues of escape become closed off. Dreams dissolve in the light of day. Fantasies cut back to reality. In time, cherished memories become defamed, for one's recollections become part and parcel of the polluted environment from which they formerly provided egress (Goffman 23). Carolyn Baxter portrays this loss in "On Being Counted":

I Lay Down, thinking thoughts that  
were one time real,  
But are now like houses that have been torn down,  
and families that have moved away. (33-34)

Or, as one prisoner remarked in a discussion of the creative process, "In prison, you just keep bringing up the same old memories until you get sick of yourself" (Witherup 7).

The third major institutional practice is discipline, which is more than merely the authorities' responses to infractions. Rather, disciplinary practices are "procedures for the ... coercion of bodies" aimed at producing "efficiency" and "normality" (Foucault 1977, 169). The practice of discipline occurs in several spheres. One is that disciplinary practice creates partitioned physical and analytical space, defining both physical areas and epistemological rankings (Foucault 141-9). Physically, that means segmented living quarters and special isolation cells,

also known as "the hole." Epistemologically, it means all the rules and values that define the prison milieu, such as the hierarchical ordering between (and within) staff and prisoners; the standards of behavior that allow infractions to be classified by severity; and the official and unofficial speech codes that bear upon every speech act, whether poetry or parole statements, letters home or legal briefs. Prisoners' lives are forced within these matrices.

Disciplinary practice also divides time into serialized segments, regulating activities into stages (Foucault 156-62). These serialized segments include the predetermined stages of the prison day and long-term graduated projects such as therapeutic programs or General Equivalency Degrees. Typically, prison sentences are presented to prisoners (and internalized by them) as a *series of advances* towards specific goals, like obtaining a favorable evaluation, securing greater privileges, earning good time, or qualifying for parole. Progress through each step becomes capital in itself -- an investment of time, a measure of hope, a point closer to a valuable end. The more one accrues, the less the incentive to do (or write) anything that *may* jeopardize those gains.<sup>7</sup> Wilbert Rideau writes,

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<sup>7</sup> Hence the frustration of federal judges and prison wardens with Congress's 1987 Sentencing Guidelines Act, which took away some incentives to obey the rules by eliminating parole and good time in many sentencing formulas.



... as the years pass, you soon reach a point where you've invested so many years and so much effort in the chance of getting out that, no matter how futile the situation looks, it's too late to quit the gamble, to throw it all away -- a point where you've just got to ride it out, no matter what it leads to. (52)

Finally, over time the practice of discipline conditions behavior to create "model prisoners." As Goffman observes, the prisoner is "shaped and coded into an object that can be fed into the administrative machinery of the establishment, to be worked on smoothly by routine operations" (16). That is, the model prisoner internalizes the institution's rules, roles, and routines as if he had chosen them himself. He grows tired of conflict with the authorities and feels either comfortable with the regimen or too burned-out to keep fighting it. Going along to get along, he accepts an ethos of anti-friction, and his incarceration is almost a matter of *captivare* as *captivus*. Sometimes this is referred to as being "adjusted" or doing "easy time," as exemplified by the long-term con Earl Copen in Bunker's novel, The Animal Factory. Earl advises a newly-arrived convict to give up thoughts of home: "Prison is a separate world and you have to build a life separate from the world outside .... If you try to live in both worlds, you'll go crazy" (Bunker 1977, 108).

The fourth major institutional practice is individualization, or those techniques that make the single prisoner stand out from the incarcerated many. Managers

scrupulously watch the managed, not just to trip up conspiracies, but also to record their reluctance to cooperate and their failure to reform. As Foucault observes, "Full lighting and the eye of the supervisor capture [abnormal behavior]. Visibility is a trap" (1977, 200). For Foucault, the *sine qua non* of individualization is Jeremy Bentham's Panopticon, or Inspection House, which was a central viewing tower from which a single employee could look into many cells. Because prisoners could not see into the panopticon, they had no way of knowing when they were being observed. In theory, the perpetual possibility of individualized surveillance would cause the prisoners to discipline themselves.

In practice in the nineteenth century, panoptic architecture was constructed in only a few institutions (Ignatieff 112-3), but the prominent watch towers, open view cells along catwalks, and electronic surveillance systems of our prisons are the progeny of Bentham's conformity-creating "inspection principles" (Ignatieff 111). So too are practices such as reading prisoners' mail, shaking down their cells and visitors, encouraging them to report on each other, and requiring their participation in monitored "therapeutic" activities. Punishment is designed to be a heightened form of individualization: transgressors are "written up" or placed in the hole; in many cases, they are

put on the "merry-go-round" of transfers from prison to prison, thus losing contact with family and visitors.

Perhaps the keenest individualization of prisoners is the documentation of their juridical histories. Every prisoner acquires a "jacket" or "paper shadow," which is one's lifetime record of arrests and convictions, court appearances, criminal confessions, diagnostic reports, psychological profiles, IQ tests, medical records, behavior assessments, and prison activities. Maintained by court and corrections authorities, the paper shadow follows prisoners through the turnstiles of the criminal justice system. Throughout their sentences, this record weighs heavily in matters as big as parole determinations and as small as whether they will be allowed to help plan the annual cellblock awards ceremony. Of course, prisoners do not control their own depictions in the paper shadow. They do not write the diagnostic reports that explain their "pathologies"; nor do they compose the narrative of the crimes to which they confessed in their plea bargains. They will not know exactly what is contained in the paper shadow; nor can they determine who has access to it or provide a context to those who read it. But the portrait contained therein is rendered all the more "true" by the documents' air of fact and objectivity.

The supreme moment of individualization comes during the decision about release. There, standing alone for

judgment, the prisoner is no longer an institutional Everyman. His past and his prospects are laid out for non-convict authorities, and this account will influence a judgment affecting years of his life. At this moment, individualization becomes a form of mortification, for the prisoner's biography is represented as autobiography, and used against the "author."

Overall, individualization has a muffling effect on creative expression. That is because surveillance encourages facelessness, intimidating leadership, creating a mentality of withdrawal, and teaching prisoners that conformity is the gateway to freedom. Of course, sometimes prisoners refuse to silence themselves, perhaps because they feel they have nothing to lose by speaking out or because personal dignity requires them to test the boundaries of permissible speech. Then, prison power typically shifts from the realm of influence to authority (in Patterson's terms [1982, 1-2]), and that means explicit censorship. In the United States, there is a long history of forcibly editing or suppressing prisoners' journalism, including several prominent cases in the past six years. In 1988, the columnist Dannie Martin was placed in solitary confinement at Lompac Prison, transferred against his will, and prohibited from writing articles after one of his pieces in The San Francisco Chronicle offended authorities (Martin and Sussman). In 1990, the journalist Luke Janusz reported

being placed in solitary confinement at Norfolk state prison in Massachusetts because of his efforts to found the in-house journal Odyssey (Jurkowitz). For most prisoners, the mere possibility that the authorities will read their writing (before or after publication) creates a climate of silence and is itself a powerful form of censorship. In a recent article in THE ECHO, a monthly newspaper circulated throughout the Texas prison system, Philip Brasefield describes an encounter in which another prisoner asks why most of his articles deal with sports. "For one thing, the ECHO is a censored publication, and I therefore doubt they'd welcome reading my observations on the dismal decline observed in the general population during the past sixteen years" (2).<sup>8</sup>

As a social act, publishing an article or a poem causes a person to stand out. It creates a distinction, perhaps even a sensation. However, public attention is often undesirable for convicts who do not control their living conditions or dates of release. As the journalist Ron Wikberg said from Louisiana State Penitentiary at Angola in 1992, "You get your time. You serve it. You keep your

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<sup>8</sup> However, Brasefield's move is a bit of a canard, because he goes on to complain at length about the "animalistic" and "pathetically insecure" prisoners in the general population (2). His perspective is not one that Texas prison authorities would need or want to censor. However, the fact remains, as the newspaper's masthead indicates, that "THE ECHO is a monthly **censored** publication" (their boldface).

mouth shut, and four or five years later nobody knows who you are or what your crime was" (Clines). The alternative is to flirt with a longer sentence.<sup>9</sup> Wikberg's friend and mentor Wilbert Rideau understands the principle of invisibility as well as anyone. Rideau is a 33-year resident of the penitentiary at Angola where, in 1975, he became editor-in-chief of The Angolite, now the leading non-censored prison journal in the country. Over the years, he has published insightful articles while helping prisoners express themselves and learn useful occupational skills. However, despite his accomplishments, Rideau is the only 1961 murder convict in Louisiana still behind bars. "The key to getting out of prison is anonymity," the writer said in a 1992 interview (Clines). Louisiana Governor Edwin Edwards agreed, stating that Rideau "has effectively forever

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<sup>9</sup> Notoriety sometimes can help exceptional convicts -- those imprisoned for political crimes, death row prisoners, and people imprisoned unjustly. Differently, it can also help those who tow the institution's line. According to Jerome Washington, the opposite of the writer-in-prison is the "prison writer":

He kowtows and blends with the system. He and his craft are subjugated by the system. Therefore, prison writers strengthen the very system which oppresses them .... [Their] prose and poetry only serves to restate, rather than incriminate, the misconceptions and stereotypes nurtured by the system. In short, they become as much a functioning part of the prison as are the guards, the officials and the administrators who pass the buck and protect themselves at the expense of their humanity. (x)

barred any possibility for clemency because of his own self-generated press" (Clines).

4.

Individualization, objectification, mortification, and discipline all foster a culture of silence and compliance. They all create a world of pain. In a very deep sense, the practice of poetry counters these forces, though not necessarily in an open or specifically-targeted style.

One way poetry does this is by displaying a sensibility, a way of thinking, a fundamental humanity, that is not acknowledged by institutions in their daily practice. Consider Santiago Baca's "I am Sure of It." The speaker appreciates the majesty of a cool spring sunset. He is responsive to small details -- "headlights roving into long roads of darkness" (39), grass crickets tuning "their fiddles on the wind" (45). He blends these newly-appreciated images of beauty with newly-aroused memories, such as his grandfather buying him tennis shoes. Most of all, he values friendship and companionship -- people "respecting each other, helping each other, / close or far away" (75-76). Dramatized here is a mind able to appreciate "simple things" and the good in life. The poet displays a sensitivity to his surroundings and a largeness of spirit

and perspective, not the kind of thoughts typically associated with the "criminal mind."

Nor are they the kind of thoughts prisons regularly promote or reward. Through their Spartan surroundings and brick and bar monotony, prisons seek to deprive prisoners of sensory pleasure. Through the practice of mortification, they seek to despoil prisoners' self-esteem. And through the numbering and batching of people, they seek to deny the importance of prisoners' individual identities and experiences. Poetry that displays humanizing sensibilities resists all of these practices, a point Michael Hogan makes in the anthology, Do Not Go Gentle:

I see these poems primarily as weapons of survival and only incidentally as good literature. Each man represented in these pages fought to preserve his identity, his existential wonder, his joy at being alive in the world, his rage at being imprisoned. In doing so he gave courage to others who might have abandoned the fight, might have succumbed, as so many before them had, to the darkness of not seeing, not feeling, and doing "easy time." (v)

Lyric poetry makes a claim for individuality in an overcrowded system of enforced uniformity. "Each group of poems," Hogan continues, "describes a way of seeing, a way of feeling, and a way of being that is unique to each poet" (v). This may not seem to be a remarkable assertion as an introduction to most anthologies, but for prisoners, to reclaim one's *unique way of seeing* is to refute a core premise of institutions -- that prisoners' personal concerns and individual perspectives mean nothing.



Thus, Michelle Roberts writes spiritual poetry, showing how the moon, the stars, the wind, and the earth make her heart beat "like an ancient drum" (Bruchac 1984, 272) and awaken her to universal connections between the generations. Edgar Jackson/Anawrok writes about his cultural identity as an Eskimo, about "the traditions we believe in / ... the magic our people lived with / the only magic that kept us alive / to believe in ourselves" (Bruchac 1984, 137). In Personae Non Gratae, Paul Mariah eulogizes two men who fell in love on death row before their executions. Arthur DeTullio recreates specific memories in his poems -- the hangout where he and his future wife went as teenagers (1993, 117); an afternoon holding his newborn son, "his small fist around my finger" (1993, 89); and an abandoned farmhouse where he and his girl "did our dance of passion / in the dust of Georgia clay" (1990, 62). In "Pity," the African American poet George Drumgold expresses his determination to build upon the "slaving" lives his parents were forced to lead:

Still in all I don't desire pity  
                                 instead I'd rather integrity ...  
 And to this add equality  
 My mother is weak, my father is dead  
   until I perish I'll stand in his stead  
   ... He was and I am Somebody.  
                                 (Bruchac 1974, 55)

For these poets, poetry expresses *entire classes of sensibility* to which the prison is at best indifferent and at worst antagonistic: faith, not fighting; remembrance,

not rioting; dignity, not dependence. With their idiosyncratic images and ideas and accents, their particular perspectives and distinct subject matter, these poems highlight the *singular* identities of their authors. Viewed within the context of their perpetual objectification as numbers, "beds," or "heads," this poetic assertion of singularity is one of the most powerful features of the tradition.

But at the same time, imprisoned poets write about *common* subjects -- whether nature or love or ethnicity or God -- thus breaking down the binary opposition between the concerns of amoral "inmates" and we who are good. That is to say, prisoners employ poetry to repair the bonds between themselves and the outside world from which they were exiled. Let us look at "Even the Best," by Gary Allan Kizer:

And what Mantle dreams of  
At night is the way  
The bat breaks and stings  
When a high hard one  
Sings in on his hands  
And the ball dribbles out  
To a baby-faced pitcher  
Who runs it to first  
By himself and laughs.

And Maris walks the street  
Overweight and unremembered,  
With the sun an asterisk  
Next to his 61, always  
A shadow not his own  
Blurring the mark he left,  
Hearing his son say  
You did it dad but  
It's never quite enough.

And Mays gives out  
Greetings to the gamblers,  
Feels his heart beat  
In time with falling chips,  
And curses legs that let him  
Down as they stumbled at Shea,  
Hearing the crowd murmur,  
Watching the white ball bounce  
Around the wheel against his  
Will and away to the wall.

And you, my son --  
I know you dream at night  
On young legs that run  
All day, hear the bat  
Crack the sky of your mind  
Like thunder and smile  
As you lay there sleeping.  
Your life like base paths  
Stretched out ahead of you,  
Hungry for accomplishment.

But think of them, Matthew,  
These old men once stars  
Who look back to a time  
Of greatness before a crowd,  
Locked in a child's world  
With gray hair and wrinkles  
And a wall full of trophies  
To give each day new purpose.

There are other things  
for a strong son to learn  
And do as you will,  
Other moments of greatness  
When your children to come  
Squeal their way into the  
Air or your hands work  
Wood or steel or a woman.

Yes, rage like any boy who  
Dreams and fails his dream  
In the sunlight and the sweat,  
Who tries to be his dream,  
Quivers with fear, excitement,  
Each time he tries,  
And sometimes wins.

If you wake and strike out,  
If hot tears push at your eyes  
Whenever you try and fail  
And a small crowd sighs,

Learn early to take it  
 And come back with the will  
 To be only what you are,  
 My strong son,  
 My prince,  
 My star. (Bruchac 1984, 163-4)

The poem displays rare eloquence and tenderness, but it also shows that, in large ways, Kizer is just like anybody else. He loves his son unconditionally. He wants Matthew to be happy and resilient during the rough times in life. A baseball fan, he is moved by the possible sadness of his retired heroes, "locked in a child's world" and left to rue their lost glory with unquenched hearts. And he himself has endured his own ups and downs over the years, from which comes his counsel to Matthew. To preserve and feature such familiar, in one sense, *unremarkable* human concerns in poetry is to defy the institutional practice of stripping and soiling one's pre-incarceration identity. No longer is the totality of one's life contained within the institution and its labels.

Not surprisingly, Kizer is just one of many to use poetry in this way. Melvin Douglass Brown shares a portrait of his steelworker father, a man "worn from toil" who shot flames from his mouth and taught the poet, "Son / don't be like me / THINK / don't be like me" (Minarik 22, lines 16-19). William "Rocky" Middleton describes his boyhood pain of watching his mother primp for a night on the town, singing to the radio, while "I wanted / you to stay at home / watch TV or play monopoly" (Minarik 56, lines 37-39).

John Paul Minarik, the incarcerated editor of Kicking their Heels with Freedom: Poems from Pennsylvania Prisons, includes in the anthology two unidentified "blank rounds" -- one poem by a guard and another by a civilian -- to show readers that they cannot distinguish the values and concerns of prisoners from non-prisoners, and thus that "the people in this volume ... are your fellow Americans, your fellow Pennsylvanians, your neighbors, your brothers, your sisters, your sons, your daughters, the face you see in the mirror" (preface, 5). The poem "Reincarnation," by John L. Sellers, presents ordinary, "everyday" sensibilities in another way:

Of all the birds I love,  
I would rather be a duck.  
I would swim along the river bank,  
And watch the people fish.

Of all the fish I love,  
I would rather be a bass.  
I would climb upon the slippery rocks,  
and slide down on my hands and knees.

Of all the animals I love,  
I would rather be a skunk.  
I would spray all the so-called poets  
Who write this type of junk. (Hogan 1977, 57)

Humor is one of the key ways that women and men survive incarceration (Martin 48). The ability to laugh softens the tension of prison life and shows that one is not thick-witted. It projects self-confidence in addressing a non-incarcerated audience while also allowing for self-deprecation. Consider the following poem by Melvin Ray Hairston:

looking out through the prison bars  
     i wonder about the minutes  
 that could be spent doing  
     productive things  
 constructive things  
     creative things

    i think about sitting down  
         at the poker table  
 or, betting on horses  
         even shooting dice and  
 snorting cocaine, or  
         pimping whores  
 while i drive my brand-new hog  
         through the crime-infested  
         streets  
 maybe even being in a dope house  
         pumping skag in my veins

yeah...!  
     everytime [sic] i look out through these  
     prison bars  
 i think about doing  
     productive  
 constructive  
     YEAH!  
 creative things.... (Wiegand 42)

Hairston does not fear poking fun at himself and the rhetoric of reform and personal productivity valued by the criminal justice system. With humor, he rises above his stolid prison surroundings and contrasts his own vibrant, multileveled language with the somber idiom of the institution. In laughing at himself, the poet invites us to laugh with him, thereby breaking down the barriers of difference we might expect between our sensibilities and his. At the same time, humor has the key function of modulating truly acrid views so that one can convey them without appearing consumed by them. The self-mockery of Hairston's poem may have been the only way for the poet to

write about the great loss of being removed from one's world and everything one likes to do. In "Who's Bitter?", William Wantling employs this technique:

when Judge Lynch  
denied probation  
& crammed that 1 - 14  
up my ass  
for a First offence  
I giggled

when Dr God  
stuck 7 shocktreatments [sic]  
to me  
for giving my chick  
in Camarillo  
2 joints  
I laughed aloud  
now  
when the State of Illness  
caught me bending over  
2 jugs of Codeine  
cough medicine  
& charged me w/Possession  
and Conspiracy  
I shrieked  
in idiot joy

a bit worried  
they all inquired  
--What are you Wantling?  
--A goddam Masochist?  
I, between hilarious gasps  
O howled--No,  
--I'm a Poet!  
--Fuck me again! (21)

Here, Wantling humorously plays off the romantic image of poets as tormented souls to posit that neither incarceration nor the rules of society can break him; the more persecution he faces, the deeper the torments heaped upon him, the more fully he embraces his identity -- a poet, a sufferer, a man who seeks to transcend confinement. "Who's Bitter?" offers an example of how poetry allows

prisoners to express sensibilities that would bring punishment if verbalized directly to the authorities. One such feeling is rage, which permeates a poem written on a cell wall by an anonymous Chinese immigrant detained on California's Angel Island: "If there comes a day when I will have attained my ambition and become successful, / I will certainly behead the barbarians and spare not a single blade of grass" (Lai 84). Another prohibited sensibility is lesbian love, as expressed by Theresa Munguia in "Black-Winged Angel":

She and I were one  
a year ago.  
Little Angel with black wings,  
my love is strong, all true your sins.  
Should I keep you, I said yes.  
My baby knows, I'm the best.  
I wasn't all out, all the way  
Ready now, come let's play.  
Hold on tight when you take my hand  
give you the world and a wedding band.  
Sin so soft, taste so sweet  
Angel, can't love no one else I meet.     (22)

Still another taboo sensibility is vulnerability, as in the poem "Beauty" by Paul David Ashley:

even among the deformed  
there is a certain beauty: in the hand  
of an amputee  
rising to ward off a blow

in those who let us  
do things against their will  
when they know it is something else  
we really wanted

in the father whose daughter  
is neither rich nor beautiful, in her  
face when she realizes  
we were lying  
and accepts money for the first time



in the recognition  
that our smallest disappointment  
is still more than any of us can afford

in our words  
when we continue without winning,  
when even whiskey or a parachute won't set us down  
easy

when we continue as if we had  
broken the light  
down into pieces small enough to carry  
when we continue  
as if we had portioned our lives exactly  
(Bruchac 1984, 9)

Truly, incarcerated women and men have not "portioned [their] lives exactly." But to admit this vulnerability to one's keepers rarely helps a prisoner in his or her daily struggles with the authorities for, as Malcolm Braly observes, the evaluative apparatus of the prison is premised on the assumption that "we were here because of psychological problems, and our task now, by which we could expect to be judged, was to isolate and come to terms with them" (157). Thus, there arises an incentive to don a mask, to suppress feelings, to stand one's ground by creating a facade of normality and impregnable self-assurance. To admit one's incompleteness or "deformity" in poetry is to opt for honesty over the inviting path laid out by the prison as the safer form of survival: becoming an automaton.

A poem that displays many of the non-"criminal," non-"inmate" sensibilities discussed thus far is "The Harvest," by William Aberg:

*He had assigned to that same lady more  
Than it is proper to concede to mortals.  
-Lucretius*

The thighs were awkward at first --  
Stiff blue denim.  
But he stuffed each leg with rages and towels  
And primped them  
Until they were firm enough  
To hold his weight. The breasts posed  
A bigger problem: tangerines  
Were too small and hard, and rolled  
Unmercifully. So he skipped them over,  
Pretending she was young  
And eager for heat. Yet, something  
Was missing -- perhaps the light  
Affection requires  
Pass from one inner room

To another. But he wouldn't give up  
Trying, though through the window  
The guard shone his flashlight  
On the white of his buttocks, laughed,  
And moved along.  
And though he wrought nothing  
From his pitiful attempts  
At passion, a certain warmth  
Like release  
Flared in his abdomen.  
But when he pulled out  
The rolled rags and towels, damp  
With sweat, something inside him  
Fell apart too,  
And he sat for a moment

Nude on the bed,  
Tried to reassemble her, but couldn't,  
And lay down with the empty jeans  
Tight in his palms,  
And created the rest of her gentle frame  
With his eyes. And often  
During the night, she spoke to him in a voice  
Airy and gentle as goose down --  
So quietly, he could hear  
Her breath grow slow and light  
As it joined his own. (Bruchac 1984, 3-4)

Besides gentle humor, vulnerability, and a breadth of  
perspective, Aberg displays aesthetic sensibilities, which  
is another quality of mind dramatized to subversive effect

in prison poetry. For example, the poet defines intimacy metaphorically as a light passing "from one inner room to another." He uses irony to contrast the stuffed figure with a woman of high Lucretian praise. He juxtaposes the stuffed figure "falling apart" with the prisoner's emotional collapse. And he builds into the latter half of the poem a rhythm sustained by monosyllabic words and parallel verb forms ("sat," lay down," "created") strung together by the conjunction "and."

In terms of discursive practices, Aberg did not simply write a poem, but rather, within his institutional identity as an object and his social identity as a criminal, he dramatizes his poetic sensibilities. This is important. Detractors and admirers alike of prison poetry have argued that the genre does not value aesthetic considerations or the joy of verbal dalliance and literary innovation. The former argue that most prisoners are not capable of formal and linguistic brilliance. Somewhat defensively, the latter rationalize that prisoners' subject matter is far too important for them to worry about "academic contrivances" (Hogan 1984, 325; also Franklin 265). Both camps are wrong, for many poems reflect sophisticated aesthetic sensibilities. Whether in the forward-moving narrative drive of "I am Sure of It," the whetted visual imagery of Kizer's "Even the Best," the linguistic experimentation of A-Jabar, or, as we will see, the great concern with form in

Henry Johnson's and Etheridge Knight's poems, many incarcerated poets present themselves as writers, artists, and thinkers. Witness Rosanna Warren's "Science Lessons":

The human body is superfluous.  
 Rochester knew it: lurching home  
 from a night of swiving and sluicing,  
 ballocks crumpled, loins wrung out,  
 fingers dripping and pungent, he was consumed

by knowledge. Having caressed  
 the soft slippage of flesh from rib and hip,  
 foreknew rack, gibbet, kettle, all the precise  
 instruments of quest including  
 the final, eloquent shudder; knew

pond scum to grow gooseflesh, to be  
 freakishly aroused; knew Spanish moss  
 to dangle as lace, black mud to suck  
 and ooze with a confession of pleasure;  
 knew truth a prisoner

begging to be shucked free, detached.  
 So over and over the glossy girl,  
 the sleek-limed boy, must pose  
 while Love the scientist stutters, repeats  
     himself,  
 staggers through his garbled litanies

husking pure form from the body of this death.  
 (117)

The organizing allusion to the Earl of Rochester; the lyrical ear for rhythm and alliteration; the Hopkins-like innovation with language; the synaesthesia of "soft slippage of flesh"; and the very idea of the poem, that "truth" is a prisoner to the finite limits of human understanding, and that perhaps something pure and enduring can be husked from our earthbound loves: in all these ways, Warren displays, as Wantling cries out, "I'm a poet!" The

same can be said of Michael Knoll, whose poem "Prison Letter" dramatizes the churning mind of an intellectual.

You ask what it's like here  
 but there are no words for it.  
 I answer difficult, painful, that men  
 die hearing their own voices. That answer  
 isn't right though and I tell you now  
 that prison is a room  
 where a man waits with his nerves  
 drawn tight as barbed wire, an afternoon  
 that continues for months, that rises  
 around his legs like water  
 until the man is insane  
 and thinks the afternoon is a lake:  
 blue water, whitecaps, an island  
 where he lies under pale sunlight, one  
 red gardenia growing from his hand --

But that's not right either. There are no  
 flowers in these cells, no water  
 and I hold nothing in my hands  
 but fear, what lives  
 in the absence of light, emptying  
 from my body to fill the large darkness  
 rising like water up my legs:

It rises and there are no words for it  
 though I look for them, and turn  
 on light and watch it  
 fall like an open yellow shirt  
 over black water, the light holding  
 against the dark for just  
 an instant: against what trembles  
 in my throat, a particular fear,  
 a word I have no words for. (Bruchac 1984, 184)

"You" and "here" frame the first line of "Prison Letter" -- "outside" and "inside." Locked out of the institution, "You" does not, in fact, know what prison is "like"; "I" communicates that incarceration is not just a physical condition; prison also creates a kind of pain, a kind of tension, a kind of fear, and above all, a kind of linguistic chaos. But all of that eludes easy description

and can be hinted at only through language that never actually hits its mark: unsuccessful metaphors, broken stanzas, circling words, the failed use of apposition. This is quintessentially a writer's sensibility -- aware of the difficulty of representation, alert to the complexities of language, comfortable with ambiguity, and committed to poetry as a process of moving toward understanding.

It is particularly important to pay close attention to form, which is where many poets display their aesthetic concerns with literary convention and tradition. Let us examine Etheridge Knight's brilliant poem, "Haiku":

1

Eastern guard tower  
Glints in sunset; convicts rest  
Like lizards on rocks.

2

The piano man  
Is stingy at 3 A.M.  
His songs drop like plum.

3

Morning sun slants cell.  
Drunks stagger like cripple flies  
On jailhouse floor.

4

To write a blues song  
Is to regiment riots  
And pluck gems from graves.

5

A bare pecan tree  
Slips a pencil shadow down  
A moonlit snow slope.

6

The falling snow flakes  
Cannot blunt the hard aches nor  
Match the steel stillness.

7

Under moon shadows  
A Tall boy flashes knife and  
Slices bright star ice.

8

In the August grass  
Struck by last rays of sun  
The cracked teacup screams.

9

Making jazz swing in  
Seventeen syllables AIN'T  
No square poet's job. (Knight 17-18)

The poet adheres to the conventions of the Japanese poetic form: numbered three-line poems of five, seven, and five syllables, each presenting a sharp visual image to evoke spiritual insights. He also follows a second poetic tradition, this one of American Imagists such as Amy Lowell and Ezra Pound, who experimented with haiku because of its precise imagery, verbal density, and suggestiveness. But, while working within two formal traditions, Knight makes another self-consciously poetic move as well: expanding the haiku genre, he infuses it with the blues and jazz traditions of melancholy imagery, word play, and social relevance. I do not claim that Knight "appropriates" an established poetic genre for a particular political purpose, but rather, that he is a poet who happens also to be a prisoner -- and his sensibilities reflect both (and more).

In "The Funeral Parlor," Henry Johnson presents aesthetic sensibilities by employing another venerable genre, the sonnet:

He arrived at the funeral parlor,  
 His hands in cuffs before him; all that day,  
 Gray clouds hung low in the summer sky. More  
 Bored than the task called for, he made his way  
 Inside, and the watery eye'd women  
 Soaked his collar in tears. He stepped alone,  
 Down the isle where all the others had been  
 Standing, looking down at a man now gone  
 From that world which had never let him rest  
 While he lived. He burned that dead black face deep  
 Into his memory, touched the cold cheeks  
 With calm fingers, and turning, tried his best  
 To shed a tear. He tried real hard, but failed;  
 and so it was, all the way back to jail.

(Bruchac 1984, 151)

The poem is a prison in its own right, a formal box. Its action is contained in the setting designated by the title. Its subject (presumably the poet) enters the funeral parlor in the first line and leaves in the final line. With its fourteen ten-beat lines and its a-b-a-b-c-d-c-d-e-f-f-e-g-g rhyme scheme, it is an almost perfect Shakespearean sonnet. Here form and function come together, for the poem's brilliance is that it is only *almost* perfect. It may be that the poet attempts to communicate his message within a genre that has rigid rules because, paradoxically, with this submission to poetic stricture comes the possibility of mastery and transcendence. This formal challenge is akin to, and perhaps emblematic of, other personal challenges alluded to in the poem -- coping with imprisonment, making peace with his father, communicating with the women in his family.

But the poem dramatizes the poet failing in the formal challenge. In the third quartet, the rhyme scheme slips and



the sonnet breaks down. In line 11, Johnson cannot find a rhyme for the word "rest" that ends line 9. Instead, he does the next best thing, obliquely rhyming "cheeks" with the word "deep" that ends line 10; then he rounds the quartet in line 12 by rhyming "best" with line 9's "rest." He's left with an e-f-f-e rhyme scheme -- not the e-f-e-f of a Shakespearean sonnet. The poem finishes with a rhyming couplet, but the possibility of mastery is gone. In other words, Johnson suffers the discipline of genre without the transcendence of perfection. Here, form mirrors the message, because the poem shows that the prisoner cannot escape his bitter past with his father.

Of course, following in the tradition of William Carlos Williams and others, writers in prison also display an awareness of poetic form and tradition through their antagonism towards both. Lyric innovation, grammatical anarchy, resistance to genre, and mutiny against Standard English are prevalent in contemporary prison poetry, as epitomized by A-Jabar's chaotic "This is A Recording" (sic). One poet who engages in poetic quarrels with convention is Carolyn Baxter, author of the stunning poem, "WHY WAKE YOU":

I

Affection stills itself in the climb of breathing.  
 A splintered bird caught in my throat.  
     Warming my hands on my belly before touching  
         you,  
 I lay/burn palms into your ribs,  
     as you touch me in part of your dream.

I held you -- night a black tee shirt, warm with  
a heartbeat/a sleep.

## II

Morning awake/bars my spirt [sic] negative  
when morning angled tips of grey on your hair,  
I had to leave/go to prison,  
not wanting to look beyond the bamboo shade.

I held you -- street waited with arm extended  
/we froze. (12)

With its fractured lines, syncopated metrics, and colliding images separated by slash marks, the poem captures the fear and the struggle for self-control of one's last morning of freedom. This cutting and splicing of lines and images occurs in other works by Baxter, becoming, indeed, her own convention. In poems about prostitutes and homeless people on the streets on New York City, her resistance to inherited poetic forms -- her anti-conventional convention -- also suggests political alienation, as if the rules of poetry and syntax are analogous to the rules of prison and society. But in those poems, as in "WHY WAKE YOU," the sensibility displayed through Baxter's rebellion against form is aesthetic as well as political -- and one should not lose the former in exploring the latter.

Thus, the tradition of poetry by prisoners is suffused with aesthetic sensibilities and the *jouissance* of verbal dalliance. There are no doubt countless reasons why so many incarcerated women and men have committed themselves to writing poetry that is fresh, powerful, beautiful, and enduring on literary grounds. One is the sheer ugliness of

prison -- the overly-lit yellow rooms, grimy bathrooms, paint-chipped green bars, and soot-covered windows. Prison cells echo sharply and stink of stale air, sweat, and ammonia. They are infested with flies and roaches. Even the rare institutions that provide attractive views frame them within dingy cellblock walls. Therefore, within the disciplined dullness of prison fare, euphony, lyric beauty, and interesting poetic forms create a realm of intellectual escape. Eloquence argues that a person can rise above ugly surroundings. Graceful language implicitly comments on hideous environs. Linguistic free play -- experimentation with figurative language -- contrasts with the intense literalism of prison rules and regulations. Moreover, as prisoners, these poets are ensnared in institutional roles that diminish them considerably. They are defined by their crimes, by the harm they have done to others, by the lengths of their sentences, by infractions any one of them could commit, and by the stereotype of the "inmate." Striving to create something beautiful, prisoners redefine themselves and their counterparts as uncontained and uncontaminated by their institutional personae.

There is social power in the aesthetic -- not necessarily political, economic, or legal power, but the power of intellectual seriousness and choosing one's own persona. By presenting oneself as an artist and a creator, rather than a destroyer, the poet also disrupts the outside

world's stereotype of the "criminal." Poetry suggests that one values higher truths and timeless things; that one is gifted and sensitive; that one reads and can be enthralled by intellectual beauty; and that one has a sense of literary culture and tradition, admiring that tradition enough to lend one's individual talents to its service. This is one reason why convicted murderers such as Jack Rainsberger and Harold LaMont Otey have introduced their poetry in death penalty appeals; the lyric and the poetic can suggest a gentleness and, to use the words of one of Rainsberger's defenders, a "growth of consciousness" that contrasts both with their crimes and with state-sponsored executions (Levine 209).

While the prisoner may be Caliban in the popular eye, the poet is often Ariel: that is part of the cultural power of the aesthetic -- and that is why poetry by prisoners sometimes creates a biting backlash. One such example is the book, Voices Behind the Wall, written by a prison psychologist named John P. Farrell. The book consists of ninety stories told to Farrell over the years, mostly by "the inmates themselves" (1). The author recasts these stories as first-person poems, supposedly because verse "seemed to fit" and because the first-person voice would "preserve their freshness and immediacy" (1). One of Farrell's premises is that "by using inmates' own words, I

can give a glimpse into the criminal mind that ordinary people rarely encounter" (5).

Thus, the reader is presented with "poem" after "poem" in which speakers expose themselves as unstable, menacing, and remorseless. Two speakers describe attacking people who happened to cross eyes with them (41, 43). Others express the recurring theme of repression: "I ain't one of them / muthafuckin' faggots. / Sure I have sex with men, / but I'm the pitcher / not the catcher" (32). Several recount dreams involving sexual relations with animals (17, 26). Almost all of the "poems" concern deviance or criminality, and many exhibit those qualities, as if prisoners have no other concerns. The language is slang-filled and vulgar, with "fuck" or its variants appearing in 58 of 90 stories. "Sex Offense, First Degree" is representative:

When I was fourteen this old guy  
used to pay me to let him suck my dick.  
It felt good and I liked the money,  
but after a while it began to fuck with my head  
and make me wonder if likin' it  
meant that I was goin' gay.  
I got real sensitive about  
bein' called a faggot,  
and later after I got married my wife found  
she could really push my button callin' me that.  
Once we were havin' dinner at my mother-in-law's;  
my wife was mad at me for somethin'  
and she called me faggy  
in front of the whole family.  
I got so pissed I told her,  
"When I get home I'm gonna beat your ass,"  
then I got up and left.  
While I was drivin' I saw this girl hitchhikin'.  
I picked her up and asked her  
if she wanted some marijuana.  
We shared a joint  
and she asked me to drive her to the mall,

but I took her to a wooded area,  
 I took out my knife  
 and told her to take off her clothes.  
 I wanted to fuck her  
 but I couldn't get hard  
 so I went down on her, ate her pussy.  
 Afterwards she asked me to take her to work  
 but I pushed her out of the car,  
 left her there, naked.  
 She called the cops, and since  
 I had threatened her with a deadly weapon  
 they made it, "sex offense, first degree,"  
 and that got me all this time. (87-88)

Viscerally, the impact of reading dozens of these false confessions is fear, as readers are led to wonder if perhaps all one million people locked up in America are deranged and incorrigible. Intellectually, the net effect is to reinforce Farrell's claim in the introduction that "the economic and environmental causes of crime have been overplayed" (2), a point made not only in the scary sensibilities that Farrell creates, but also in the few "poems" that display positive attitudes. In the stories of reformed criminals, the speakers accept that people who work hard and play by the rules are not "chumps" after all (9, 18, 91, 98).

Farrell's thoughts on the "criminal mind" are not novel; what is new is falsifying prisoners' poetic voices in order to make this case. In mainstream culture, lyric poetry is typically regarded as a spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings, a window on the soul. If prisoners have used the genre to depict their inner lives favorably, Farrell attempts to turn the tables. His mirror, seemingly

held up from within, shows their souls to be twisted and black. However, authentic poetry makes a move that Farrell cannot and would not dare. It reaches out to readers to converse and communicate. It attempts to build bridges of understanding and perhaps create community. Even in silence and solitude, composing poetry is inherently a social act, because it presumes a community of readers for whom one writes. As we will see, this reaching out, this coming forth, this attempt to rejoin the walled-off world, points to another critical quality of prisoners' poetry.

5.

It does not hurt an aspiring warden to have a background in theater. That is because obtaining the obedience of hundreds or thousands of people for years and decades requires a flair for spectacle. Quite simply, it is not possible (or necessary) to mortify and discipline each prisoner individually with any great regularity. Instead, institutions maintain order by dramatizing their authority and by controlling single prisoners in ways that intimidate the larger circle. The daily regimen is composed of multiple spectacles of power that have enormous symbolic resonance. The admission ritual of breaking down new entrants perpetually reenacts institutional force for all prisoners, as do executions and putting people in the

"hole." Left to watch impotently instead of rallying to their analogue's defense, all prisoners can be humiliated by such public performances. The authorities also create spectacles of power on a smaller scale: arbitrary lock-downs; monthly visits by the warden; new policies about contraband; the frisking of visitors; spring cleaning in the cellblock; the disconnection of phone lines; the unannounced inspection of cells; and the refusal to relax prison regulations when prisoners face personal crises, such as illness or a death in the family.

Such on-going spectacles thrust in captives' faces the crushing fact they have little power and almost no voice in the management of their lives. Prisons are monologic institutions; they work by denying or defining the terms of colloquy between employees and residents. Edicts from higher-ups "come down" -- *fait accompli* -- in the form of memos posted on bulletin boards or summary directives by the line staff, and prisoners are expected to follow all commands with a minimum of complaint. Only rarely are they officially invited to comment on their situations, typically at disciplinary and parole hearings, when one must weigh the consequences of criticizing the administration. Otherwise, unsolicited questions generally take days for the institutional bureaucracy to process, unless they are met only with stony silence. Importantly, the suppression of colloquy is in itself one of the great mortifying practices,



because, day after day, hour after hour, it symbolizes and reenacts the lowly position of prisoners.

Of course, many prisoners dedicate themselves to subverting institutional power. In response to official displays of power, they sometimes create spectacles of their own, perhaps by banging on the bars, refusing to do their jobs, or, in extreme cases, rioting. In such instances, discipline may be loosened somewhat, which is often itself a display of power. When the staff creates a little good will by delaying the count for an hour on Super Bowl Sunday or marginally improving the food, prisoners witness each other being bought off by token gestures, after which the normal order returns. Typically, the subversion strategies of prisoners do not take the form of coherent counter-spectacles, but rather of individual and covert acts -- anything from manipulating individual corrections officers to plotting means of escape. It must be noted, however, that, for all their moral importance to individuals, such strategies do not change the power relations between the staff and the residents as a group, and may even strengthen the authorities.

In this context, poetry and other forms of creative expression are practices of resistance that offer hope to prisoners. In response to monologic spectacles of power created by the administration, poets can depict and reenact counter-dramas of confrontation between prisoners,

authorities, and the outside world. These dramas are portrayed both directly and indirectly. First, the direct -- the poem "ZIP-FOUR" by Colden Quick. Published more than a decade before the mainstream popularization of rap music, this poem should be read aloud to be appreciated.

ZIP-FOUR FOR MY LAST STING  
 ZIP-FOUR IN OLE SING SING  
 ZIP-FOUR! I HEARD HIM SAY  
 ZIP-FOUR HAVE YOU ANYTHING TO SAY!?  
 ZIP-FOUR!? MY WOMAN CRIED OUT  
 MY MAN IS INNOCENT WITHOUT A DOUBT!  
 HIS HONORE [sic] LOOKED UP AND SAID ONCE MORE  
 I SENTENCE YOUR MAN TO A MEAN ZIP-FOUR!  
 MY WOMAN WAS FURIOUS/MY SISTER CRIED  
 THE JUDGE TOLD THE BAILIFF/  
 TAKE HIM INSIDE  
 I SAID/HOLD UP YOUR HONOR  
 I'M STRUNG OUT ON STUFF  
 HE SAID/DIG THIS BROTHER  
 THAT SHO' IS TOUGH  
 I SAID/WOULD YOU GIVE ME  
 A MINUTE AND HEAR WHAT I SAY?  
 HE SAID/TELL IT TO THE  
 PAROLE BOARD IN A YEAR AND A DAY!  
 I SAID/HEY! YOUR HONOR YOU  
 SHO' AIN'T RIGHT!  
 HE SAID/THIS AIN'T YOUR  
 COURTROOM AND PLUS YOU  
 AIN'T WHITE!  
 MY WOMAN SHOUTED/RACIST!  
 MY SISTER HOLLERED/PIG!  
 MY MAMA SNATCHED OFF HER  
 HUNDRED DOLLAR WIG!  
 HIS HONOR GREW ANGRY AND  
 BEGAN TO SHOUT/GET THESE  
 PEOPLE OUT OF MY COURT-  
 ROOM OUT! OUT! OUT!  
 I SAID/HOLD UP YOU PUNK!  
 WHO YOU THINK YOU ARE?  
 HE SAID/LOOK HERE NIGGER  
 YOU'VE GONE TO FAR!  
 I SAID/HOLD UP HONKY,  
 YOU HOLD UP RIGHT THERE  
 YOU AIN'T NO TIGER AND  
 YOU SHO' AIN'T NO BEAR!  
 HE SAID/SILENCE YOUNG MAN  
 I'LL STAND FOR NO MORE!

ONE MORE WORD, YOU'LL  
HAVE DOUBLE ZIP-FOUR!  
MY WOMAN STOOD UP, THE  
JUDGE SAID/SIT DOWN!  
I DON'T WANT TO HEAR  
ANOTHER SOUND!  
I GAVE THIS HERE NIGGER ONE  
HELL OF A PLAY  
AND HE'S GOT THE NERVE TO ACT  
THIS WAY!  
HE COULD'VE GOT TEN, TWENTY  
OR MORE!!  
BUT I GAVE THE PUNK A LOUSY  
ZIP-FOUR  
SO TAKE MY ADVISE [sic] AND GO ON  
TO JAIL  
CAUSE I KNOW YOU'RE HIP TO  
THE JOHN DOE SALE  
YOU'VE SAID YOU'RE A JUNKIE  
AND THAT'S PROOF ENOUGH  
I COULD GIVE YOU A DIME FOR PUSHING  
THE STUFF!  
HOLD IT!!! YOU BIGOT, YOU  
RACIST YOU SWINE  
YOU'VE SAID YOURS NOW  
LISTEN TO MINE!  
SHUT-UP YOUR HONOR! SIT  
DOWN D.A.!  
I DON'T ONLY HAVE TIME  
I'VE GOT SOMETHING TO  
SAY  
ZIP-FOUR IS A PRETTY  
LONG TIME  
IN 32 MONTHS FREEDOM  
IS MINE?!  
ONE YEAR AND A DAY I GO  
TO THE BOARD  
ONE YEAR AND A DAY PRAISE  
THE LORD!  
SIT-DOWN YOUR HONOR AND OPEN  
YOUR EARS  
I'VE BEEN IN JAIL FOR TWENTY  
TWO YEARS  
IT SAYS ON THE WALL "IN GOD WE  
TRUST" I CAN'T TRUST THE DUDE  
CAUSE HE MADE THE BUST!  
WHAT MANNER OF MAN IS THIS I  
SEE?  
YOU'RE NOT FOR THE PEOPLE CAUSE THE  
PEOPLE IS ME!  
THE COURTROOM GREW SILENT/THE  
JUDGE STARTED TO SHAKE

NO MORE ABUSE DO I HAVE TO TAKE  
 THIS IS MY COURTROOM/IT DAMN SURE  
 AIN'T YOURS  
 SO HOW WOULD YOU LIKE THREE ZIP-FOURS?!  
 I'VE SAT HERE AND LISTENED TO ALL  
 THAT YOU'VE SAID  
 NOW I AM SURE THERE IS SOMETHING  
 LOOSE IN YOUR HEAD!  
 ZIP-FOUR! DO YOU HEAR WHAT I SAY  
 AND I'LL BE ON THE BOARD IN A YEAR  
 AND A DAY  
 THEN WE'LL SEE WHAT YOU HAVE TO SAY  
 NEXT CASE/MR. BAILIFF TAKE HIM AWAY!!!!

(Bruchac 1974, 91-93)

In a narrative poem that is steeped in the African American "signifying" tradition (right down to the reference to the tiger and bear), Quick creates an alternative drama, a courtroom confrontation in which the young convict seizes the opportunity to tell a white judge about the racism in society and the criminal justice system. By dramatizing this confrontation, the poet invents a spectacle in which the silenced perspective "from the bottom" is expressed in an official proceeding. The young convict tells the judge that, as an African American, he cannot trust justice "CAUSE HE MADE THE BUST"; that life for people in the ghetto is itself a "JAIL"; and that the white prosecutor cannot be "FOR THE PEOPLE CAUSE THE / PEOPLE IS ME!" The judge's reaction is predictable. At first he is confused, because "ZIP-FOUR" seems like a good deal. Then he silences the young man, refusing to hear opinions that displease him. The drama has a grim finale, reaffirming the danger of being individualized in the criminal justice system, as the judge vows to attend the young man's parole hearing.

Poetry also stages indirect dramas of confrontation. But to understand how this works, we must first think about the multiple groups of readers implicit in prisoners' work. According to Bakhtin, writing by outsiders or subordinate groups has two audiences, which he calls the "listener" and the "hero" (1989, 399-401).<sup>10</sup> "Listeners" are actual or projected readers whose sympathies hang in the balance, such as the "you" that Michael Knoll apostrophizes in "Prison Letter." Poets strive to gain what Bakhtin calls the "choral support" of this uncommitted group both for specific arguments and for their overall perspective. For instance, Knoll strikes for the listener's empathy as he digs deep to find words that express "what it's like here." So does Jimmy Santiago Baca, in presenting his cellblock epiphany, John L. Sellers in sharing a little homespun humor, and Theresa Munguia in celebrating her joyful coming out as a lesbian.

The "hero" is the "object of the [poet's] utterance," but is usually nameless and not addressed directly. Instead, the hero becomes a presence to the listener, a "living culprit" (or a living champion [1989, 399]) through the poet's tone and implied attitude. Although Bakhtin does

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<sup>10</sup> Bakhtin did not write this about poetry per se. As is well known, he distinguishes between poetic and novelistic language, arguing that the former is monologic, "authoritarian" and "suspended from interaction with alien discourse," while the latter is dialogic (1981, 285-7). My assumption here is that this particular distinction between the two kinds of language is not correct.

not make this point, there is often more than one hero in a piece of writing. For example, one of the living culprits in A-Jabar's "This is A Recording" is the white power elite, and one of the living champions in James Lewisohn's metaphysical poetry is the Christian God. However, in both cases, and in all prison poetry, the institution is also a "hero," both because of its vast, freedom-limiting presence in prisoners' lives and because we readers are likely to analyze prisoners' poems as a comment on their circumstances.

According to Bakhtin, writers from a subordinate group speak to their "listeners" about the "hero" as if the "hero" were eavesdropping. Bakhtin calls this quality the "intonational metaphor" (1989, 400). What the sensitive listener discerns is a doubleness in the poet's voice, as he speaks to the listener but also for the consumption of the hero. Therefore, "any locution ... is the expression of the product of the social interaction of [the] three participants" (1989, 401).

To apply the theory, in "Black-Winged Angel" Theresa Munguia is not celebrating her awakening as a lesbian only to a listener who may or may not be sympathetic. She is also doing so under the gaze of several heroes, one of which is the institutional authority that officially forbids gay

sexual relations.<sup>11</sup> We must read the poem as a statement to those powerful authorities who try, and in this case fail, to tell the poet how to live. With her joy and exuberance for "sin so soft, taste so sweet" (line 11), Munguia represents two dramas: for the hero, she puts on display her awakening, and for the listener, she displays her prancing honesty and defiance before the hero. And thus, the listener's choral support is gained (or not gained) not only from the poem's content, but also from the poet's dramatic and confrontational act of telling the institution something it does not want to hear.

Likewise, it is evident that William Aberg's poetic voice in "The Harvest" resonates in two directions at once. To the listener, the key lines "something inside of him / Fell apart too," say, "Hear this story, empathize with this man, recognize in his pain feelings similar to ones you have felt." To the hero -- for whom the chuckling guard with the flashlight is a metonym -- those lines carry the charge, "See what you've done to him, and what that has done to your humanity." And thus back to the listener, the drama of confrontation enjoins listeners to watch the poet confront the hero with its own falsity (and then to unite with the poet). In this context, to quote Bakhtin, "Verbal discourse is a social event" (1989, 400). One might not want to

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<sup>11</sup> Other heroes include those segments of the larger culture that defines gay love as perverse, and perhaps those elements of Hispanic culture that do likewise.

overgeneralize about the presence of Bakhtinian "heroes" in the writing of all subordinate groups. The theory applies well to writing in prison, because authors living under twenty-four-hour per day "inspection principles" and the specter of censorship are likely to regard any poetry they publish as being posted, albeit indirectly, to Big Brother.

If there is for poets in prison a positive side to the inspection principles, it is that publication becomes one small way that they can *influence* the content of their paper shadows -- those "shambling, distorted and malicious doppelgängers" (Braly 219) that usually tell only the institution's version of their penal histories. "Influence" is a key word here, for it raises the question of the extent to which poetry can help prisoners shape their own lives, act as agents, and carve out domains of freedom within institutional confines. The final section of this chapter explores this issue.

## 6.

We have seen that, within several circles of confinement, poetry counters social and institutional stereotypes, displays humanizing sensibilities, and creates spectacles of confrontation. Perhaps some readers will find power and beauty in these rhetorical practices. But it must be admitted -- no matter how much we readers enjoy them --



that poems have no discernible effect on the policies and procedures that govern prisoners' lives. After all, a poet in prison still wears a number and faces daily prohibitions. His poetry rarely arouses either respect or wrath from the authorities, and, in fact, may not even be recognized. I do not know of an instance where poetry endowed an individual with power that the authorities were compelled to acknowledge, although such cases may exist. But these limits do not mean, as Auden wrote, that "poetry makes nothing happen." Rather, within the rules and the restrictions, the surveillance and the stereotypes, poetry can become an empowering form of action on a number of fronts.

For example, in response to prison discipline, any published work (whether poetry or prose) helps clarify the rules of censorship. This matters. Censorship is always strongest as an unchallenged threat, an unexercised power, when the boundaries are vague and the penalties are uncertain. By forcing the institution to respond to a text, the writer establishes precedents and establishes open territory, determining the extent to which one has "sovereignal freedom," or "the power to act as one pleases, regardless of the wishes of others" in the realm of writing (Patterson 1991, 3-4).<sup>12</sup> Also, by writing within

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<sup>12</sup> For example, most institutions prohibit prisoners from publishing exposés or writing about the staff. But some do allow them to argue passionately against issues of

restriction, authors expose the extent of the censors' abilities, perhaps exposing the limits of their perceptiveness, interpretive skills, and energy. Finally, requiring the censors to act also may free poets from internalizing their roles and becoming their own censors, which has benefits that go beyond the practice of writing. Overall, any practice that puts the onus for sustaining captivity on the institution, and not the individual, is a practice of resistance, for institutions work better when their subjects sustain their own constraints.

Poetry resists the prison in another way. For if disciplinary practices create partitioned physical and epistemological spaces, poetry helps carve out an alternative intellectual dimension in the domain of the mind. True, poetry cannot melt away the bars or rescue one from a noisy day-room, but the process of composition can take temporary pre-eminence over such corporeal confines. It can establish a mental arena in which prison rulers do not have absolute sway. And it can influence temporal experience, transforming prison monotony into productive hours when time passes differently. As Bachelard observes, creative thought gives one the "power to make space withdraw, to put space, all space, outside, in order that

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penal policy, such as the death penalty or mandatory minimum sentencing laws.

meditating might be free to think" (231) and to create an inner space.

Michelle Roberts's work exemplifies this power. Describing the BRIGHT FIRES writing workshop at the California Institute for Women, she writes, "We were women struggling to get out, not only from the physical prison but more importantly the prisons of the individual mind" (Bruchac 1984, 271). The poem "Purple dry buds" dramatizes the process of freeing one's mind and one's inner life from the taint of imprisonment.

Purple dry buds tight to gray branches  
water in an old coffee jar  
themselves a clear thought  
a resting place for everything

White bleach water soaked purple dry buds  
like life a side show formaldehyde bottle  
preserve a season -- cut  
float around a waterline

My hand to my head  
cradle memories pulled  
possibly better forgotten  
comfort this line

serious

tragic

the waterline  
the jar  
the dry/wet buds  
and the cut

(Bruchac 1984, 272)

Here, poetic form is especially suggestive -- as Roberts employs box-like, four-line stanzas that intimate enclosure and confinement. The fourth cellular stanza differs from the first three, and it is in that transformation that the

poem dramatizes the creation of inner space within corporeal captivity. In the first two stanzas, the imprisoned speaker remembers a simple, beautiful image -- the purple dry buds, preserved and preserving of their season. The image resonates widely to her, evoking the way of life that makes such images profound. But that life is gone: the speaker is imprisoned; she cannot preserve purple dry buds in a coffee can -- and in remembering that she *used* to do so, and now cannot, she risks having the image become a measure of her loss, not her life.

Thus, in the third stanza, she cradles her head, wondering if she must forget her past to preserve it. To do so would be devastating -- too much to capture in language -- and so the poet does not try; she simply sets off her feelings in the most general of terms:

serious

tragic

These are feelings too deep to clarify, yes. And yet, as the step-like indenting suggests, still they lead somewhere -- to that final, different box, set far off within the whiteness of the page:

the waterline  
the jar  
the dry/wet buds  
and the cut

These are the same images made new; they are now more compact, less adorned, located elsewhere in the poem and stored elsewhere in the mind. The captive poet creates a

new mental cell, an inner place of protection. The images remain "themselves a clear thought," as at the beginning of the poem, but in the sanctuary of a new "resting place." To Bachelard, "There is consolation in knowing that one is in an atmosphere of calm, in a narrow space" that is commensurate with the inner space of inner being (229). For some poets, prison life has a peeled-down simplicity or purity of experience that creates this calm and concentrates the mind. In his prison journal from Nigeria, Wole Soyinka includes a chapter showing how he occupied his mind by watching the movements of a mobile he had made from stones, string, cigarette foil, and toilet paper rolls (242-45). The American poet Jim Moore has a short poem called "Dawn" in which he describes hearing "the sound of a crow through the silence," reminding him that "The life to be led / Waits in an open field, just beyond / The barbed-wire" (Bruchac 1971, 58, lines 1-6). As a response, he pledges, "I will not desert / This slowness" (lines 6-7), which is his hard-won sensitivity to fine sensory stimulæ in the stripped-down prison milieu. In the words of the American poet, R. Wayne Hardy: "Prison has, if nothing else, sharpened the images and enhanced the words in my poetry. My first concern is to write good poetry and survive this abstract illusion of my incarceration" (Bruchac 1984, 120).<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> In Letters to Olga, Havel writes: "... everything is bare, as it were, unmediated, transparent; everything can be seen with greater clarity ...; you are made aware of

Poetry can empower the individual to create an alternative inner space. The poet sorts through memories, refines ideas, and plays with language and form, circling themes draft after draft until he or she gets them right. That said, the mind has its own limits and limitations. Maybe language fails one's own purple dry buds, or perhaps a poem seems flat. Then the walls grow colder and the bars seem even more indomitable. However, even where poetry seems just as confining as other bounded systems, even when one's wits are dull and when the words come badly or not at all, poetry still introduces, if nothing else, a *different* set of strictures with which to struggle. That is critical. Because whether they "win" or "strike out," as Kizer writes to his son, that struggle is chosen by prisoners, not imposed upon them. "Victory?" Soyinka asks himself as he contemplates the possibility of transcendence through the life of the mind. "No, ebb and tide" (187).

One's resistance to individualizing practices designed to create conformity can also be enhancing by poetic practice. Not that writing verse shields people from the institutional gaze; rather, it counterbalances the feeling of being singled out that the gaze is designed to promote by opening channels of communication and creating solidarity. It helps build friendships and mutual respect among

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many things about life -- in general -- of which you were not so conscious outside" (81).

prisoners who are discouraged from regarding themselves as a corporate entity. It asserts that one is enmeshed in webs of social relationships, in and beyond the prison, that are worth enhancing even at the risk of offending the authorities. It restores one's sense of civic freedom, allowing prisoners not only to affirm the primacy of their communities of birth, but by writing to continue participating in them (Patterson 1991, 4). Solitary and self-effacing, the "adjusted" prisoner avoids the searchlights, does his time, and awaits release; the poet thrusts himself into those searchlights, rejecting an ethos of self-segregation and detachment.

Likewise, poetry empowers people to resist the practices of objectification and mortification. For one thing, it can protect cherished recollections from becoming tainted in a degrading environment. Michelle Roberts, Melvin Douglass Brown, and Arthur Detullio are three poets who gild their memories into verse, thus preserving and protecting them as elements of their survival and not indices of their fall. Writing also empowers prisoners to have in Patterson's sense the personal freedom to breath their own meaning into their incarceration -- to make it their own (1991, 3). Think about "The Harvest," where the guard shines a light on the naked prisoner and laughs, the shock treatments William Wantling recounts, or Henry Johnson chained like a slave at his father's wake. All of these are

deeply humiliating experiences, the kinds of mortification that might linger for a long, long time. But rather than sinking into shame -- perhaps the intended effect -- poets make something significant from their pain and resist the institution's effort to determine their attitudes about their experiences. Thomas Nickens explains, "I started writing ... while in prison to vent my anger and absorb my unshed tears so as not to turn to violence or cry in public .... Poetry made it possible for me to get through five years in a Pennsylvania prison and stay somewhat sane" (Bruchac 1984, 243)

That is to say, poetry and all forms of writing help prisoners create a realm of intention, which is exactly the opposite of what prisons want for their captives. Self-expression provides women and men with the opportunity to exercise their will on a blank piece of paper. Yes, they may face censorship, lack libraries, long for peace and quiet, and hurt inside. But within tough strictures and a sea of hopelessness, to embrace an ethos of intention -- to view one's self as a subject and not only an object -- is both liberating in itself and a building block for other freedoms. But Jimmy Santiago Baca says this better:

While I was in prison, I wrote poetry to survive. The first step on prison property I ever took, I decided to fight against it. And poetry was the only sane approach .... I believe that for those in prison, and those out of prison, poetry is more than an art form, a way of expressing feelings and ideas acceptable to society. I believe it is a way of changing and bettering the world we live



in. It is a way of fighting back and winning our humanity back. (Bruchac 1984, 25-26)

Winning our humanity back. One person writes about ethnicity, another writes about death, a third calls for political change, and a fourth describes lovely images. In these ways and more, poetry helps prisoners preserve a baseline of individual identity. As Raymond Ringo Fernandez writes, "When everything else has been taken away, I am still a poet at heart" (Bruchac 1984, 94). To close this chapter where it began, the fact that thousands of prisoners have acted on this sentiment -- all in their own ways -- is the most formidable political testimony raised by the tradition as a whole.

## Chapter Four

### Dialogue and the Struggle for Freedom in Nineteenth-Century African American Writing

... I pledge you my sacred word of honour,  
that Mr. Jefferson's remarks respecting us,  
have sunk deep into the hearts of millions of  
the whites, and never will be removed this  
side of eternity.

David Walker (91)

Got one mind for white folks to see,  
'Nother for what I know is me;  
He don't know, he don't know my mind.  
Folk Song (Levine xiii)

#### 1.

"In order for the oppressed to be able to wage the struggle for liberation," Paulo Freire writes, "they must perceive the reality of oppression not as a closed world from which there is no exit, but as a limiting situation which they can transform" (34). Throughout the nineteenth century, this is exactly how African Americans as a people viewed their circumstances. Whether they faced slavery or three-fifths citizenship or state-sanctioned terrorism, African Americans soldiered on believing that their actions could create new freedoms for themselves and their children.

These actions included dramatic displays of resistance -- from slave rebellions and the Underground Railroad to Civil War combat -- through which people died for their liberty. At the same time, African Americans

created margins of freedom through everyday, routine, willful acts in variety of ways. They masked true beliefs and feelings from whites while maintaining hardy, resilient family and community bonds (Gutman), including what Deborah Gray White refers to as the supportive "female slave network" (119-141). They preserved African cultural traditions such as the ring shout and the John Kunering ceremony (Stuckey 3-91) and invented new traditions blending residual African practices, acquired Euro-American practices, and emergent practices such as folk wisdom and spirituals (Levine). They created alternative semantic fields, in which words such as "Negro," "Africa," "Canaan," and "master" were infused with meanings that countered those of the larger culture (Baker 1980, 18-23). They taught and practiced their own Christianity, sometimes radical, that stressed social transformation and/or the grace of a just and colorblind God (Genovese 209-284; Andrews 1986a, 1-22). They fought for political representation and emmpowerment, recognizing, as Martin Delany is reported to have said, that "no people can be free who themselves do not constitute an essential part of the *ruling element* of the country in which they live" (Harding 186). Together, these practices comprise what Frantz Fanon calls an oppressed people's "culture": "the whole body of efforts made by a people in the sphere of thought to describe, justify, and praise the action through which that people has created itself and

keeps itself in existence" (233). For African Americans in the nineteenth century, writing was a major and growing component of that culture. This chapter explores three interrelated discursive practices -- three forms of dialogue -- that allowed authors to forge possibilities of freedom from social and cultural restrictions: confrontational, interior, and communal dialogue.

In the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries, it was politically imperative for African Americans to create and present themselves as writing subjects. As Henry Louis Gates, Jr. has shown:

Anglo-African writing arose as a response to allegations of its absence. Black people responded to ... profoundly serious allegations about their "nature" as directly as they could; they wrote books, poetry, autobiographical narratives .... The narrated, descriptive "eye" was put into service as a literary form to posit both the individual "I" of the black author as well as the collective "I" of the race. Text created author; and black authors, it was hoped, would create, or re-create, the image of the race in European discourse. The very face of the race was contingent upon the recording of the black voice. Voice presupposed a face, but also seems to have been thought to determine the very contours of the black face. (1986, 8)

From the last fifteen years of literary scholarship, we know that, in a variety of subtle ways, early African American literature hinted at the cultural and political importance of black subjectivity.<sup>1</sup> Unfortunately, sometimes overlooked

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<sup>1</sup> Most antebellum works by African Americans are described on their title page as the authentic product of a black subject, a text "Written by Herself" or "Himself." Furthermore, as Robert Stepto observes, many texts are

in our appreciation of this subtlety is the fact that, throughout the century, African American authors also promoted black subjectivity with great force and candor by challenging members of the race to think of themselves as writers. For example, in 1827, the opening editorial in the first African American newspaper, Freedom's Journal in New York City, proclaimed, "Too long have others spoken for us" (Aptheker 82). Two years later, in Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World, David Walker called on African Americans to contest Thomas Jefferson's Notes on the State of Virginia: "For let no one of us suppose that the refutations which have been written by our white friends are enough -- they are *whites* -- we are *blacks* .... [Unless] we try to refute Mr. Jefferson's arguments respecting us, we will only establish them" (77-78). In 1841, Ann Plato wrote in "Advice to Young Ladies":

The greatest word that I can say--,  
I think to please, will be,  
To try and get your learning young,  
And write it back to me. (93)

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authenticated by the depositions of white boards of examiners (i.e., Wheatley 48; Bibb 54-5) or introductions from public figures attesting that the author did or was capable of writing the book (i.e., Jacobs 203-5; Wilson 138-40; Douglass 1845, 33-46) (Step 3-31). Gates notes that the seminal narratives of slavery by James Gronniosaw, Olaudah Equiano, and others employ the trope of the "Talking Book" to dramatize the correspondence between having textual voice and forging a social and political identity (1988, xxv). Henry Bibb closes his 1845 narrative of slavery with the suggestive line, "*mind* makes the man" (171).

In 1855, Frederick Douglass wrote that among the reasons he founded The North Star was to call out "the energies of the race itself" and make "them acquainted with their own mental powers" (389).

Such appeals continued after the Civil War, as African Americans faced economic deprivation, Black Codes, the Ku Klux Klan, and, in 1877, the rolling back of Reconstruction. In 1866, Mattie Jackson advised readers to "manage your own secrets, and divulge them by the silent language of your own pen" (29). Near the end of Frances E. W. Harper's Iola Leroy, published in 1892, an African American doctor named Dr. Latimer urges the heroine Iola to do "lasting service for the race" by writing "a good, strong book that will be helpful" (262). That same year, the educator Anna Julia Cooper lambasted William Dean Howells' characterization of African Americans, telling readers that "what is needed ... to reverse the picture of the lordly man slaying the lion, is the lion to turn painter" (225). Finally, in 1900, at the dawn of a new century, Pauline Hopkins issued a clarion call-to-arms in the preface to Contending Forces:

Fiction is of great value to any people as a preserver of manners and customs -- religious, political, and social. It is a record of growth and development from generation to generation. *No one will do this for us; we must ourselves develop the men and women who will faithfully portray the inmost thoughts and feelings of the Negro with all the fire and romance which lie dormant in our history, and, as yet, unrecognized by writers of the Anglo-Saxon race.* (her italics, 13-14)

Considered together, these summonses represent a striking cultural legacy -- a large body of marginalized people, spanning nearly a century, who understood that oppression occurs in and through the medium of language and who were committed to writing as a practice of racial empowerment and liberation. As we shall see, this legacy is also one of great political and rhetorical sophistication. Even as African American writers endeavored to reach their racial community, they also tried to craft their work to influence overlapping constituencies of white readers who had varying degrees of sympathy, or none at all, for the antislavery and Negro rights causes. That meant they needed to invent strategies to gain the choral support of white readers steeped in national pride and racial prejudice. They needed to develop improvisational skills to adapt correctly to changing political currents, whether it was the passage of the Fugitive Slave Law in 1850, the wild success of Uncle Tom's Cabin in 1851, the meteoric course of the Know-Nothing party in the mid-1850s, or the Northern backlash against the concept of "Negro equality" in the late 1850s. And, like writers in prison, they needed to find rhetorical devices to make slavery present and "true" for white readers, while at the same time addressing discrediting racial stereotypes and the stigma of being a black man or woman. All of which is to say that African

American writers worked *within* the very "limiting situations" they were seeking to expand.

There is a vast body of historical research on the contours of nineteenth-century African American oppression, which included slavery, political disenfranchisement, segregation, labor exploitation, and captivity in a legal system in which many jurists believed, with Supreme Court Chief Justice Roger B. Taney, that blacks had "no rights which a white man was bound to respect" (McPherson 1988, 174). In addition to those circles of limitation, throughout the nineteenth century, mainstream white society was hostile to the practice of black literacy and learning. In the antebellum South, state laws prohibited teaching slaves to read, for it was believed that "Learning would spoil the best nigger in the world .... It would forever unfit him to be a slave" (Douglass 1845, 78). In the antebellum North, a similar dynamic prevailed: most desegregation battles were lost, and in fact it was a struggle even to obtain separate and unequal schools with poor facilities, inferior teachers, and rudimentary curricula (Litwack 113-152).<sup>2</sup> After the War, Southern

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<sup>2</sup> Harriet Wilson's Our Nig (31) and Harriet Jacobs's Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl (166) both describe the denial of schooling to African-American children in the North, as does an 1854 letter from Josephine Brown to Samuel May, Jr.: "While we resided in Buffalo, I did not go to school, owing to the fact that colored children were not permitted to be educated with the whites, and my father would not send me to the colored school, because it would have been giving sanction to proscriptive [sic] prejudice"



blacks displayed what Eric Foner calls a "seemingly unquenchable thirst for education" (1988, 96) -- buying land, building schools, working with the Freedmen's Bureau, and relocating to areas where schools existed for their children (1988, 96-102). Sometimes, as Harper depicts in Iola Leroy (147), the Ku Klux Klan waged guerilla combat against schools, students, and educators (Shapiro 9; Ransom and Sutch 27-31). The official social response to black educational aspiration was less violent but perhaps more insidious -- the establishment of school segregation, unequal funding, and the rationale of separate but equal.

There was another way that whites tried to prevent blacks from developing public voices, and that was the steep personal toll exacted from many African Americans who dared to speak out. Consider the case of the David Walker, who was a free man when he moved from Wilmington, North Carolina to Boston in the late 1820s. After the first edition of his militant Appeal came out in 1829, a group of vengeful (and threatened) Georgians put a bounty on his head (Stuckey 137). Similarly, in 1832-3, the freeborn New Englander Maria Stewart delivered a series of antislavery lectures in Boston that were met with such "calumny and reproach," in her words, that she was forced to quit the public stage (Yellin 1989, 46-7; Yee 115). In the 1830s and 1840s in the North, proponents of abolition (white and black) were

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(Sterling 146).

harassed, shouted down, beaten, and even killed by mobs.<sup>3</sup> During the next decade, when ethnic political riots were frequent (McPherson 1988, 141), lecturing and publishing placed runaway slaves at heightened risk of being returned South under the Fugitive Slave Law -- so much so that Henry Bibb emigrated to Canada and Ellen and William Craft fled to Europe (Quarles 1969, 62, 203-4), while Frederick Douglass and William Wells Brown remained overseas until they had purchased their freedom. Of course, violence was directed not only against specific leaders, but also against whole communities and therefore the entire race.<sup>4</sup> We cannot know

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<sup>3</sup> Some of the abolitionists who braved violence included William Lloyd Garrison (1835, Boston), James Birney (1836, Cincinnati), David Ruggles (1837, New York), Elijah Lovejoy (killed in 1837, Alton, Illinois), and Frederick Douglass (1843, Pendleton, Indiana). Women abolitionists such as Lydia Maria Child, Maria Weston Chapman, and Sarah and Angelina Grimke regularly faced mobs. Shirley J. Yee argues that black women faced greater threats than white or black men (113).

<sup>4</sup> In the antebellum North, many cities had at least one major race riot; in the antebellum South, obviously, the bondage system was maintained by systematic violence. Immediately after the Civil War, violence against freedmen in the South reached astonishing levels. Eric Foner cites some of the numbers: the 1866 massacre of twenty-four members of a black settlement near Pine Bluff, Arkansas; the 1865 murders of 2,000 blacks in and around Shreveport, Louisiana; the killing of 1,000 blacks by whites in Texas between 1865 and 1868 (1988, 119-121). During Reconstruction, African Americans and white Republicans who stepped forward to vote, hold office, serve on juries, or even file legal claims had to contend with the Ku Klux Klan, especially during the state elections from 1869 to 1871 (Foner 1988, 425-444), and there were at least thirty-three race riots in which more than one person was murdered (Shapiro 11). In the post-Reconstruction years from 1882 to 1903, 1,914 African Americans are known to have been lynched (the actual number was probably much higher) for a variety

the extent to which a century of violence and terrorism discouraged African Americans from striving for public arena; but we do know, and must remember, that African American writers, speakers, and public figures could not take for granted their personal safety as they endeavored to make themselves heard.

Finally, in addition to all these trappings of oppression, African American writers ran up against the obstacles of racist ideologies and limiting cultural codes and forms of discourse. Freedom of expression, no doubt a goal, had to be realized within the rules and boundaries of the era. For example, before the 1850s, African Americans were expected to employ direct, unadorned prose -- not literary language -- and were praised for writing, as one reviewer said of Henry Bibb's narrative, "with perfect artlessness" (Davis and Gates 29). As I will discuss in the next chapter, they also had to be circumspect about writing anything that could weaken political support for emancipation, reveal the secrets of the Underground Railroad, or implicate friends and family who remained in the South.<sup>5</sup> And, at the most basic level, African Americans

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of reasons that typically had to do with drawing attention to themselves (Shapiro 32).

<sup>5</sup> Frederick Douglass criticized William Wells Brown and William and Ellen Craft for sharing their ingenious means of escape: "In publishing such accounts, the anti-slavery man addresses the slaveholder, *not the slave*; he stimulates the former to great watchfulness, and adds to his facilities for capturing the slave" (1855, 324).

were roundly loathed by white Americans because of their race and because, as Mary Prince notes in her 1831 autobiography, "Slavery hardens white people's hearts towards blacks" (4). This contempt was not simply a matter of individual people's feelings. It was codified in mainstream stereotypes, in the laws and culture of the country, in the erasure of blacks from the national history, and in the English language itself. Many of the restrictions African American writers encountered are exemplified in an illuminating seven hundred-word letter Harriet Jacobs wrote to Amy Post on June 21, 1857.

Jacobs and Post had been close friends since the late 1840s, when Jacobs, then a fugitive slave, lived with Post and her husband in Rochester for nine months (Yellin 1987b, xvi-xvii). In June, 1857, Jacobs was trying to find a publishing house for the autobiographical work-in-progress she would eventually publish herself, anonymously, under the title Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl. Now widely-regarded as one of the most important works in American literary history, Incidents blends the genres of the slave narrative and the sentimental novel in telling how a woman named "Linda Brent" grew up in slavery, fought off the advances of her master Mr. Flint, hid for seven years in a small chamber beneath her grandmother's roof, and finally escaped to the North, where she was reunited with her children (whose freedom she had secured while in hiding).

In the letter to Post, after a brief greeting, Jacobs moves right to her progress on the autobiography: "I have My dear friend -- Striven faithfully to give a true and just account of my own life in Slavery -- God knows I have tried to do it in a Christian spirit ..." (Yellin 1987a, 242-3). These are trenchant lines. In just two sentences, Jacobs alludes to four qualities white readers expected of slavery accounts: veracity, authentic authorship, Christian values, and fairness (i.e., not being too shrill). These were four qualities that had to be displayed in the substance and style of a work, four conditions of publication.

Jacobs goes on to ask Post to write a letter of introduction for the published account. Aware that a "Slave Woman" would need help gaining the trust of white readers, she recommends areas where Post could provide support. One is the subject of the author's illegitimate children (their father was a neighbor of her master's), which Jacobs instructs Post, who was familiar with the circumstances, to explain however she likes in accordance with the truth. She also asks the Christian abolitionist to tell readers that the original idea for the autobiography was Post's, not Jacobs's; that when composing the book Jacobs was at the same time working, not living an "Idle life"; and that Jacobs was certainly not telling her story "merely to make money" (Yellin 1987a, 242). Hence, a fifth condition of authorship: the narrator of slavery should appear upright

and well-intentioned, in this case with no "unwomanly" motives of profit or self-promotion. Of course, because the standards of being a virtuous person were based on the values and experiences of middle-income whites, and did not correspond to the tragic dilemmas faced by a Harriet Jacobs, much of a fugitive slave's life was lost in the telling.

Jacobs's request for a character reference points to yet another limiting situation that defines the social act of writing for African Americans in the 1850s: most would-be authors required the financial and political support of "dear [white] friends" like Amy Post to open doors into the worlds of publishing and public speaking. No doubt, some of these friendships ran deep, as did Post's and Jacobs's, but they were still imbalanced. The former slave needed the influential person a lot more than vice-versa, and it was probably up to the more vulnerable party to preserve the relationship and to make sure that nothing she wrote or said did harm to it.

As a black woman, a former slave, and the mother of mulatto children born out of wedlock, Jacobs recognized the importance of constructing an authorial persona that would deal with the discrediting assumptions and stereotypes of white readers. But that is not all her letter reveals. She also describes the process of culling material for the book:

... there are somethings [sic] that I might have made plainer I know -- Woman can whisper -- her cruel wrongs in the ear of a very dear friend -- much easier than she can record them for the world

to read -- I have left nothing out but what I thought -- the world might believe that a Slave Woman was too willing to pour out -- that she might gain their sympathies. (Yellin 1987a, 242)

Here, Jacobs sheds light on a narrative captivity faced by every former slave who aspired to fight slavery with a pen. White Northern audiences were willing to read about slavery -- and were receptive to the ideas that the authors were human and rational and good -- but they did not and could not cope with many of the egregious details, like sexual assaults, molten authorial anger, and evidence of Northern complicity, all of which could have demanded more decisive remedies than most whites were ready to support. In the antebellum period, America was not a sleeping nation of John Browns ready to be shaken into fury. The Harriet Jacobses of our country understood that reticence; sometimes they challenged it directly, but often they avoided the challenge. To get themselves in print, they muted their anger and sanitized their suffering. They softened or suppressed the worst abuses, only presuming to show "slavery in the mildest form" (Craft 331; also Equiano 4). They appealed to the self-interest of white audiences, and sometimes re-inscribed damaging stereotypes. They tried to display a "Christian spirit" of forgiveness and forbearance. Pragmatic, yes. But was too much lost in the bargain?

## 2.

The answer, of course, is yes. Too much was lost. But that does not mean that nothing was gained. As individuals and as a people, African Americans used the written word to create interstices of personal, sovereign, and civic freedom both from *captivus*, or forcible confinement by an external force, and from *captivare*, or internally-sustained constraints. Because African Americans did not have the power to end slavery by themselves, they had to build coalitions and recruit whites to their side, and for that, they needed writing to play an instrumental role. Their texts had to reach out to diverse constituencies while alienating no group that might be swung to their side. Thus, most African American writers adhered to basic principles of political organization: prioritize your goals; find common ground; build alliances; avoid burning bridges; try to turn the swing block against your most extreme opponents. And above all, lean on your moral and political base -- *expect core supporters to compromise small interests for big goals* -- but never allow your base to erode into being just one interest group among the many you solicit. The interrelated rhetorical practices of confrontational dialogue, interior dialogue, and communal dialogue helped writers to achieve these objectives.



Confrontational dialogue occurs when one publicly disputes others' practices, ideas, or ideologies. For example, because African Americans had been negated as human beings in Euro-American discourse, they needed to wage oppositional strikes against epithets such as "brute," "bukra," and "nig." Because they were the objects of legislation by whites -- but not framers of legislation -- they needed to make their voices heard on unfolding social and political matters such as African colonization and the Fugitive Slave Law. And because they were victims of crimes who typically had no legal means of redress, they needed to take the strong stand of specifically naming in print, and perhaps bring moral condemnation upon, oppressors such as Dick Walker, who sold his own children into slavery (Brown 1847, 195), and Austin Gore, who shot a slave named Demby in cold blood (Douglass 1845, 65-69). The rhetoric of confrontation establishes a public exchange of ideas, sometimes forcing more powerful interests to justify a position that they would prefer not to have to defend or articulate. It also creates a public record of opposition where previously there had been only monologue and, for the silent, implied consent. For the oppressed, it presumes and displays the vulnerability of dominant interests, and it can be an essential step towards collective empowerment and cultural pride.

Let us look first at David Walker's Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World, which uses confrontational dialogue to single out and rebut Thomas Jefferson's Notes on the State of Virginia. Walker's radical pamphlet appeared in three editions in 1829-30, more than forty years after the first publication of Jefferson's responses to the queries of the Count de Buffon. The Appeal is really an early and inflamed expression of liberation theology, arguing that one day the "God of justice" (68) will wreak "vengeance" (136) on all who deny the Rights of Man.<sup>6</sup> Unlike most of his white Christian contemporaries, Walker does not espouse passive earthly patience or the purity of suffering. Instead, with a ground-breaking spirit of Christian militancy, he calls on African Americans to "lay aside abject servility" (128) and crush the slave system. "My colour will yet," he promises, "root some of you out of the very face of the earth!!!!!!" (139).

Quite correctly, Walker believed that the institution of slavery would never reform itself into oblivion and thus that violent resistance by African Americans was required (96). For him, the precondition of forceful self-defense

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<sup>6</sup> "Perhaps they will laugh at or make light of this; but I tell you Americans! that unless you speedily alter your course, you and your Country are gone!!!!!! For God Almighty will tear up the very face of the earth!!!" (104). "O Americans! Americans!! I call God -- I call angels -- I call men, to witness, that your DESTRUCTION *is at hand*, and will be speedily consummated unless you REPENT" (his italics, 108).

was collective awareness. Walker would not allow blacks to hold the illusions that they were respected by whites or that there could be equality in servility (93). A realistic understanding of society was the prerequisite of transformation. To that end, Walker asks "each of my brethren ... to buy a copy [of Notes] and put it in the hand of his son" (77). He wanted members of the race to go forward for freedom fully cognizant of their degraded image in white America's eyes and fully aware of the deep racism they would have to overcome. He believed in nothing if not the power of open-eyed realism to spur political action: "I am glad Mr. Jefferson has advanced his positions for your sake," he writes, "for you will either have to contradict or confirm him by your own actions" (91).

Both quoting from Notes and alluding to it indirectly, Walker creates a confrontational dialogue on a number of Jefferson's key themes. One is the notion that blacks "are inferior to whites in the endowments of both body and mind" (Walker 72; Jefferson 270). Walker disputes this idea by pointing to the accomplishments of Egyptian culture (82). He argues that all humans are "the same" and equally the reflection of God (127). He also attacks Jefferson's methodology in comparing black and white achievement in America, saying that to do so is like "putting one wild deer in an iron cage, ... and holding another by the side of the same, then letting it go, and expecting the one in the cage

to run as fast as the one at liberty" (72-73). And he suggests that, if the races are to be ranked, it is whites who come out below, because they have "always been an unjust, jealous, unmerciful, avaricious and blood-thirsty set of beings, always seeking power and authority" (79).

In the narration of the text, in the speech-act of displaying his own intelligence, Walker also provides a riposte to the Virginian. While Jefferson opines that "among the blacks ... there is no poetry" (267), Walker includes several examples of his own verses of devotion and resistance. While Jefferson claims never to have found that "a black had uttered a thought above the level of plain narration" (266), Walker displays volcanic rhetorical skills and a keen mind for political analysis. And while Jefferson claims that writing by African Americans "does more honour to the heart than the head" (267), Walker shows a firm grasp of Greek, Roman, and Biblical history, as well as a mastery of Notes itself.

At one point Walker brilliantly echoes Jefferson to contradict his notions of black passivity and powerlessness. In a famous line beginning "When I reflect that God is just," Jefferson warns that the slave system may be brought down by "supernatural interference," because the "Almighty has no attribute which can take side with us in such a contest" (289). The sentence reveals that Jefferson has no intellectual framework with which he can envision African

Americans taking responsibility for their liberation and imposing their will upon the world. With dripping irony, Walker confronts this well-known section of Notes and presents the scenario to which Jefferson was blind -- African Americans actively defending themselves for the greater glory of God:

But when I reflect that God is just, and that millions of my wretched brethren would meet death with glory -- yea, more, would plunge into the very mouths of cannons and be torn to into particles as minute as the atoms which compose the elements of the earth, in preference to a mean submission to the lash of tyrants, I am with streaming eyes, compelled to shrink back into nothingness before my Maker, and exclaim again, thy will be done, O Lord God Almighty. (92)

This cry of resistance was powerful not only for its message, but also as a speech-act. At risk to his life and security, this legally unprotected semi-citizen dramatically confronted the forces of power and authority. He publicly gave voice to black rage, which had never been done so forcefully in print, and he animated the critical lesson, vital to any freedom movement, that one person, even acting alone, can make a difference. The Appeal's effect was stunning; it terrified slaveholders throughout the South, who, after reading the "seditious" and "highly inflammatory" work, banned and burned the pamphlet, passed laws forbidding slave literacy, and wrote irate editorials (Aptheker 45-51). The pamphlet also inspired the friends of emancipation, both leaders such as Henry Highland Garnet and William Lloyd Garrison who invoked Walker's name in the 1840s (Aptheker

38-44; 51-53) and also, no doubt, the slaves and free Negroes who would have seen the anxieties stoked by one man's words.

To Walker, Notes on the State of Virginia was a crucial text for other reasons besides its racial figuring. For one thing, it was widely known that Jefferson had made an argument, if tepid, in favor of long-term emancipation -- the rub being that freed African Americans would have to be deported elsewhere to avoid "staining the blood of [the] master" (270). This position, advanced by the African Colonization Society and endorsed by the great compromiser Henry Clay at the time when Walker was writing, remained in the air until the Civil War and was advocated by President Lincoln in 1862 (McPherson 1988, 508-9). Without summarizing Jefferson's position, Walker forcefully dismisses the case for colonization: "The greatest riches in all America have arisen from our blood and tears: -- and will they drive us from our property and homes, which we have earned with our *blood*?" (131). This is a significant public act of confrontation, for it makes two key points for black and white readers: first, that genuine "emancipation" must account for the rights and desires of the former slaves; and second, that African Americans have larger claims to citizenship and national ownership that will not be met by emancipation alone. "America is as much our country as yours" (137), he reminds both audiences -- a

point to be lost in later decades on white Americans of all persuasions.

In confronting America's great philosopher of freedom, individual rights, and agrarian self-sufficiency, Walker points to more than fifty years of democratic hypocrisy in society at large. America is merely a "land of ... pretended *liberty*" (137), he tells readers, a country dominated by "the devouring hands of white Christians" (141). Noting that authorities in the South were searching ships for copies of the Appeal, he comments sarcastically, "Why, I thought the Americans proclaimed to the world that ... all the inhabitants of the country enjoy equal rights" (140). The pamphlet's final pages make the most whetted ideological thrusts of all. First, Walker excerpts a long passage from the Declaration of Independence, including the famous "We hold these truths to be self-evident" sentence and the revolutionary claim that, under a regime of "absolute despotism," it is the people's "right, it is their duty, to throw off such government ..." (143). Then, he makes an extraordinary demand, commanding his readers: "See your Declaration Americans!!! Do you understand your own language?" (143). This is a noteworthy moment in American literary and political history: a disenfranchised invisible man uncovers the failure of the world's first democracy to live up to its professed ideals, while seizing for his

people's freedom movement the seminal document in which those great ideals are most powerfully articulated.

Make no mistake, to a large portion of the American population in 1830, there was no obvious contradiction between the philosophical bases of legalized slavery and the Declaration of Independence. As Orlando Patterson demonstrates, slaveholding societies typically have been dominated by an educated class that cherishes and refines high notions of political freedom (1982, vii). Part of what makes slavery self-sustaining is that the low social position of the slaves confirms everything noble and lofty that the slaveholders hold true about themselves and their liberty. In confronting Jefferson and appropriating the Declaration of Independence as intellectual property of African Americans, Walker tries to make mainstream society uncomfortable with its own ideology. He recognizes the political significance of the struggle to define the meaning of national values and symbols. Indeed, Walker anticipates many of the qualities of state power and social conflict that Antonio Gramsci was to describe one hundred years later.

For Gramsci, the economic and military power of a dominant social group must be complemented by hegemonic power, which is the myriad means by which the leading group "educates" (1971, 258) its members to be superior while others learn subordination. However, because hegemonic



power operates on the level of the sign, it can always be jostled and subverted. A subordinate group always has the potential to redefine its consent to be ruled. It can always reassert a new collective will and chip away at the leading group's control of the national language and values. In the realm of hegemony, battles can be won but not wars, for there are no ultimate victories so long as the weaker forces retain the powers of speech or symbolic action. Thus, as Walker reminds us, the necessity for the oppressed of learning, writing, and confrontational raids on the Declaration of Independence.

David Walker understood that tyranny and opposition are played out on an expansive historical stage. He recognized that a work such as Notes on the State of Virginia does enduring harm, the on-going nature of which increases the need for confrontational dialogue. He writes:

Do you know that Mr. Jefferson was one of as great characters as ever lived among the whites [sic]? See his writings for the world, and public labours for the United States of America. Do you believe that the assertions of such a man ... will pass away unobserved by this people and the world? If you do you are much mistaken .... (78)

Neither Mr. Jefferson nor his views on the "unfortunate difference of color" (270) will ever go away. Literature preserves the best of what has been thought and said -- but also the worst and most hateful of our ideas. Because print preserves our prejudices, because "Mr. Jefferson's remarks ... will never be removed this side of eternity" (91), every

generation of African Americans must confront a canonical record of white supremacist attitudes that has the potential to breath new life into old bigotries. The same goes for other marginalized and despised groups. Strong texts sow their ideas, and our cultural past cannot be erased. That said, as Walker teaches, there is reason for hope.

Resistance also can be written and preserved, placed side by side against oppression for tomorrow's parents to pass on to their children. "Teaching the conflicts" is what Gerald Graff calls this practice in an academic context. But for the conflicts to endure, every Notes must have its Appeal. Confrontational dialogue is not for an age but for all time.

This rhetorical strategy does not appear only in prose polemics. Political confrontation is a component of the story lines, settings, and characters in the earliest novels by African Americans, such as Martin Delany's Blake and William Wells Brown's Clotel. Consider the fiction of Harriet Wilson, who takes up Walker's challenge and refutes Mr. Jefferson's arguments in her 1859 novel, Our Nig, or, Sketches from the Life of a Free Black, in a Two-Story White House, North. Showing that Slavery's Shadows Fall Even There. The 131-page novel, the third published by an African American, tells the story of Frado Smith, an abandoned mulatto child (her mother was white) who grows up as a servant in a white Massachusetts family of modest means. On the issue of race, the Bellmont family is

divided: the racist, "she-devil" mother and daughter Mary beat, starve, overwork, and humiliate Frado, whom they rename "Nig." Meanwhile, in a benevolent but non-assertive way, the matriarch's husband and her other three children look after the girl, especially a young man named James, who loves Frado and whose death triggers something of a spiritual awakening in her. As Henry Louis Gates, Jr. has shown, Wilson blends the traditions of the slave narrative and the sentimental novel of white middle-class women (1982, xxxiv-lv). Her heroine endures many of the adversities faced by characters such as Ellen Montgomery in The Wide, Wide World -- want, abandonment, cruel guardians, loneliness, and grief. But these trials are not settled according to a formula, with a marriage and economic security. Rather, like many of the slave narratives, the novel cuts off without a tidy resolution. After leaving the Bellmonts, Frado marries a seductive ne'er-do-well who later abandons her and their child to eke out gloomy lives of bare subsistence. In merging the two genres, Wilson creates something new, and with it, a distinctive sardonic tone reflected in the book's title.

Through the characterization of Frado, Our Nig establishes a confrontational dialogue with prevailing stereotypes. Quality for quality, Wilson counters the image of blacks set forth in Notes on the State of Virginia and thus preserved in the American literary canon. For example,

Jefferson claims that "ardent" sexuality likens African Americans to the "Oranootan" (265); Wilson's Frado shows no sexual desire for James, the one man she truly loves.

Jefferson claims that African Americans possess a lower "share of beauty" than other races (264); Frado is so gorgeous that Mrs. Bellmont shaves her head to make her ugly (68) and leaves her in the sun to darken her skin (39).

Jefferson claims that "in imagination [African Americans] are dull, tasteless, and anomalous" (266); as a child, Frado displays a roguish, trickster's mind and then real skill with her needlework as an adult. Jefferson claims that African Americans' griefs are "less felt, and sooner forgotten" than whites' (265); Frado suffers mightily, crying often and becoming more depressed and erratic as the pain of racism seeps into her being. Jefferson claims that miscegenation lowers the quality of the white race (270); but Frado is herself the child of a white woman and a black man, and she is more virtuous, more beautiful, and more talented than the "unstained" Bellmonts. Wilson's practice of confronting racism and injustice through the delineation of a character is referred to by Mikhail Bakhtin in his book on Dostoevsky as a "hidden polemic":

In a hidden polemic the author's discourse is directed toward its own referential object, as in any other discourse, but at the same time every statement about the object is constructed in such a way that, apart from its referential meaning, a polemical blow is struck at the other's discourse on the same theme, at the other's statement about the same object. (1984, 195-6)

With confrontational dialogue, Wilson combats the erasure of African Americans in national discourses. The concept of "nigger" becomes the appellation "Nig," now accented with Wilson's sarcasm and scolding critique of those who use the term. Shown to be a hateful name for a human being, "Nig" is transformed from a referent of black reality to an index of white racism. Through the portrayal of Frado, the author negates the negation of African Americans' humanity in white discourse, including those sentimental novels such as Ida May and Philly and Kit, whose eponymous titles are mocked by Wilson's resonant choice of "Our Nig."

However, Wilson does more than only construct a counterimage or narrative negative to Jefferson's reductive stereotype, for she creates a heroine who is *transformed* by the harsh events of her life and thus provides insights about the inner outcomes of oppression. As a child, Frado displays a winning mischievousness and "exuberance of spirit" (17), pulling funny pranks such as blowing cigar smoke into a teacher's desk drawer to give the appearance of a fire when the drawer is opened (39), but a lifetime of beatings and debasement takes its toll: physically, Frado becomes sickly and worn out; psychically, she internalizes some of the Bellmonts's racism, wishing she were white (51) and doubting that heaven is "for blacks" (84). As a result of her hard life, the child's wit turns caustic. In one

scene, she responds to Mrs. Bellmont's order to eat from the cruel woman's unwashed dinner plate by first giving the plate to the dog to lick clean (71). In another, she risks drowning to trick a sheep into jumping into a river (54). Later, she contemplates poisoning Mrs. Bellmont and takes a manic delight in Mary Bellmont's sudden death: "S'posen she goes to hell," the girl crows, "she'll be as black as I am. Wouldn't mistress be mad to see her a nigger!" (107). This acrid heroine is a far cry from the stoic true women who are schooled and purified by their suffering in the white sentimental novel tradition. However, just when it appears that Frado will immolate like Melville's Pip, she leaves the Bellmont household. Narrative time speeds up, and years pass in a few paragraphs. In rapid succession, she becomes an invalid, lodges for several years in a house of charity, marries a feckless black drifter named Samuel, and becomes an impoverished widow. Her anger burns itself out, and, disabled and languid, she is left simply to abide. The book ends with a haunting glimpse at the residue of racial injury and pain in one's early life. After summing up what happened to all the Bellmonts in the years after Frado left them, Wilson closes the novel with the final comment: "Frado has passed from their memories ... but she will never cease to track them till beyond mortal vision" (131).

There is an important principle displayed in the depiction of this complex oppositional character. Yes, the

wretched of the earth must directly challenge their distorted images. Opposition is of profound moral significance as an engine of hope and pride and further resistance. However, if opposition only means replacing pejorative icons with affirmative ones, then the literature of resistance becomes wooden. Characters become flat variants of others' ignorance. Plots become formulaic. The oppressed people's culture loses internal meaning, which is like taking minerals from the soil plants need to survive. A culture of resistance must speak to the core of a people's experience, to their hopes and their hardships and their humanity. Otherwise, it becomes foreign to those it would sustain. Desiccated and overly defensive, it will neither arouse nor inspire.

3.

A second form of discourse -- interior dialogue -- adds richness and complexity to the literature of people in circumscribed social situations. By "interior dialogue," I mean two sets of related rhetorical practices. The first is that of communicating, in the same texts and lines and words, with multiple social groups that may have different or conflicting interests. This practice derives from African Americans' subordinate social position, which made it necessary to find ways to address a multicultural array

of audiences at the same time. Take, for example, Frederick Douglass's 1855 autobiography, My Bondage and My Freedom, which will be discussed in greater detail in the next chapter. A number of passages are directed specifically to African Americans, whom Douglass rallies to "strike the blow" against slavery, just as he had whipped the cruel overseer Covey (241-49, 348). He warns them not to collude with bounty hunters, describing a New Bedford turn-coat who was run out of a black church and nearly killed (347-8). And, as William L. Andrews notes in To Tell A Free Story, he moves to portray himself to black readers as a proud member and dedicated leader of the African American community, a shift away from the persona of the self-reliant hero in the 1845 autobiography (238). But My Bondage and My Freedom is also clearly marked for other audiences. Douglass threatens slaveholders that "every hour [you are] silently whetting the knife of vengeance for [your] own throat" (269; also 324). He tells Northern white women that the peculiar institution both spoils the Christian goodness of Southern white women like Mrs. Auld (162-3) and reduces them to "IDOLS" ignored by their husbands who are turning slaves into concubines (59). He encourages temperance society members, many of whom had refused to grant charters to African Americans or admit them as members (Quarles 1969, 98-99), to see the nexus between their crusade and his (150, 255-6). Economic interest groups are also part of this



medley: to monied Northern Whigs, he implies that slavery is a feudal institution hostile to progress and free trade (62-63), while to workers, as I will discuss further in the next chapter, he argues that slavery is an anti-white economic system that crowds out free labor, and he praises "the superior mental character of northern labor over that of the south" (345). For patriots, Douglass links abolition with the American revolution (284) and argues that the U.S. Constitution is "an anti-slavery instrument" (396). For the devout, he argues that slavery is an anti-Christian abomination (159, 257-8). For incrementalists advocating a kinder, gentler system of bondage, he recounts how lenient treatment only increased his disquiet (319). And for radical white abolitionists, he insists that former slaves must be allowed to speak fully and freely about their experiences (358-71), instead of being told, "Give us the facts ... we will take care of the philosophy" (361).

By creating spectacles of public dialogue with multifarious audiences, Douglass adds complexity and levels of meaning to the text. For example, slaveholders do not read only those passages where they are explicitly addressed. They also read those parts where Douglass legitimizes violent self-defense by African Americans and where he appeals to temperance, Christian, business, women's, and workers' audiences. Witnessing Douglass mobilizing support in this broad-based way would have been

threatening to some slaveholders, especially Northerners who owned property in the South; and that was one of Douglass's goals as an abolitionist -- to intimidate slaveholders into abolishing the bondage system, not to try to reason them into radical change. Similarly, Douglass's public gesture of recruiting this assortment of white groups to support emancipation makes the powerful statement to African Americans that their movement must be integrated. It is even possible that, in turn, some white readers would have perceived the transmission of this message to African Americans, thereby bolstering Douglass's credibility with them.

In the mid-nineteenth-century, African Americans did not have the power to call a town meeting and expect all the diverse audiences they cared about reaching to attend. Geographically and politically, the different social groups were too far apart, and pragmatically, proslavery forces would never have debated former slaves on equal footing in front of groups whose opinions still hung in the balance. As a result, African Americans seized upon writing as a way to address, and symbolically assemble, a spectrum of audiences. They created textual town hall meetings, structured to display colloquy with specific groups to wider circles of listeners. Textual spaces become textual places, points of gathering and intersection. Some of their white contemporaries did this as well, but never to quite the

eclectic range Douglass seeks out and inscribes in My Bondage and My Freedom. Nineteenth-century works by white writers are more limited in this respect for the simple reason that they presuppose African American audiences only slightly more often than they presuppose Martians.

Interior dialogue also works in an inverse way, as passages full of meaning for one audience are made innocuous and non-offensive to others. One of the best examples of this practice occurs in The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African, published in England in 1789. The first chapter of the autobiography is a lucid fourteen-page description of life in Equiano's long-lost home of Essaka (in Nigeria). The chapter favorably presents and preserves dozens of Ibo cultural practices, including wedding customs, new year's celebrations, naming rituals, funeral rites, libation ceremonies, work, dance, dress, food, hygiene, perfumes, types of beds, and housing. Showing a quiet love for "our ... uncommonly rich and fruitful" land (10), Equiano explains that his people treat their slaves with more respect than do Westerners, exacting forced labor only from criminals and prisoners-of-war. Contemporary British and American readers probably would have interpreted this chapter as an agreeable, uncomplicated account of the "manners and customs" of natives, proof positive of African barbarism and a legitimation of slavery. But for African

and African American readers, the chapter is nothing short of cultural reclamation -- understated to be sure, but incalculably important as the opening of one of the first books published in the West by a person of African descent. Although many years removed from Africa, educated and converted to Christianity, Equiano expressly defines his cultural identity as Ibo. He describes Ibo practices in the present tense, stressing that the culture lives and thrives. And he embraces the culture as his own, proudly using "us" and "we" when recounting every practice except formal worship (which, as a Christian, he can no longer observe). What would (and do) black readers receive from this section? Certainly, a story of origins, a cultural touchstone, and a model of African consciousness. In addition to all that Equiano preserves, there is moral value in how, and that, he preserves it. The speech-act itself is an example of black heroism. By recording his cultural identity before a white audience that was at best uncomprehending and at worst hostile, Equiano models the importance of what Houston Baker calls "the journey back" -- the quest to represent and recover the original sources and primary values of an African tradition and community (1980).

Nineteenth-century African American writers also employ interior dialogue to send in single passages different messages to diverse communities. We see this practice in Our Nig, where Harriet Wilson treads on a dangerous

antebellum fault line by depicting the hardship of a mulatto girl in New England. In the 1850s, the theme that laboring blacks (and whites) were oppressed in the North was championed by proponents of slavery such as George Fitzhugh and Senator James Hammond of South Carolina. Their argument was that slavery was an honorable form of paternalism in which masters had obligations and slaves had rights and relative comfort (Genovese 4-112). Wilson was by no means the first African American to pick up the theme of Northern oppression in the 1850s, the decade of the Fugitive Slave Law, the failure of state campaigns for black rights, and the Dred Scott decision. Like others, in treating this subject, she bucks the radical white abolitionists' desire for African Americans to limit their remarks about the free states to expressions of praise, gratitude, and fealty. The difference, however, is that Wilson is one of the rare writers who acknowledges this pressure for silence from the radical left. Ostensibly to mollify the New England abolitionists, she explains in a one-page preface that "I would not ... even palliate slavery in the South, by disclosures of its appurtenances North. My mistress was wholly imbued with *Southern* principles." If on the surface, the statement appears crafted to appease the abolitionists, it also announces to other audiences that Wilson, in fact, does view black life in the North as a form of slavery. The author then claims, "I have purposefully omitted what would

most provoke shame in our good anti-slavery friends at home," again foreshadowing the argument she claims not to have made under the guise of direct communication with the abolitionists.

In the final pages of Our Nig, through the sketchy portrayal of Frado's worthless black husband Samuel, Wilson attempts to blunt the anticipated charge that the novel is a forgery by radical whites. Samuel is, of all things, an impostor fugitive slave who "had never seen the South" and whose "illiterate harangues were humbugs for hungry abolitionists" (128). Rare is the antebellum African American writer who gives credence to the slaveholders' charge that such frauds exist. Although gratuitous to the plot, Samuel's falsity is central to the political positioning of the novel: Wilson is publicly chiding the abolitionists for the alleged use of inauthentic fugitives. In present-day political parlance, this practice is known as "counter-scheduling," which is the carefully-chosen act of prominently criticizing or disagreeing with one interest group for the consumption of other constituencies. Counter-scheduling allows an office-seeker (or a policy initiative) to be defined favorably through the opposition he (or it) generates.<sup>7</sup> Wilson effectively says, "I am not like Samuel.

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<sup>7</sup> In the 1992 presidential campaign, the classic counter-scheduling event was then-Governor Bill Clinton's public spat with Jesse Jackson because of a critical speech the candidate gave at a Rainbow Coalition conference; around the country, white centrist Republicans and Reagan

*I am not the puppet of zealous abolitionist ventriloquists.*" If, at one level, the portrayal of Samuel rebuts those who would question Wilson's authenticity as the author, it also contains a second message for other white and black Northerners who, for various reasons in the late 1850s, resented the radical white abolitionists. To whites, the figure of Samuel defines the kind of overly-zealous abolitionist politics that Wilson does not endorse. To African Americans, it points to the need for authentic black voices -- literary voices, not "illiterate harangues" controlled by white abolitionists.

There is another set of discursive practices, different from the practice of addressing and inscribing multiple audiences in the text, that can be considered interior dialogue. To understand these practices, we should begin with Bakhtin's well-known concept of *heteroglossia*: language that is "marked by a plurality of perspectives and value-laden ideological practices that are in challenging contact with one another" (1981, 312). As I will discuss later, Bakhtin uses the term to describe several different kinds of semantic phenomena, but in general, we can say that *heteroglossia* places side-by-side in one text a smorgasbord of cultural strands -- anything and everything -- that, by virtue of being brought together, inform and critique each

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Democrats were presented with the appealing image of a Democratic candidate who would put Rev. Jackson in his place.

other in revealing ways. The opposite of *heteroglossia* is univocal discourse, or writing that reflects a single dominant or "official" perspective (and usually the vested interests of a powerful group). The comparisons afforded by *heteroglossia* destroy all homogenizing (mis)uses of language, freeing "consciousness from the tyranny of its own language and its own myths of language" (1981, 61). This allows for "the laying bare of any sort of conventionality, the exposure of all that is vulgar and falsely stereotyped in human relations" (1981, 162), like, for example, the Northern racism exposed by Harriet Wilson through the juxtaposition of the hateful label "Nig" with the humanity of Frado Smith.

Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl shows some of the ways that interior dialogue can be an empowering form of discourse for marginalized groups. In chapter XII, Jacobs describes how, after white men in North Carolina heard about Nat Turner's rebellion in Virginia, they indiscriminately terrorized the slaves to keep them in line (63-67). The attacks began after the landowners and poor whites rounded up all the slaves under the pretense of having a "muster," or holiday celebration. Instead, houses were searched and looted. At night, with the mob "staggering under intoxication" (66), women and men were pulled from their homes and tortured. Jacobs comes as close as she can to



stating that women were raped.<sup>8</sup> The "low whites" in particular "exulted in such a chance to exercise a little brief authority" (64). People of all ages were "whipped till blood stood in puddles at their feet" (64). This reign of terror continued for several weeks, only subsiding with reports of Turner's capture and execution. The chapter ends by describing how the slaves' small church was burned to the ground.

The first sentence of the next chapter shows some of the advantages of interior dialogue. To illustrate these benefits, I have divided the sentence into four parts:

1. After the alarm caused by Nat Turner's insurrection had subsided,
2. the slaveholders came to the conclusion
3. that it would be well to give the slaves enough of religious instruction to keep them from
4. ... (to be completed). (68)

Overall, in diction and style, the sentence "speaks" in the idiom of the proslavery camp. The first three parts, littered with euphemisms and misstatements, are cast in language this group might use in public discussion with non-slaveholders. The first deceitfully implies that Turner's rebellion led to mere "alarm," when what actually occurred

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<sup>8</sup> "Many women hid themselves in woods and swamps, to keep out of their way. If any of the husbands or fathers told of these outrages, they were tied up to the public whipping post, and cruelly scourged for telling lies about white men" (64).

was planned violence against innocent people. The second misleadingly suggests that the slaveholders rationally came to a "conclusion" about how best to prevent such "alarm" in the future. And the third falsely intimates that their decision was liberally to "give" the slaves "enough" of something beneficial ("religious instruction") to keep them from .... From what? From sinning? From dying as heathens? Completion of the withheld part will take place momentarily.

One can call the idiom Jacobs captures here the "public discourse of slavery." Notice that the author does not use a formal marker such as quotation marks or italics emphasis to set apart this discourse within the narration. Nor does she explicitly indicate her intent to exhibit the slaveholders' lies. The text simply juxtaposes the slaveholders' self-serving language with the mayhem and murder, the angst and injustice, laid out in the previous chapter. The comparison implicitly challenges readers to decide which idiom they trust more, Jacobs's or her former captors'. It also awakens readers to the larger point that in political discourse language is never neutral. The struggle over a term like "alarm" ultimately concerns much more than the one incident Jacobs describes. It is about a language-wide practice of duplicity and hypocrisy on the part of the slaveholders, and it is about whose voice will become more credible in the marketplace of competing ideas.

By alerting readers to one of the slaveholders' crimes against truth, Jacobs calls into question their entire public discourse.

The sentence contains a second and even more telling use of interior dialogue. In the previously-withheld fourth part, Jacobs places directly behind the public discourse of slavery another of the slaveholders' most important idioms:

After the alarm caused by Nat Turner's insurrection had subsided, the slaveholders came to the conclusion that it would be well to give the slaves enough of religious instruction to keep them from *murdering their masters*. (my italics, 68)

"Murdering their masters" is strictly part of the private discourse of slavery. Behind closed doors, in the confidence of cohorts, the slaveholders may air such anxieties in order to justify the chattel system to themselves and collaborate on tactics to keep it functioning smoothly. But never, never would they allow the candidness of private discussion to creep into their public idiom. Never would they acknowledge to outsiders and antislavery forces the lethal unhappiness of their captives. In the words of Bakhtin, Jacobs uses "another's speech in another's language" (1981, 324) to reveal how the public discourse conflicts with and is unmasked by the slaveholders' own private discourse. And in doing so, she exposes the white Southerners' motives for providing "religious instruction" to slaves: social domination, period. That is to say, Jacobs's interior dialogue places "religious instruction"

alongside "alarm," revealing them to be complementary euphemisms and two versions of the same power dynamic. In displaying this association, Jacobs implicitly contradicts much of the slaveholders' propaganda about the relationship between Christianity and slavery, including the notions that, 1) masters sincerely desire to save their slaves' souls; 2) religion is not politically-invested; 3) slavery and the status quo are the will of God; 4) social station corresponds to spiritual station in God's eyes; 5) contentment is always a Christian virtue; and 6) earthly obedience leads to heavenly bliss. All of these arguments crumble if, as Jacobs suggests, the Christianizing of slaves is just another insurrection-preventing strategy. By creating a textual spectacle of exposing hypocrisy, Jacobs frees her readers to practice their faith more critically.<sup>9</sup> This dialogue also suggests that master discourses such as Christianity always remain open to appropriation by any social group -- an appropriation that Jacobs herself attempts later on in arguing that true Christianity defends the weak (70, 100) and cherishes "human brotherhood" (189). But perhaps most important, by exposing only the hypocritical use of Christianity -- but not suggesting that Christianity itself is inherently hypocritical -- Jacobs

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<sup>9</sup> Jacobs goes on to show that the slaves have this liberated perspective, as they laugh off the proslavery homilies of Reverend Pike (68-70).

takes care not to offend those devout allies in the North, like Amy Post, upon whom she was so dependent for personal and political support. Interior dialogue and indirect discourse allow Jacobs to critique a repressive application of Christianity within the boundaries of a Christian society.

Thus, in a larger sense, interior dialogue causes the contradictory refrains of a culture to blend and bounce off one another in an illuminating medley. As the University of Toronto law professor Craig Scott has asserted to me in private conversations, the practice is particularly effective in societies (like the antebellum South) where oppression is cloaked in a hypocritical veil of rationalization or denial. However, this is not to say that interior dialogue allows an author definitively to triumph over all hegemonic discourses, or even that it necessarily gives potent counter-hegemonic discourses equal play with hegemonic ones. Let us look at a second excerpt from Incidents, where we return to the issue of Jacobs's illegitimate children born to a white, married man she names "Mr. Sands":

But, O, ye happy women, whose purity has been sheltered from childhood, who have been free to choose the objects of your affection, whose homes are protected by law, do not judge the poor desolate slave girl too severely! If slavery had been abolished, I, also, could have married the man of my choice; I could have been spared the painful task of confessing what I am now about to relate; but all my prospects had been

blighted by slavery. I wanted to keep myself pure; and, under the most adverse circumstances, I tried hard to preserve my self-respect; but I was struggling alone in the powerful grasp of the demon Slavery; and the monster proved too strong for me. I felt as if I was forsaken by God and man; as if all my efforts must be frustrated; and I became restless in my despair. (my underlining, 54)

The first thing to note about the apologia is that Jacobs incorporates a plethora of cultural voices. The clause "O, ye happy women, whose purity has been sheltered from childhood" derives from the Cult of True Womanhood, pointing to the exalted essential feminine conditions of virginity and passivity.<sup>10</sup> "All my prospects had been blighted" introduces the complementary discourse of marriage, and the notion that nuptials marked the crowning moment of a woman's social life. "Protected by law" is the language of patriarchy. "The painful task of confessing" and "I became restless in my despair" come from the idiom of the Christian confessional. "The demon Slavery" derives from that strain of white evangelistic abolitionism that endorsed the stereotype of the degenerate slave to argue that the chattel system caused depravity.<sup>11</sup> Truly, what we have here is a nineteenth-century *heteroglossial* cornucopia,

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<sup>10</sup> The Cult of True Womanhood was the nineteenth-century values system in which white women were "promised happiness and power" if they possessed the virtues of piety, purity, submission, and domesticity (Welter 21-41).

<sup>11</sup> As Frederick Douglass wrote in 1856, "Opposing slavery and hating its victims has come to be a very common form of abolitionism" (Davis and Gates xviii).

but it has to be admitted that these hybrid idioms are not exactly placed in "challenging contact." Here, in defensively explaining her lapses from the standards of white women, Jacobs offers no critique of the Cult, the patriarchy, the Christian confessional, or abolitionist racism. It is by no means clear that the author juxtaposes and mimics the languages of powerful interests from a position of critical distance and disinvestment; and that raises the question of how liberating the practice of writing can be for Jacobs if it involves buying into or at least failing to extricate herself from a number of repressive discourses.

This issue is important, and to address it fully will require two extended arguments. First, we need to think about the particular "internalized" discourses in the larger context of the literary form that Jacobs employs. All of these discourses were prominent in the genre of the sentimental novel, that popular and influential vehicle with which white, middle-class, Christian women sought and gained a role on the public stage. As the research of Jean Fagan Yellin, Frances Smith Foster, William L. Andrews, Hazel Carby, and others has shown, it is too simplistic to say that Jacobs is merely pouring her life story into a mold created by, for, and about white women of an advantaged social class. Bakhtin reminds us that "artistic form, correctly understood, does not shape already prepared and

found content, but rather permits content to be found and seen for the first time" (1984, 43). Jacobs is trying to make her life's content "found and seen" by the potentially vast audience to which the sentimental novel was familiar, credible, and comprehensible. As she writes in the preface, "I ... earnestly desire to arouse the women of the North to a realizing sense of the condition of two millions of women in the South, still in bondage, suffering what I suffered, and most of them far worse" (1; also 29). Never before had a black woman sought to address *en masse* the huge readership of Susan Warner's The Wide, Wide World, Maria Susanna Cummins's The Lamplighter, and Harriet Beecher Stowe's Uncle Tom's Cabin. As a result, some concessions were necessary, not only the discourses in question, but also the use of melodramatic language, suspenseful passages, coincidental meetings, and tearful reunions. However, we have to recognize that some of the qualities that made the genre empowering for white women justify its appropriation by Jacobs. For one thing, the sentimental novel located cultural power, security, and respect in the role of motherhood; so in displaying the heroism of her maternal actions (i.e., rescuing her children from slavery), Jacobs makes the case for black women's equality in a new way, and within the values system of those she hopes to win over. Moreover, white women's fiction of the era had a profoundly didactic social function. Its heroines such as Little Eva



and Gerty Flint were drawn as moral exemplars meant to instruct and edify. It is a progressive step to give this didactic social function to a character who happens to be a black domestic worker and former slave. For with her leadership, decisiveness, and resilience, Linda Brent powerfully embodies a new model of heroism -- one far more assertive than the mainstream "feminine" ideal that had been applied to white women.

Suppose Jacobs had somehow conformed perfectly to those features of the sentimental tradition that are most antithetical to her life. Perhaps she would have written a novel that goes as follows: a young mulatto orphan of unknown parentage grows up in slavery. Because of her unusual beauty and grace, she is taught to read the Bible and protected from lustful slaves and poor white overseers by her pious mistress, Mrs. Flint. But when the mistress dies, a series of coincidences places Linda on a ship that gets windswept from North Carolina to New York. While waiting for her master's best friend, Mr. Sands, to retrieve her, the accidental fugitive lodges with an Aunt Jemima-figure who works for a wealthy Italian merchant named Giuseppe Brentano. The merchant tells Linda how, many years before, his unfortunate brother Luigi died of smallpox while travelling through the south with his infant daughter Lydia, who was never found. The slave girl thinks nothing of the tale. At first, neither does Mr. Sands, who is still

grieving from the death of his invalid wife. But on the train ride home, as he suddenly notices the surprising delicacy of Linda's almost snow-white skin, as he wonders how it could be that African blood is coursing through her veins, and as the names Linda and Lydia kick around in his head, he suddenly surmises the tragic and wonderful truth of it all. Linda is Luigi's lost daughter! Linda is white!! Back home, after posting letters to a few people who might be able to shed light on the young woman's origins, Mr. Sands tests Linda's virtue and intelligence. Naturally, she proves to be perfectly pious, perfectly pure, perfectly submissive, and perfectly fit for motherhood. After a series of misadventures in which she is sold down the river, Mr. Sands proves Linda's true race and rescues her again. They marry and embark on a gilded future that promises to be full of good fortune, loving children, and happy slaves.

Now that kind of sentimental novel would have erased the truth of Jacobs's life from her text. But that's not how the author employs the genre, despite her apparent acceptance of problematic values that come with it. Rather, Jacobs's approach to the sentimental novel falls more along the lines of the practice Bakhtin refers to as stylization:

Stylization presupposes style; that is, it presupposes the sum total of stylistic devices it reproduces did at one time possess a direct and unmediated intentionality and expressed an ultimate semantic authority. ... Stylization forces another person's referential (artistically referential) intention to serve its own purposes, that is, its new intentions. The stylizer uses

another's discourse precisely as other, and in doing so casts a slight shadow of objectification over it. To be sure, the discourse does not become an object. After all, what is important to the stylizer is the sum total of devices associated with the other's speech precisely as an expression of a particular point of view. *He works with someone else's point of view.* (my italics; 1984, 189)

In the passage in question, Jacobs works with the point of view implicit in the sentimental novel. She establishes an interior dialogue with the genre by raising the issue of what happens when we apply the values and conventions of a literary form coded "white female" to experiences that are most definitely "black female." The answer is that if Jacobs must bend in places, she makes the genre bend, too. Incidents expands the model of good motherhood to include the choices of the author, who is forced to break laws and hide from her young children for seven years to gain them their freedom. It celebrates collective resistance by women, as Jacobs is aided during her seven years in hiding by her grandmother and a friend named Betty.<sup>12</sup> It challenges white readers to imagine themselves in Linda's circumstances, reminding them, "You never knew what it is to be a slave; to be entirely unprotected by law or custom ..." (55). And it suggests that slave women face more relentless and inescapable attacks by men than do white

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<sup>12</sup> Jacobs also upholds a model of feminist solidarity by a Southern white woman -- the neighbor who temporarily shelters Jacobs and is applauded for her "deed of Christian womanhood" (100).

middle-class women. In these ways, the autobiography shows that sentimental novels, as written by white women, have few ready-made paradigms for presenting the life of a woman who physically has to fight off rape and who is legally prohibited from marrying into economic and social security. The book also offers concrete justification to Jacobs's claim that "the slave woman ought not to be judged by the same standards" as other women (56). But perhaps most important, Incidents does not end with the resolution of peril and conflict that usually concludes a sentimental novel. Instead, the autobiography shows that for a marginalized black woman, no such solution is possible. There can be no picture perfect ending. "My story ends with freedom," Jacobs writes famously, "not in the usual way, with marriage. I and my children are now free! ... and though that ... is not saying a great deal, it is a vast improvement in my condition" (201). Still, "the dream of [her] life is not yet realized" (201), for she and her children lack a home to call their own. This open ending challenges readers to become authors of social change, to translate their dissatisfaction at the heroine's incomplete final situation into real-life gains for the Linda Brents of their communities.

Thus, when we think about the problem of internalized discourses in the larger context of genre, we see that interior dialogue and stylization can blur formal boundaries

in beneficial ways. By assimilating discursive elements of the sentimental novel and the slave narrative (and here too Jacobs "stylizes") Jacobs sends a three-fold message. As a sentimental novel, Incidents suggests that African American women are not "Others," that the difficulties white women face in understanding their black sisters have to do with the culturally-determined paradigms through which white women view and black women are viewed. As one of the first slave narratives published by a woman, it portrays slave women as sisters in solidarity and resistance, not as meek and helpless victims (which the men's narratives typically imply).<sup>13</sup> And as neither a slave narrative nor a novel, it shows that African American women can and should conjure up their own literary space by using and modifying any and all traditions available to them. Although not every marginalized writer values and strives for such freedom of literary form, generic revision and innovation did become a signal feature of African American women's writing. Our Nig fuses a novelistic, third-person narration of Frado's life with autobiographical first-person elements such as the chapter titles "My Father's Death" and "Mag Smith, My

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<sup>13</sup> Consider Equiano: "I was often a witness to cruelty of every kind .... It was almost a constant practice with our clerks, and other whites, to commit violent depredations on the chastity of the female slaves; and these I was, though with reluctance, obliged to submit to at all times, being unable to help them" (73-4). Violence against helpless African-American women becomes a register of the author's humiliation in slavery, since he cannot protect and provide for them.

Mother." Iola Leroy eschews the conventions of realism and naturalism that were admired in late nineteenth-century literature to create what I will later show to be a novel of conversation. The magazine novels of Pauline Hopkins merge such disparate genres as the historical novel and the popular romance (Hagar's Daughter) and the ghost story, the travel narrative, and the black nationalist tract (Of One Blood). In a society that strove to create hierarchical social categories into which the marginalized would be relegated, such hybrid texts not only overleap the contemporary boundaries of genre, but make a critique (admittedly subtle) of the notion of rigid categories.

I believe that this argument is the best way to resolve the issue of internalized discourses, but there is also a suggestive second way to think about the problem. This will require a more detailed discussion about *heteroglossia*, which Bakhtin refers to in three somewhat contradictory ways.<sup>14</sup> In some places, the Russian critic alludes to *heteroglossia* descriptively as the condition of all language in society.<sup>15</sup> At other times, he discusses *heteroglossia*

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<sup>14</sup> I am indebted to private conversations with Craig Scott for this distinction.

<sup>15</sup> For example, Bakhtin writes, "... at any given moment of its historical existence, language is heteroglot from top to bottom .... As a result of the work done by all these stratifying forces in language, there are no 'neutral' words and forms -- words and forms that can belong to 'no one'; language has been completely taken over, shot through with intentions and accents. For any individual consciousness living it, language is not an abstract system

(and novelization, hybridization, and carnivalization) normatively as a rhetorical strategy marginalized authors can and should employ consciously to expose the falsity of empowered social discourses.<sup>16</sup> In still other writings, Bakhtin places the greatest emphasis on the idea that texts become polyvocal via one's fundamental and subconscious alignment as a social outsider, and not by authorial intention. Like the Harlequin rogue in Menippean satire, the *heteroglossial* author is "in life, but not of it, life's perpetual spy and reflector" (1981, 161). The authorial rogue does not necessarily "understand" the conventions and idioms of the world. Rather, they are conveyed from a non-committed, and perhaps even ignorant, perspective.

In other words, in this third sense of *heteroglossia*, a "novelistic" author such as Jacobs should not be expected to

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of normative forms but rather a concrete heteroglot conception of the world" (1981, 291, 293).

<sup>16</sup> Bakhtin writes, "Heteroglossia is another's speech in another's language, serving to express *authorial intentions* [my emphasis] but in a refracted way" (1981, 324). Also, "This process -- experimenting by turning persuasive discourse into speaking persons -- becomes especially important in those cases where a struggle against such images has already begun, where someone is striving to liberate himself from the influence of such an image and its discourse by means of objectification, or is striving to expose the limitations of both image and discourse. The importance of struggling with another's discourse, its influence in the history of an individual's coming to ideological consciousness, is enormous .... Novelistic images, profoundly double-linguaged, are born in such soil, seek to objectivize the struggle with all types of internally persuasive alien discourse that had at one time held sway over the author" (1981, 348).

reduce discourse to a single politically-correct perspective or an ideological common denominator. He or she does not strive for the "single-voiced hegemony" that Bakhtin saw as the aspiration of poets (1981, 297). Instead, the author participates in the text with "almost no direct language of his own" (1981, 47). Language is set free to speak itself, in all its polyvocality, with no domineering authorial slant. Even if the author at some level does penetrate potentially devastating internalized myths, the greater ideological commitment is to representing the polyphony of multiple social discourses. For Bakhtin (and here the notion of agency does slip in), "human thought becomes genuine thought," not by suppressing the oppositional, but by coming in "living contact with another and alien thought, a thought embodied in someone else's voice ... in someone else's consciousness expressed in discourse" (1984, 88). Of course, he recognizes that "consciousness must choose a language, yet [more importantly] all exist in [the author], and no attempt [is made] to coordinate them" (1981, 295). The novelistic author "passes from language to language reflexively" with no strong sense of agency (1981, 296).<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Or as Bakhtin writes of Dostoevsky:

*Everywhere there is an intersection, consonance, or interruption of rejoinders in the open dialogue by rejoinders in the heroes' internal dialogue. Everywhere a specific sum total of ideas, thoughts, and words is passed through several unmerged voices, sounding differently in each. The object of authorial aspirations is certainly*



Thus, because the *heteroglossial* author (in the third sense) does not function as an ideological filter, he or she must not be expected systematically and willfully to dismantle repressive discourses such as the Cult of True Womanhood.

This line of thought has some advantages as a framework for understanding internalized repressive discourses. It counters the critical impulse towards making the dichotomous judgment that this or that author is either an ideological savant or an ideological dupe. It presumes reading to be a more active and potentially subversive practice, as readers must take responsibility for making the connections and comparisons *heteroglossia* affords. It suggests that the oppressed do not necessarily view their lives narrowly, only in terms of their oppression (as we who are not oppressed tend to do in analyzing their creative expression). And finally, and perhaps most important, it recognizes that because one's ideological position is not perfectly defined on every issue, writing itself becomes part of a movement to greater understanding. Jacobs's struggles with the Cult of True Womanhood can be understood as a process of coming to awareness rather than a reflection of pre-formed

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not this sum total of ideas in itself, as something neutral and identical with itself. No, the object is precisely *the passing of a theme through many and various voices*, its rigorous and, so to speak, irrevocable *multi-voicedness* and *vari-voicedness*. The very distribution of voices and their interaction is what matters to Dostoevsky. (his italics; 1984, 265)

consciousness. As Bakhtin writes, "The ideological becoming of a human being ... is the process of selectively assimilating the words of others" (1981, 341). Through that process, "one's own discourse and one's own voice ... will sooner or later begin to liberate themselves from the authority of another's discourse" (1981, 348).

But there are drawbacks to this formulation. For one thing, in the *heteroglossial* text (whether the product of authorial intention or unconscious alignment), all points of view get aired, and it is up to the discerning reader to recognize contradictory strands of thought. The implication is that readers will discern honest discourse from hypocrisy by seeing the two held up against one another. That is a fine ideal, and I think that it can have this effect in certain settings -- i.e., university seminars -- where the liberal traditions of close reading and intellectual debate are strong. But the truly *heteroglossial* text may be too diffuse and too chaotic to have a revolutionary effect, a transformative effect, in society at-large. Recruits to a freedom movement cannot be expected to unearth radical or subversive material through the complex machinations of literary exegesis. In the crucible of oppression, amidst the many competing claims on people's time and attention, direct, unclouded, forceful expression is often required. At some point -- witness Harriet Wilson depicting Northern racism -- the oppressed must stand up and say "no" in

unambiguous terms. At some point -- witness David Walker's impassioned call for rebellion -- the oppressed must opt for decisive language in the name of truth to their lived experience and the need for collective action. At some point -- witness Frederick Douglass -- the oppressed must issue carefully calibrated messages to precisely identified groups and constituencies. And at some point -- witness Jacobs and the Cult of True Womanhood -- the oppressed must uphold the validity of certain master discourses (even at the cost of ideological impurity), for the larger good of using their power and authority in the struggle for liberation. All of this requires some attempt at controlling the Word, at creating centripetal narratives pulling inward towards order or coherent, focussed messages. For example, in a radical and well-publicized speech at the 1843 National Negro Convention in Buffalo, Henry Highland Garnet told an African American audience about the need for clear, univocal expression in the fight against their oppressors: "Tell them in language which they cannot fail to understand, of the exceeding sinfulness of slavery" (230).

Moreover, if we are to invoke the third definition of *heteroglossia* to "excuse" internalized repressive discourses, we necessarily evaporate authorial intention as a part of the process of emancipatory writing. The problem with that move, as any activist knows, is that, along with

awareness, intention is the lifeblood of a freedom movement; it is the foundation of an individual's defiance and resistance and, when publicly displayed, one person's intention can inspire large groups to act. As both a speech-act and a social act, it is significant that Harriet Jacobs defines to "arouse the women of the North" (1) as the intention of her work. It is significant, as we have seen, that throughout the nineteenth century African American writers asked their sisters and brothers to use writing as a weapon in the struggle against injustice. And it is significant that Garnet forcefully reminds African Americans in that 1843 speech that their intent to end slavery is the key to its demise:

It is an old and true saying that, "if hereditary bondmen would be free, they must themselves strike the blow." You can plead your own cause, and do the work of emancipation better than any others. ... [Go] to your lordly enslavers and tell them plainly, that you are *determined to be free* [his italics] .... Let your motto be resistance! resistance! RESISTANCE! No oppressed people have ever secured their liberty without resistance. What kind of resistance you had better make, you must decide by the circumstances that surround you, and according to the suggestion of expediency. (228-233)

I believe collective willpower and the determination to be free have been engines of black liberation in this country and that the traditional confidence with which African Americans have viewed writing as a social act of transformation is based on the assumption of authorial agency -- the belief that the well-chosen use of language

and narrative can enhance their lives. "Nothing will be done until people of good will put their bodies and their souls in motion," Dr. King preached in his final Sunday sermon (1968, 275); such motion, whether in the streets or the classroom or at an aspiring writer's desk, does not occur without choice.

In any political struggle for equity and justice, the failure of subordinate groups to govern the meanings and implications of their words usually means that opponents will turn those words against them. The marginalized need to be sophisticated in their uses of language; otherwise, and the recent case of the rap artist Sister Souljah is instructive, they will find themselves back-peddalling, caricatured, discredited, and ultimately pitted against groups that could and should be their allies. Thus, in the nineteenth century, interior dialogue was a discursive practice that allowed African Americans *not simply to bring together* in texts divergent ideologically-charged points of view and a range of implied audiences, but, within the context of limitation and boundaries, *to exert control over this material*. Interior dialogue as I define it is primarily a purposeful narrative strategy -- not a narrative happenstance -- deriving from the needs of an oppressed people for multileveled discourse, multidirected messages, and generic flexibility to complement their more confrontational discourses.

## 4.

Authentic thinking, thinking that is concerned about reality, does not take place in ivory tower isolation, but only in communication.

Paulo Freire (64)

Confrontational and interior dialogue give nineteenth-century African American authors a rare blend of polemical directness and political subtlety with which to make their voices heard by a range of white audiences. Complementing and inclusive of them is a third form of textual dialogue -- communal dialogue -- that grew in prominence as African American literacy and publishing increased throughout the century.<sup>18</sup> Broadly speaking, communal dialogue is the array of discursive practices with which an oppressed people address and debate each other, define themselves as a community, share their history, and sustain a common culture.

In published texts by African Americans in the nineteenth-century, communal dialogue takes many forms. Authors allude to the works of African American forebears, revisiting their themes and ideas. Likewise, they adopt and modify the tropes, language, and genres of black ancestors, thereby creating a literary tradition. They represent and

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<sup>18</sup> In 1865, no more than 7 percent of adult African Americans were literate; by 1870, the figure was 20 percent; by 1890, it was 44 percent; by 1900, it was 56 percent (Levine 156).

translate into narrative form such oral practices as spirituals, signifying, call-and-response sermonizing, and verbal word play. They tell and retell their collective past (especially slavery), revising when they obtain greater license for candor, and they preserve traces of the cultural present for their progeny.

But communal dialogue is not just a vehicle for recording and transmitting culture in printed form. As noted at the beginning of this chapter, nineteenth-century African American authors viewed writing as an instrument of social transformation. Besides writing against stereotypes and repressive views, as I have shown, they also wrote to enhance their collective cultural identity and to shape the race into a more potent political force. To that end, communal dialogue is manifested in the hundreds of works that challenge readers to commit themselves to social change; in the portrayal of innumerable characters drawn as good or bad role models or drawn, like Wilson's Frado, to communicate the cultural experience of African Americans as well as to contradict pervasive stereotypes; in appeals to readers to "uplift the race" through education, religion, and moral righteousness; and in efforts to promote a distinct black consciousness, such as Martin Delany's 1859 novel of insurrection, Blake, and Octavia V. Rogers Albert's 1890 collection of oral testimonies about slavery, The House

of Bondage.<sup>19</sup> Importantly, communal dialogue also is manifested in the rich tradition of discussion and debate in published works. Authors work out with each other and their African American readers a plethora of nuanced views on issues such as resistance strategies, miscegenation, Christianity, African colonization, the best name for the race, and the proper education of children. On some issues, after a period of time the dialogue evaporates, indicating the emergence of a consensus (i.e., African colonization); on others, the dialogue spans the century and continues today (i.e., the issue of separatism vs. integration).

The communal elements of African American writing is, of course, an enormous subject that has been explored in great depth and breadth. It cannot be discussed comprehensively in one dissertation. What matters for our purposes is this: as we seek to appreciate the ways that nineteenth-century African American writers resisted oppression and limiting situations, we must remain alert to those conversations and cultural exchanges, deep as a river, that are the basis of communal awakenings and action.

One example of communal dialogue that can be examined in a study of this scope is the recurrence (especially in novels) of scenes in which African American characters talk

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<sup>19</sup> Albert tries to inspire African American readers to develop a stronger appreciation for their deliverance from bondage by a loving Christian God, similar to the appreciation for divine deliverance that she admires in Judaism (130).



to each other about political and racial concerns. Blake includes several such scenes. In one, the fugitive slave Henry Blake recruits other slaves to join him in flight after they discuss why "good masters" who lessen the sting of slavery are really the worst masters (125-30). In another scene, Blake, after emigrating to Cuba to lead a slave revolution, talks with a comrade named Placido about the need to "drop the religion of [their] oppressors," while preserving the scriptures as a guide and Christ as an exemplar (196-7). In The Marrow of Tradition, Charles Chesnutt's novel of post-reconstruction terrorism against blacks, the laborer Josh Green tells the bright black doctor William Miller about the need for violent resistance to white violence, while the physician tries to impress upon Green the importance of prudence and even forgiveness (109-114). In Contending Forces, Pauline Hopkins depicts a sewing circle in which a number of women discuss "the place which a virtuous woman takes in upbuilding a race" (148). Later in the novel, Hopkins draws a detailed portrait of a meeting of the American Colored League (248-273), where five or six speakers publicly debate the appropriate community response to lynching and economic inequality.

In such scenes, communal dialogue is displayed for readers as a critical social act to help African Americans grow stronger as a people and gain control of their destiny. What Contending Forces celebrates, for example, is a model

of engaged *political* conversation, where words imply the need for deeds, where action and reflection are mutually sustaining, where people converse as equals, and where, as Freire writes, thinking takes place not in "ivory tower isolation, but only in communication" (64). Importantly, in Hopkins's novel, it is not only the militant speakers whose contributions point to the need for collective action and change. In the meeting of the American Colored League, Will Smith (modelled after W.E.B. Du Bois) calls for agitation and greater political rights (272), while Dr. Arthur Lewis (modelled after Booker T. Washington) calls for the cultivation of skills that will make African Americans valuable employees for whites (250). Although Hopkins sides with Will Smith's vision and values, the author does not denigrate Lewis's contribution to the dialogue. Rather, her moderate character also finds the status quo untenable and advocates sustained, collective action by African Americans.

Communal dialogue is a prerequisite for the emergence of the voice and unity of a people. Only through the sharing of experiences and ideas can a community awaken to the real nature of their oppression, its collective quality, and, most significantly, the collective perception of their oppression. It is from these awakenings, the fruits of dialogue, that a community commits itself to seeking out and taking action against the root causes of oppression. Freire calls this process of coming-to-awareness/coming-to-action

"conscientizaçao" (19-22) -- and that is exactly the praxis depicted in these scenes of communal dialogue: the emergence of a people.

Frances E. W. Harper's Iola Leroy, an historically expansive novel of slavery and reconstruction, contrasts the African American characters' capacity for communal dialogue with white characters' inability to talk openly and honestly about society as it has been constructed. Near the end of the novel, a former slaveholder named Dr. Latrobe pontificates on black inferiority to the mulatto doctor Dr. Latimer, a young medic whom Latrobe admires without realizing his race. After Latimer informs the Southern racist that "I am one of them" (238), Latrobe storms away without speaking (his final appearance in the novel). The white character Alfred Lorraine also closes off dialogue. When, before the Civil War, his fellow French Creole Eugene Leroy tries to discuss his desire to marry his quadroon slave Marie (the union from which the heroine Iola is born), Lorraine dismisses the desire as "Madness and folly inconceivable" (72). Years later, after Eugene dies, Lorraine acts on his bigotry in predatory fashion by returning his friend's wife and their octroon children Iola, Harry, and Gracie (who dies) into bondage.

Harper shows that even earnest, ostensibly fair-minded whites face profound difficulties in maintaining genuine dialogue with those they have been conditioned to regard as

their genetic and cultural inferiors. After their marriage, Eugene Leroy represses the reality of Marie's ancestry by thinking of her only in ethereal, non-human terms, like "something ... in old cathedrals, lighting up the beauty of a saintly face" (69); as a result, for years he refuses to discuss with his wife the fact that, according to the law of the land, their children should be in fetters. During the Civil War, the white northerner Dr. Gresham falls in love with Iola, who works for the Union as a nurse after being liberated. Gresham throws "a halo of romance" (110) around Iola, denying the social significance of their racial difference. In the conversation when she declines his offer of marriage, Gresham cannot comprehend her explanation of why she would prefer to "serve [her] race" than marry him and try to pass as white (230-236). In another scene, the Union officer Captain Sybil, a decent man who eventually dies in combat, cannot listen to and learn from the former slave Robert Johnson because the officer is unable to modify his ingrained notions of race. Captain Sybil declares that it is "a burning shame" that someone who looks as white as Johnson was enslaved (44). When Johnson tries to educate him about his lived experience in slavery, the officer is only able to muse about the bondage system in an overly-lyrical, intellectualized manner, "as if speaking to

himself" (47).<sup>20</sup> Again and again, Iola Leroy shows that whites like Dr. Gresham and Captain Sybil must face consequences for having created a race-obsessed society with its racially-determined falsehoods and inequalities; they are unable to get "in deep" with those they have objectified (271), to expand themselves as human beings by genuinely hearing the voices of others, no matter how much they may desire that intimacy.

Conversely, Iola Leroy depicts communal dialogue as the basis of African American solidarity, culture, and resistance. From the first words of the novel, the characters' conversations eclipse the narrator's voice. The book opens with a coded exchange between the slaves Robert Johnson and Tom Anderson:

"Good mornin', Bob; how's butter 'dis  
mornin'?"  
"Fresh; just as fresh, as fresh can be."  
"Oh, glory!" (7)

In fact, the two men are actually passing along information about Union battle victories over their captors. Their conversation represents a convergence of communal dialogue and interior dialogue, dramatizing the need, at times, for the oppressed to invest alternative meanings in the language of the oppressor. Such linguistic freedom may seem small

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<sup>20</sup> For example, Captain Sybil regards the faith of the slaves as "a golden thread woven amid the sombre [sic] tissues of their lives. A ray of light shimmering amid the gloom of their condition" (47). The former slave tries to tell him that he does not want a faith that justifies servitude, but the officer does not respond.

against the captivity of slavery, but it has pragmatic benefits, in that it allows forbidden conversations; and it has moral benefits, contributing to an oppressed people's culture and serving as a living enactment of their on-going non-compliance with the hegemonic order.

In several places in this novel of conversation, Harper depicts five or more characters discussing short- and long-term goals for the African American community. The first two instances take place secretly among the enslaved "folk" in McCullough's woods (15-23) and in Uncle Daniel's cabin (24-31), where the dialogue concerns if and how the slaves should flee the South to help the Union cause. Harper shows that although there is disagreement among them, the community remains unified and the conversations are productive. Those who choose to stay, such as Uncle Daniel, do not resent those who take flight (Johnson and Anderson), while those who flee the plantation communicate their respect for their comrades, listening to and accepting the explanations for remaining behind given by Uncle Daniel, Aunt Katie, and Ben Tunnel.

If in Harper's novel communal dialogue allows members of the community to share taboo information publicly and to retain their solidarity despite differences of opinion, it also functions as a mighty engine for transmitting and preserving culture. In McCullough's woods, Anderson tells a story about "a real Guinea man" named Potobombra who was

beaten savagely for resisting religious conversion; while dying, he convinced his master to issue him "free papers" so he would not have to return to Africa as a slave (22-3). At the meeting in the cabin, Uncle Daniel tells the story of a cruel mistress named Old Miss Gundover who sent Aunt Katie out to the fields the day the slave woman's child died and then buried the infant while Aunt Katie was working (27). Near the end of the war, Robert Johnson hears Iola singing a hymn his mother had sung in slavery (140-41); that shared bit of culture helps them figure out that Robert must be Iola's uncle, whom she had never met, and when the Confederacy surrenders they team up to locate other family members scattered by slavery and war. Later, communal dialogue again reunites family members, when Robert finds his long-lost mother, sold during his infancy, after she stands up and tells the trials of her life at a church service (180-82).

Harper also depicts the salutary effects of communal conversation in a remarkable chapter entitled "Friends in Council" (246-61) that comes near the end of the novel. Convened during reconstruction, the council brings together about twelve new leaders of the African American community, half of whom appear nowhere else in the book. They include Bishop Tunster, who advocates emigration to Africa; Professor Langhorne, who cites African Americans' investment in building the country as grounds for staying; Professor

Gradnor, who advocates missionary efforts to convert Africans; Mr. Stillman and Hon. Dugdale, who argue for meeting unmet needs at home before expending resources overseas; Lucille Delany, a woman of unmixed African origin who calls for increased political action, stresses that America's resources are African Americans' resources, and contributes the poem "A Rallying Cry" to the proceedings; Mr. Forest, who pushes for economic warfare against whites; Rev. Cantnor, whose paper "Patriotism" asserts that whites are the "master race" and that American whites are "the broadest, most Christian, and most humane" of all caucasians (249); Iola, who calls for greater education and social activism of women and offers a reverie of hope for the future; Iola's mother Marie, who proclaims that African Americans' suffering will contribute to their "human development" (256); and Rev. Carmicle, who fears that African Americans are losing their moral standards. The scene of mixed-gender, mixed-generational, mixed-faith, mixed-complexion interaction shows how dialogue allows the community to air different views, to understand its shared history, to appreciate the variety within its ranks, to nourish an ethos of praxis, and simply to have an enjoyable evening. No resolution is reached or required among the varied points of view. No votes are taken, no members are silenced (not even Reverend Cantnor), and no dissension is bred from contrary opinions. Rather, at the culmination of



this novel of conversation, the meeting dramatizes true dialogue -- dialogue emerging from an oppressed people's experience -- as the source of their strength and solidarity.

An important qualification. We should remember that Iola Leroy is a didactic novel. One could argue that while Harper portrays unrestricted communal dialogue as a praxis of emergence and liberation, the author does seem to endorse a more narrow set of values. For example, of all the "folk," only Robert actually joins the high-powered "Friends in Council," and he does not open his mouth until walking home with Iola, when he calls the meeting an advancement over the meetings of the "bygone days" (260) in which he had been a leading participant; one might object to Harper's apparent view that the African American community must be "uplifted" by an educated black elite. Also, one could argue that the scenes of conversation implicitly valorize the view that standard English is proper English and that men are better suited than women for the heavy lifting of social change. Perhaps this text about talking even proffers an ideology of cultural inferiority, for no speaker questions the thesis that African Americans need to be "uplifted." These caveats are not insignificant. However, my claim is not that communal dialogue as Harper or anyone else depicts it or engages in it allows for emancipation from every restrictive value or ideology; no text and no

practices of dialogue can do that. We must appreciate all forms of textual dialogue -- communal, interior, and confrontational -- within the reality of social limits, and judge the extent to which they create opportunities for greater personal, sovereign, and civic freedom.

Although I have discussed the three forms of dialogue individually, it is important to remember that these rhetorical practices are not discrete from one another. After all, confrontational dialogue and interior dialogue are both part of African Americans' communal culture and literary tradition. Both derive in part from African Americans' common experience of oppression, including the common need for sophisticated verbal and rhetorical strategies. And both address the common quest of African Americans, generation after generation, to secure greater power and opportunity within a society that views them as "minorities." As a result, even when the primary audiences are extracommunal, confrontational and interior dialogue also function as forms of communal dialogue, perhaps creating pride, recognition, or humor among readers. The flip side is true as well. Because communal dialogue presupposes and projects the existence of a shared culture, the public act of addressing one's community -- of recognizably inscribing one's community as implied readers in a text -- can also be an act of contestation. It confronts and combats the argument frequently levied against

marginalized people that their culture is pathological, schizophrenic, anti-intellectual, or in some other way to blame for social conditions that are actually the result of social and economic forces.

Thus, through the use of three interrelated and overlapping forms of dialogue, African Americans resisted and made gains against a mainstream society that was profoundly hostile to their collective interests. From our contemporary perspective, it is easy to neglect the basic fact of African American oppression (even when we know better), the reality that Harriet Jacobs, Harriet Wilson, and Frederick Douglass lived within a society organized on every front to hold them back. Precisely because African American writers did not resign themselves to silence and censorship, it is easy to forget that society tried to impose both upon them. Precisely because they did not allow their writing to be overly-determined by mainstream racism, it is easy to overlook the pervasiveness of those attitudes. And precisely because they did not yield to all strictures of law and custom in their writing, it is easy to lose sight of just how severe those strictures really were. Ironically, the discursive result that the three forms of dialogue helped to achieve -- the breaking of rules and the shattering of boundaries -- can minimize to readers the very forces authors labored to overcome, and thus the full dimensions of their achievement.

## Chapter Five: The Fungible Text

Measures change, principles never.  
Frederick Douglass (1881, 284)

I write freely of myself, not from  
choice, but because I have, by my case,  
been morally forced into thus writing.  
Frederick Douglass (1892, 511)

### 1.

One of the classic autobiographical moments in nineteenth-century literature comes in the final scene of Frederick Douglass's Narrative of the Life of an American Slave, published in 1845. There, the author describes the momentous step, as a fugitive from bondage, of rising at an 1841 abolitionist meeting in Nantucket and, for the first time, addressing an audience made up primarily of whites:

... while attending an anti-slavery convention in August, 1841, I felt strongly moved to speak, and was at the same time much urged to do so by Mr. William C. Coffin, a gentleman who had heard me speak in the colored people's meeting in New Bedford. It was a severe cross, and I took it up reluctantly. The truth was, I felt myself a slave, and the idea of speaking to white people weighed me down. I spoke for but a few moments, when I felt a degree of freedom, and said what I desired with considerable ease. From that time until now, I have been engaged in leading the cause of my brethren -- with what success, I leave those acquainted with my labors to decide. (151)

Douglass draws on the Narrative's recurring theme that enslavement is typically a captivity not only of the body, but also of the mind and the soul. Just as the enslaved boy

must teach himself the value of freedom by reading The Columbian Orator and the enslaved teenager teach himself the value of resistance by warding off Edward Covey's vicious blows, the adult fugitive also must free himself from a set of mind forg'd manacles. To speak in public, the nascent leader must break through the *captivare* of internalized doubts as to whether he deserves the attention of white listeners. He must cast off the mantle of slavery. In this final scene of the autobiography, Douglass shows himself accomplishing that self-liberation and confronting his destiny. Frederick Bailey grows into Frederick Douglass. The protagonist becomes the eloquent speaker praised by William Lloyd Garrison in the preface, a man with the self-possession to claim the public stage, and to write the autobiography of which this transformative scene is the finale.<sup>1</sup>

Ten years later, when Douglass revised and updated his life story under the title My Bondage and My Freedom, he represented the speech rather differently:

Mr. William C. Coffin, a prominent abolitionist in those days of trial, had heard me speaking to my colored friends, in the little schoolhouse on Second street, New Bedford, where we worshiped. He sought me out in the crowd, and invited me to say a few words at the convention .... My speech on this occasion is about the only one I ever made, of which I do not remember a single

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<sup>1</sup> Garrison opens the preface with his own account of the speech, describing "the extraordinary emotion it excited" in him and "the powerful impression it created upon a crowded auditory" (34).

connected sentence. It was with the utmost difficulty that I could stand erect, or that I could command and articulate two words without hesitation and stammering. I trembled in every limb. I am not sure that my embarrassment was not the most effective part of my speech, if speech it could be called .... Mr. Garrison followed me, taking me as his text; and now, whether I had made an eloquent speech on behalf of freedom or not, his was one never to be forgotten by those who heard it. (358)

The variations are striking. The 1855 version suggests that Douglass's challenge is to surmount the *captivare* of stage fright, not the shame and internalized inferiority featured in the earlier narrative. In the second account, he does not overcome his fear and attain a "degree of freedom," as in the original. He does not even possess the evening's triumphant speech anymore; that belongs to Garrison, unmentioned in 1845, who goes on to "take" Douglass as the "text" of his own stirring oration. And that leads to the most important change: in the 1855 autobiography, Douglass chooses not to portray the Nantucket speech as the moment when he makes the great leap from object to subject, from protagonist to author; instead, it simply marks his initiation into the abolition movement.

Douglass communicates several messages by re-presenting the Nantucket anecdote, rather than replicating or omitting it. First, no longer does the author suggest (to readers of all races) that the reflexive response of a fugitive slave to a white audience (and by extension to white readers) is to feel inferior to them. Second, the revision ensures that

a speaking opportunity provided by white abolitionists is no longer shown as the landmark moment when Douglass gained the personal and ideological readiness to have a public voice.

Third, combined with other material in the 1855 autobiography, this revision presents the darkening of Douglass's attitudes towards the Garrisonians during the ten-year period between the two autobiographies -- his opinion that, under their control, he was their "text," not an independent speaker. Finally, the revision implies (to readers familiar with both autobiographies) that the 1845 account is not, in a strict factual sense, the truth.

And therein lies the great contemporary problem raised by this re-presentation. We modern readers have come to regard autobiography as a fictive art. We are comfortable analyzing scenes in autobiographies as *constructions* of a truth -- drawn to have particular rhetorical or thematic effects -- and not necessarily as mimetic reflections of the truth. However, as noted in the previous chapter, texts by African Americans in the antebellum period were expected to be honest and accurate depictions of honorable lives. Nothing was more important to authors than the acceptance of their works at face value by white audiences. Of course, the rhetorical challenge was not to write the truth and nothing but the truth, but to make everything written appear reliable (even upon hostile scrutiny), given the various audiences' imperfect knowledge of slavery, the South,

African Americans, and the author's life. In this instance, Douglass does the unthinkable -- creating published evidence of inconsistency, and doing so in the arena of personal feelings, which otherwise would have been incontrovertible. He seems almost to flaunt the ethos of veracity that pervades antebellum African American autobiography as he makes himself vulnerable to the charge of dishonesty. Why would he do that?

One answer is that antebellum African American authors developed a multifaceted regard for the social power of the published work. They believed that the purpose of writing was not necessarily to create original, sacrosanct monuments to beauty, truth, humanity, nature, or God, but to create texts that had great instrumental value. They wrote works that could perform useful functions in an oppressive society. While one of those functions was to communicate their own authority -- to ring true -- that was not the only task that mattered. Douglass and others also valued published texts as fungible resources that could be strategically revised and re-inserted into public discourse, allowing for the advancement of new arguments or the refinement of old ones. This quality was critical because, as a group, antebellum African Americans faced evolving forms and degrees of oppression, with their social and ideological restrictions loosening or tightening in



unpredictable ways.<sup>2</sup> All the major debates relevant to African Americans -- whether about biological determinism, miscegenation, African colonization, slavery, or Negro rights -- twisted and turned during the tumultuous years before and during the Civil War. If, for example, it was politically expedient during the early years of the abolition movement for African American writers to suggest that people of African descent were peaceful, passive, and forgiving, they also needed to be able to contradict these stereotypes later to make the critical case for the right of blacks to fight in the Union army. If at some moments in the 1850s African Americans needed to hold the Republicans' feet to the fire and contradict the racist ideology with which party leaders courted the support of Barnburner Democrats, Whigs, and Know-Nothings, they also needed to be ready at other times to bite their tongues and endorse a John C. Frémont or an Abraham Lincoln because those options were best. Engaged in a Gramscian war of position, some authors brilliantly re-worked published texts with great sensitivity to the changing contours of oppression and

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<sup>2</sup> For example, in the North during the twenty-five years up to and including the Civil War, the experience of oppression for free Negroes and fugitive slaves altered through such developments as the evolution of the Liberty, Free Soil, and Republican parties; the rise of abolitionism, nativism, and sectionalism; federal and state debates and compromises concerning the expansion of slavery and black rights; the passage of the Fugitive Slave Law in 1850; the bleeding of Kansas in the mid-1850s; the Dred Scott decision in 1857, and the events and evolving public perception of the War.

political opportunity, keenly aware of the necessity that their voices remain audible and credible in the country's white-dominated public discourse. This chapter looks at the ways in which Frederick Douglass, Josiah Henson, and William Wells Brown use the "fungible text" to their advantage.

## 2.

In the preface to the 1845 Narrative, Garrison introduces Douglass as a near paragon of human excellence: "in physical proportion and stature commanding and exact -- in intellect richly endowed -- in natural eloquence a prodigy -- in soul manifestly 'created but a little lower than angels'" (34). But he also employs patronizing stereotypes that would have put white readers at ease. Douglass is portrayed as "trembling for his safety" (34) in Nantucket and as one who needed "hope and courage [instilled] into his mind" to become a lecturing agent for the American Anti-Slavery Society (35). In his four years at the pulpit, Garrison reports, Douglass has carried "himself with gentleness and meekness, yet with true manliness of character" (36). The autobiography, which is "entirely his own production," reflects that balanced and non-judgmental demeanor, for "Nothing has been set down in malice" (38). Furthermore, in his authenticating role as a white evaluator of the author's talents, Garrison employs a

condescending tone suggesting that both he and the audience are intellectually superior to Douglass: "considering how long and dark was the career he had to run as a slave, -- how few have been his opportunities to improve his mind since he broke his iron fetters, -- [the Narrative] is ... highly credible to his head and his heart" (38). The father of New England abolitionism also plays to the common stereotype of black slaves as a mentally inferior lot by relating the story of a white sailor enslaved in Africa who "had lost all reasoning power, [and] could only utter some savage gibberish between Arabic and English." Garrison's commentary: "Admitting this to have been an extraordinary case of mental deterioration, it proves at least that the white slave can sink as low in the scale of humanity as the black one" (37). It is reasonable to assume that here the abolitionist leader's main purpose is to prepare readers to receive Douglass sympathetically. But that clearly is not the only function of the preface. For, intermingled with the legitimizing of Douglass are myriad fiery sentences and paragraphs attacking the peculiar institution. Garrison does not end his essay by commenting upon Douglass or his achievement, but by issuing a forthright challenge to readers to choose the side of "down-trodden victims" over the "man-stealers" (42) and then closing with the movement's slogan, "NO COMPROMISE WITH SLAVERY! NO UNION WITH SLAVEHOLDERS!" (42). The implication is that Douglass's

autobiography matters solely as an abolitionist manifesto -- for what it says and shows about slaves and slavery -- and nothing else.

Pragmatically, Douglass situates much of the Narrative within a Garrisonian aesthetic. To "prove" he had been a slave (which is one reason the abolitionists wanted him to write the book), he names names and identifies places from his bondage in Maryland. In the main, he presents a silhouetted self-portrait, casting himself as a Christian model of courage and virtue who retained his manhood and did not become bitter towards all whites. Rhetorically, he employs an evangelistic style of exhortation and occasional spiritual introspection with which the audience would have been familiar. Readers probably would have admired his loyal defense of Christianity as an antislavery force, particularly in the appendix, and his near-utopian portrayal of New Bedford (and the North as a whole [145-50]). Nothing is said about African American efforts at solidarity and self-determination, most notably the landmark 1843 convention that he attended in Buffalo. In fact, in accord with Garrisonian praxis, he displays no confidence in the political process, comparing unctuous slaves who compete to please their overseers to "office-seekers in the political parties [who] seek to please and deceive the people" (57), and ignoring the contemporary debate about whether the

Liberty party should expand its political base beyond radical abolitionists (Foner 1970, 78-81).

Surely the strongest trace of Garrison's influence is reflected in the overall focus of the Narrative. As Garrison built the movement, he sought to attract middle-income, Christian whites, including women. Because his goal was more to create a crusade than a coalition, his preferred means of recruitment was moral suasion rather than political debate. To this end, the Narrative is organized to transform readers into iron-willed abolitionists, using rhetorical strategies tailored to the concerns and values of Garrison's target audience. For example, Douglass plays up the victimization of slave women, sometimes employing sentimental rhetoric (91-93),<sup>3</sup> while also arguing that slavery attacks the womanhood of whites like Sophia Auld (77-78). Working to create bonds of sympathy with his audience, he shares his heartbreak about being a "slave for life" (83) and the subject of Covey's slave breaking (101-5). Toward this goal of stoking red-hot emotional responses, the first chapter sets the precedent. A brilliantly constructed polemic against slavery, it begins with the evocation of sympathy for the enslaved child whose name, date of birth, and ancestry have been stolen from him (playing off the standard opening in autobiographies by

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<sup>3</sup> Douglass portrays violent or unkind treatment of slave women including Aunt Hester (52), his grandmother (91-93), Henny (99), and Caroline (105).

whites), and it closes with the riveting double image of young Fred witnessing the brutal whipping of Aunt Hester (52).

The flogging scene is just one example of what William McFeely calls Douglass's "parables of slavery" (6). Every single parable -- the teenager watching ships depart from the Chesapeake Bay (106), the valuation of slaves as property after a master dies (89-92), the disruption of the slaves' Sabbath school (98), the Nantucket speech -- is drawn to teach lessons or inspire feelings that will spur readers to help overthrow the slave system. That is the primary purpose of the Narrative. To this end, some of the parables have a defensive alignment, in that they address the implied question of skeptics, "Why do blacks allow themselves to be enslaved?"<sup>4</sup> In a different social context, Douglass might have challenged the question's premise, but here that would have been undisciplined. For as he writes in Life and Times of Frederick Douglass, the fourth and final autobiography, in the early days of the movement, "I was called upon to expose the direful nature of the slave system ... and to do what I could thereby to make slavery

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<sup>4</sup> His answer is that slavery is a "soul-killing" institution (58), which he demonstrates with parables about the attitude-adjusting practices of whipping slaves, denying them literacy (78), allowing them the privilege of coming to the Big House (56-7), selling them down the river for criticizing the master (61-2), and plunging them into dissipation during holidays (115-6).

odious and thus hasten the day of emancipation. It was no time to mince matters" (1892, 511).

Thus, in accordance with Garrisonian principles, Douglass's autobiography is tightly controlled in its themes (and is not, say, a romantic exploration of the self). For, if the process of writing an autobiography is to organize and select from one's experiences information that is important for readers to know, then, at the surface level, Douglass defines "importance" very narrowly: material that will move white readers to pick up the cause and that counters the charge that he had never been a slave. Beyond that, there are significant omissions. Douglass says little or nothing about such "important" biographical subjects as his relations with his siblings (McFeely 116); his cultural heritage; his sexual life and marriage to the free Negro Anna Murray (Moses 70-73); the thousands of free Negroes living in and around Baltimore during his years there (McFeely 59); the three years he worked as a laborer in the North before joining the American Anti-Slavery Society; the challenges and difficulties that he faced on the lecture tour from 1841 to 1844, including a proslavery mob that nearly killed him in Pendleton, Indiana (Huggins 18); and, the more personal (and ambiguous) side of his relationship with his former master, Thomas Auld, with whom he portrays a loving reconciliation in the 1881 autobiography (also entitled Life and Times of Frederick Douglass). While

McFeely may be correct that some of these omissions were "private torments and horrors too deep in the well to be drawn up" (116), most of them may well be discretionary silences, reflecting what is today referred to as "message discipline": the practice in political discourse of avoiding topics that might deflect attention from the primary point of emphasis -- in this case the central tenet that slavery is a moral atrocity that must be abolished.

Douglass wrote the Narrative within several overlapping circles of restriction that, at the time, he could not comment upon directly. These include the unequal power balance between the author and his white audience; the expectations and prejudices of that audience; the exigency of gaining credibility on white readers' terms; the need to differentiate the North from the South in terms of moral and democratic values, even at the expense of ignoring oppression in the North; and the Garrisonian imperative of "message discipline." But none of these captivities should surprise us or destroy our sense of the Narrative's integrity. These were conditions of authorship for Douglass, the terms within which he could help promote radical social change. We might try to think about the option of playing by Garrison's rules from Douglass's perspective. To continue as an antislavery advocate and build upon his lecturing achievements, he needed some way to "prove" he was not a fraud. Carving out a niche for himself



in published political discourse would be good for him and for the cause. His access to publication was the Anti-Slavery Office in Boston, controlled by fervent Garrisonians. The themes and rhetorical strategies and compromises that these brokers expected to see in the text had already proven effective for him on the lecture circuit. It was reasonable to assume that a Garrisonian autobiography would make a splash, and it did, selling 13,000 copies in the first sixteen months and receiving prominent favorable reviews from Margaret Fuller and others (Andrews 1991, 2).<sup>5</sup> And, the abolitionists' boundaries and expectations would not necessarily prevent the pursuit of other narrative aims, if done subtly. In this final respect, Douglass's triumph was greatest. Despite all the restrictions, he created a work of profound contemporary and historic value for African Americans -- an audience that his white readers, including Garrison, may not have presumed the autobiography would reach.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Benjamin Quarles notes that 30,000 copies of the Narrative had been sold in the United States and Great Britain by 1850 (1969, 65). It was translated into Dutch in 1846 and French in 1848. Contemporary reviewers noted the "immense circulation" and "very wide influence on public opinion" enjoyed by Douglass's and other narratives (Andrews 1991, 2).

<sup>6</sup> There has been enormous scholarly discussion on this topic. As William L. Andrews argues, Douglass becomes one of the first African Americans to publish an autobiography that prominently features -- instead of filtering out -- rhetorical and imaginative genius (Andrews 1986b, 123-138). He creates one of the first distinctively African American literary voices, among other things, employing the

The Narrative was a best-seller. Ten years later, so too was My Bondage and My Freedom. According to Benjamin Quarles, 18,000 copies had been sold in three editions by 1858 (Andrews 1991, 4). The second autobiography is two or three times longer than the first, containing, among other things, a much more detailed picture of slavery and an account of Douglass's sundry activities in the seventeen years since escaping. That said, there is no question that Douglass wrote the second autobiography by working off the first. The publication of a parallel text edition would reveal that, by and large, the 1855 autobiography follows the sequence of the original. Moreover, Douglass preserves much of the exact wording and specifically quotes the Narrative four times.

If the 1845 autobiography is the story of one man's escape from two captivities (from slavery to freedom, and from internalized racial inferiority to self-realization and manhood), then My Bondage and My Freedom preserves the first

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"syncretic phrasing" described by Stepto (20-21) and translating the oral tradition of the sermon into written narrative (O'Meally). As Henry Louis Gates, Jr. demonstrates, the Narrative deconstructs the dominant ideology of racial difference and black inferiority (1987, 80-97). At the same time, it textualizes and codifies a model of black heroism and courage, and it argues to the link between literacy and African-American empowerment. The qualities that enabled Douglass, working within proscription, to write an autobiography that succeeded with subsequent generations of African Americans as well as with Garrisonians and mainstream white Northern readers are the same that flourished later when he excelled as a journalist and an activist -- rhetorical genius, acute political sensitivity, and a willingness to compromise for progress.

theme but revises the second in two ways. First, as discussed above, Douglass changes the personal significance of the 1841 Nantucket speech. Then he recounts a different form of "bondage" from which he must extricate himself in the North -- the narrow public role allotted to him by the New England abolitionists now portrayed as domineering bigots. Douglass's revision of his history with Garrison comes late in the My Bondage and My Freedom, but it is critical to understanding the political nature of alterations throughout the book. The author begins by representing his first exposure to The Liberator a few months after reaching New Bedford. In 1845, he mentions that "The paper became my meat and drink. My soul was set on fire" (151), but does not refer to its famous editor by name. In 1855, his description is of a more zealous and personal adoration:

From this time I was brought in contact with the mind of William Lloyd Garrison. His paper took its place with me next to the bible.

The Liberator was a paper after my own heart .... I not only liked -- I loved this paper, and its editor. He seemed a match for all the opponents of emancipation .... His words were few, full of holy fire, and straight to the point. Learning to love him, through his paper, I was prepared to be pleased by his presence. Something of a hero worshiper, by nature, here was one, on first sight, to excite my love and reverence.

Seventeen years ago, few men possessed a more heavenly countenance than William Lloyd Garrison, and few men evinced a more genuine or a more exalted piety. The bible was his text book -- held sacred, as the word of the Eternal Father -- sinless perfection -- complete submission to insults and injuries -- literal obedience to the injunction, if smitten on one side turn the other

also .... "You are the man, the Moses, raised up by God, to deliver his modern Israel from bondage," was the spontaneous feeling in my heart, as I sat away back in the hall and listened to his mighty words. (354-5)

After that confession comes the revised, de-racialized account of the Nantucket speech and then a significant new description, not included in the Narrative, of Douglass's career with the American Anti-Slavery Society. He portrays himself at the outset of his lecturing as "young, ardent, and hopeful ... in the full gush of unsuspecting enthusiasm" (359). Fired by the pistons of righteous inspiration, he claims to have believed that "The God of Israel is with us. The might of the Eternal is on our side. Now let but the truth be spoken, and a nation will start forth at the sound!" (360). Then, however, these favorable reminiscences are disrupted by a new note of bitterness. "For a while," he notes, "I was made to forget that my skin was dark and my hair crisp" (360). His lecturing career became painful, he says, not because of disruptions, abuse, or hostilities from the crowds (which again he chooses not to describe), but because of the abolitionists themselves. Taken from lectern to lectern to secure subscribers to The Liberator and The Anti-Slavery Standard, he endured various insults from his sponsors:

I was generally introduced as a "chattel" -- a "thing" -- a piece of southern "property" -- the chairman assuring the audience that *it* could speak. Fugitive slaves, at that time, were not so plentiful as now; and, as a fugitive slave lecturer, I had the advantage of being a "brand

*new fact" .... During the first three or four months, my speeches were almost exclusively made up of narrations of my own personal experience as a slave. "Let us have the facts," said the people. So also said Friend George Foster, who always wished to pin me down to my simple narrative. "Give us the facts," said Collins, "we will take care of the philosophy." Just here arose some embarrassment. It was impossible for me to repeat the same old story month after month, and to keep my interest in it .... "Tell your story, Frederick," would whisper my then revered friend, William Lloyd Garrison. (360-61)*

Douglass describes chaffing within the requirement for fugitive slaves to give only "a circumstantial statement of the facts," for "It did not entirely satisfy me to *narrate* wrongs; I felt like *denouncing* them" (361-2). Ever committed to message discipline, the abolitionists tried to reign him in. He reports being told that he would lose credibility by embroidering his oratorical style. One advised, "Better have a *little* of the plantation manner of speech than not; 'tis not best that you seem too learned" (362). Understandable advice, Douglass acknowledges, but he knew "I must speak just the word that seemed to *me* the word to be spoken *by me*" (362). In the spirit of American self-reliance, Douglass remarks, "I was growing, and needed room" (362). Thus, when it came time to write the Narrative in 1844, the Garrisonians held a very limited vision for its scope: in his only statement in 1855 about the composition of the first autobiography, Douglass says, "I was induced to write out the leading facts connected with my experience in slavery, giving names of persons, places, and dates -- thus

putting it in the power of any who doubted, to ascertain the truth or falsehood of my story of being a fugitive slave" (363).

The addition of this new material defines for 1855 readers one part of the context of confinement within which Douglass undertook his lecturing career and original autobiography: his naive devotion to Garrison, the racism of the American Anti-slavery Society, and the abolitionists' insistence that he play a circumscribed public role. In 1855, these strictures, especially the disciple relationship with Garrison, give Douglass an excuse for his past defense of extremist positions such as the "non-voting principle" and the dissolution of the Union. At the same time, Douglass shrewdly does not portray himself as having been a voiceless captive -- Garrison's puppet -- which would have negated too much of his early career. He makes it clear that he "could not always obey" his handlers (361), becoming rebellious and independent-minded: "I was now reading and thinking. New views on the subject were presented to my mind" (361). Thus, his revisions show that the context of his public speech-acts from 1841 to 1845, including the Narrative, was not complete deference to the Garrisonians, but struggle for the words, accents, and ideas he would employ and for the public persona he would adopt. This is critical. Had Douglass depicted total subservience, My Bondage and My Freedom would have discredited the Narrative.

Instead, he valorizes the 1845 autobiography as a work that negotiates its Garrisonian confinements. Seen through this new critical lens, some elements of the Narrative grow in significance. The rather long passage in which Douglass declares his refusal to provide "a minute statement of all the facts" of his escape (because doing so might harm people still in slavery [1845, 137-9]) suggests defiance of the abolitionists who pressed him to prove his slave credentials by providing all the "leading facts" (1855, 363). More important, the many passages in the Narrative where he does "denounce" the wrongs of slavery (rather than merely supplying the desired "circumstantial statement of the facts,") stand out as transgressions against abolitionist rules and the assertion of Douglass's own voice and mind. The author seems particularly proud of those passages, because all four of the excerpts Douglass quotes from the 1845 autobiography are impassioned speech-acts of denunciation.<sup>7</sup>

The author uses another strategy to modify the self-portrait of an orthodox Garrisonian that emerges from the Narrative, and thus to redefine the context of the book. In October, 1846, shortly after its publication, Garrison sent

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<sup>7</sup> Douglass quotes passages describing the "ineffable sadness" he felt upon hearing slave songs (99); the pathetic image of his aged grandmother cast out by Thomas Auld to die (179-181); the months when "the dark night of slavery closed in upon me" under Covey's lash (219-221); and his suffering when hired out to Mr. Gardiner in Baltimore (308-9).

Douglass to England, where he gave numerous speeches eliciting European support for the cause. In Chapter XXIV of My Bondage and My Freedom, Douglass reproduces a remarkable 1,800-word letter he wrote on January 1, 1846 from England and published in The Liberator (368-73). The fugitive-in-exile begins with a stinging declaration of non-allegiance to America, employing a far less conciliatory tone than was evidenced just half a year earlier in the Narrative:

That men should be patriotic, is to me perfectly natural; and as a philosophical fact, I am able to give it an *intellectual* recognition. But no further can I go. If ever I had any patriotism, or any capacity for the feeling, it was whipped out of me, by the lash of the American soul-drivers .... [Upon remembering slavery] I am filled with unutterable loathing, and led to reproach myself that anything could fall from my lips in praise of such a land. (369)

He goes on, in contrast, to praise his "new life" in monarchical England (370) -- the "kind hospitality" and "spirit of freedom" that deviates so markedly from the "long and bitter experience" of "prejudice against me, on account of the color of my skin" in democratic America (370). In the "northern states," he protests, fugitive slaves are likely to be hunted like felons and hurled back into bondage, and free blacks are subjected to "insult and outrage on every hand ... denied the privileges and courtesies common to others in the use of the most humble means of conveyance -- shut out from the cabins on steamboats -- refused admission to respectable hotels --



caricatured, scorned, scoffed, mocked, and maltreated with impunity by any one (no matter how black his heart), so he has a white skin" (370-71). The letter offers no silent acquiescence to Northern racism, hatred, and hypocrisy. Douglass provides a scathing account of racism in Massachusetts, listing incident upon incident in which he tried to attend an art exhibit or frequent an eating house or enter a church or simply travel on a steamer, only to be met with the virulent refrain, bitterly repeated in the letter, "*We don't allow niggers in here!*" (371-2). With brutal irony, he concludes by describing a scene of wonderful color-blind treatment in Liverpool -- admission on equal footing into Eaton Hall, residence of the Marquise of Westminster, much to the chagrin of the white Americans who were there: "As I walked through the building, the statuary did not fall down, the pictures did not leap from their places, the doors did not refuse to open, and the servants did not say '*We don't allow niggers in here!*' A happy new-year to you, and all the friends of freedom" (373). The difference between such confrontational dialogue on the first day of 1846 and the near silence about Northern racism in the 1845 Narrative could not be more clear. One effect of displaying this contrast in a book published in 1855 is to demonstrate that during the period when Douglass was on Garrison's payroll, he had not been blind to racial injustice in the North. He had not been unaware of the

sufferings of his free and fugitive black brethren. He had not been brain-washed or bought off by the Garrisonians, and he had not been, in point of fact, silent about Jim Crow practices. The Narrative simply was not the most appropriate vehicle, at the time, to broach those subjects.

Douglass's revision of the relationship with his mentor Garrison also helps define the context of My Bondage and My Freedom itself. He writes that, after twenty-one months in the United Kingdom, during which he obtained money from friends and supporters to purchase his freedom from Hugh Auld, he desired to return home, feeling a "duty ... to labor and suffer with the oppressed of my native land" (376). Notice that this is a broader mission than only working for the enslaved. When his British friends and supporters offered a "testimonial" to support him and the cause in America, Douglass asked for "the means of obtaining a printing press and printing materials, to enable me to start a paper, devoted to the interests of my enslaved and oppressed people" (my italics, 389). His justification for this vocation expresses a vision of the purposes and value of writing by African Americans, and thus of the autobiography within which that vision is articulated:

I told them [his friends] that the greatest hindrance to the adoption of abolition principles by the people of the United States, was the low estimate, everywhere in that country, placed upon the negro, as a man; that because of his assumed natural inferiority, people reconciled themselves to his enslavement and oppression, as things inevitable, if not desirable. The grand thing to

be done, therefore, was to change the estimation in which the colored people of the United States were held; to prove them worthy of a higher consideration; to disprove their alleged inferiority, and demonstrate their capacity for a more exalted civilization than slavery and prejudice had assigned to them. (388-9)

Douglass argues that it is critical for white Americans to witness black achievement. Only by creating "a tolerably well conducted press, in the hands of persons of the despised race" (389) would prejudice fully be removed. Moreover, the importance of this endeavor -- and here Douglass transcends Garrison -- is not just that it will educate whites, but also that it will cultivate the talents of blacks: "by calling out the energies of the race itself; by making them acquainted with their own mental powers; by enkindling among them the hope that for them there is a future; by developing their moral power; by combining and reflecting their talents ..." (389). Here we see, not for the only time in My Bondage and My Freedom, that Douglass specifically defines his leadership in relation to all African Americans -- helping the entire community, free and slave, obtain "liberty and the pursuit of happiness" (392-3). This is a major change from the first autobiography.

Douglass reports that his "dear friends" in England responded to his aspiration to edit a newspaper with 2,500 dollars, while his "Boston friends" (394) raised objections. The Garrisonians argued that a new paper was not needed, that it could not succeed, that editing "would interfere

with my true usefulness as a lecturer," and that "I was better fitted to speak than write" (393). The portrayal bears a striking likeness to that of Douglass's former master, Hugh Auld, who tried to prevent young Fred from reading because "learning would spoil the best nigger in the world" (1855, 146). But, while Douglass never hesitates in resisting Master Hugh, he claims to have felt a great reluctance -- even after the success of the Narrative and the European tour -- to cross the Garrisonians: "I am not sure," he confesses, "that I was not under the influence of something like a slavish adoration of my Boston friends" (394). Here, he attributes to himself the very feeling of internalized racial insecurity that he had seemed to erase by revising the portrayal of his first speech to whites. And, the outcome is the same as in the Narrative's Nantucket scene: "I persevered" (394).

Thus, Douglass structures the new portrait of the Garrisonians to function the same way as the white Nantucket audience in the Narrative -- to epitomize, after slavery, a second self-sustained "captivity" from which the author had to extricate himself to claim his public voice. Moreover, as with its predecessor, My Bondage and My Freedom is a self-confirming document, reflecting and re-enacting the liberation from *captivare* that it describes. The difference between the two texts is that the bounded system from which Douglass declares his liberation in 1855 is the same

confinement within which he claims to have been forced to write ten years earlier. In this way, Douglass positions My Bondage and My Freedom as an escape from some of the conditions of authorship imposed upon the Narrative. The 1855 text displays this theme in many ways besides the public renunciation of Garrison. A number of the autobiography's revisions are speech-acts that Douglass implies were not possible in the Narrative.

Some of them are examples of once-prohibited rhetorical styles and modes of argumentation. For example, My Bondage and My Freedom eliminates the Narrative's parables of slavery by re-presenting the anecdotes with much more of the "philosophy" that the Garrisonians had disliked.<sup>8</sup> To cite one instance, in the Narrative Douglass briefly describes returning to St. Michael's in rural Maryland after seven years in Baltimore and being forced to beg for or steal food, "whichever came handy in the time of need, the one being considered as legitimate as the other" (1845, 96). The moral of the parable is the hypocrisy of the slaveholders, who allow human beings nearly to perish in hunger "when food in abundance lay mouldering [sic] in the safe and smoke-house, and our pious mistress ... and her husband would kneel every morning, and pray that God would bless them in basket and store!" (96). In 1855, Douglass

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<sup>8</sup> On several occasions, Douglass draws attention to his use of this new style by apologizing for indulging in it (106, 191).

again states that at St. Michael's "We were compelled either to beg, or to steal, and we did both" (188). But this time, the didactic lesson is replaced by a philosophical inquiry about morality in slavery. Claiming to have hated stealing, Douglass says that his doing so derived from a "clear apprehension of the claims of morality" (188).

"Considering," he argues, that my labor and person were the property of Master Thomas, and that I was by him deprived of the necessities of life -- necessarily obtained by my own labor -- it was easy to deduce the right to supply myself with what was my own. It was simply appropriating what was my own to the use of my master, since the health and strength derived from such food were exerted in *his* service" (188-9). But Douglass does not stop there, merely justifying theft from one's owner. He goes on to argue that slaves have the right to steal from anyone in society, because "Society at large has bound itself, in form and in fact, to assist Master Thomas in robbing me of my rightful liberty, and of the just reward for my labor" (190). Then, having established these principles, he advances a wider and more radical moral argument:

The morality of *free* society can have no application to *slave* society. Slaveholders have made it almost impossible for the slave to commit any crime, known either to the laws of God or to the laws of man. If he steals, he takes his own; if he kills his master, he imitates only the heroes of the revolution. Slaveholders must be held individually and collectively responsible for all of the evils which grow out of the horrid relation .... Make a man a slave, and you rob him

of moral responsibility. Freedom of choice is the essence of all accountability. (191)

Imagine Douglass in 1845 -- on the stump or in the Narrative -- deviating from the "facts" to offer a philosophical justification for slaves' murdering their masters. It is impossible to say which transgression the Garrisonians would have found most appalling -- the affront to the white audience, the betrayal of pacifist principles, or the discrediting appearance of seeming "too learned." But one thing seems likely: they would have found themselves a different "brand new fact."

In like manner, Douglass's revisions of My Bondage and My Freedom display him not simply "narrating" wrongs, as his handlers desired, but "denouncing" those wrongs in new ways. For example, he suggests that slavery is an unjust, non-productive social system for white citizens. This argument was particularly important in 1855 because, with the election of proslavery Franklin Pierce in 1852 and the Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854 (which repealed the Missouri Compromise's ban on slavery north of 36° 30'), white Northerners had grown increasingly apprehensive that soon there would be no free soil left in the United States (Sewell 254-65). If, they worried, slavery were to expand into the territories, Northern white working people, Northern entrepreneurs, and Western farmers would be crowded out of America's expansionist future, losing out on work

opportunities to slave labor. Douglass stokes that fear brilliantly.

One of his more suggestive denunciations is that slave societies are economically closed systems that prevent free laborers from enjoying their fair share of the pie. To make this case, Douglass revises the portrayal of Colonel Lloyd's plantation and the surrounding community of Tuckahoe, Maryland. In the Narrative, the plantation where Douglass spent his childhood is a model of economic efficiency, having plants growing in "abundance" and a "business-like aspect very unlike the neighboring farms" (56). In 1855, he erases these qualities and shows that plantations and slave economies are fundamentally isolationist and inimical to free labor:

Not even the mechanics ... are white men, on this plantation. Its whole public is made up of, and divided into, three classes -- SLAVEHOLDERS, SLAVES and OVERSEERS. Its blacksmiths, wheelwrights, shoemakers, weavers, and coopers, are slaves. Not even commerce, selfish and iron-hearted as it is, and ready, as it ever is, to side with the strong against the weak -- the rich against the poor -- is trusted or permitted within its secluded precincts. Whether with a view of guarding against the escape of its secrets, I know not, but it is a fact, that every leaf and grain of the produce of this plantation, and those of the neighboring farms belonging to Col. Lloyd, are transported to Baltimore in Col. Lloyd's own vessels; every man and boy on board of which -- except the captain -- are owned by him. In return, everything brought to the plantation, comes through the same channel. Thus, even the glimmering and unsteady light of trade, which sometimes exerts a civilizing influence, is excluded from this "tabooed" spot. (62-63)



A few pages later, Douglass reiterates the point, noting that "Horse-shoeing, cart-mending, plow-repairing, coopering, grinding, and weaving ... were performed here, and slaves were employed in all these branches" (69). "A little nation of its own," it is untouched by "the laws and institutions of the state" (64). There are "no conflicting rights of property," for one man owns everything. Religion, politics, and civilization are all kept out (64-5).

However, the slaveholders rigidly maintain "rank and station" -- anathemas to many in the North -- not just between masters and slaves, but also between owners and their white overseers. Isolated plantations resemble "what the baronial domains were, during the middle ages in Europe ... a full three hundred years behind the age" (64).

Encompassing these feudal institutions is a "thinly populated" (33), dying society -- where "decay and ruin are everywhere visible ... [a] dull, flat, and unthrifty district ... surrounded by a white population of the lowest order, indolent and drunken to a proverb, and among [them] slaves, who seemed to ask, 'Oh! what's the use?' every time they lifted a hoe" (34).

This is a potent and politically-nuanced indictment, particularly in the aftermath of the 1854 recession. In the antebellum period, many whites understood and valued their "freedom" in economic terms -- the freedom to earn a living, to own property, to strike out West in search of

opportunity. Douglass shows slavery to be an anti-white economic system -- anachronistic, stagnant, un-democratic, caste-based, and economically impermeable to the commerce, free labor, progress, and personal advancement valued in the North both by working people and monied Whigs. In part, Douglass's theme is negative: one need not be a slave to have one's livelihood and very freedom taken away by "Slave Power." But with that comes something positive -- the affirmation of his Northern readers' economic system and free labor values. For example, My Bondage and My Freedom provides a new account of Douglass's first perception of New Bedford. Upon arriving, he was surprised to find no "poor white trash." Instead, he discovered "the very laboring population ... living in better houses, more elegantly furnished -- surrounded by more comfort and refinement -- than the majority of the slaveholders on the Eastern Shore of Maryland" (344). Here, Douglass issues a keen and well-targeted passage of celebration, for values such as progress, upward mobility, material gain, and the dignity of labor were dear to the Northern moderates and conservatives who had eschewed the Liberty and Free Soil parties because their platforms pulled centripetally towards abolition. This is Douglass's version of what is now called the "big tent" strategy of political organizing -- to rally disparate groups to coalesce around their shared values and interests, instead of being divided by their differences. Founded in

1854, the Republican party was having great success with this inclusive approach when My Bondage and My Freedom was published (Foner 1970, 1-39). Although at that time Douglass remained a nominal member of the Liberty party (Quarles 1848, 156), he was clearly in concert with Republican tactics and avoids making reference to his party affiliation.

As part of the "big tent" strategy, the autobiography also denounces slave labor as injurious to urban workers and urban economies. Douglass revises the Narrative's anecdote about racial tensions in the Baltimore ship-yards into a famous class analysis predicting "a phase of slavery destined to become an important element in the overthrow of the slave system ....: *the conflict of slavery with the interests of the white mechanics and laborers of the south* (his italics, 309). "The slaveholders," he argues, encourage "the enmity of the poor, laboring white man against the blacks, ... making the said white man almost as much a slave as the black slave himself" (310). The difference is that the black slave "belongs to one slaveholder, and the former belongs to *all* slaveholders, collectively" (his italics, 310). The white slave is plundered by "indirection," the black slave "directly, without ceremony" (310):

The slave is robbed, by his master, of all his earnings, above what is required for his bare physical necessities; and the white man is robbed by the slave system, of the just results of his

labor, because he is flung into competition with a class of laborers who work without wages. The competition, and its injurious consequences, will, one day, array the non-slaveholding white people of the slave states, against the slave system, and make them the most effective workers against the great evil. (310)

History proved Douglass wrong about the extent to which Southern white laborers would rebel against the peculiar institution, but no doubt he was profoundly correct about the psychological and ideological mechanisms that pitted low-income whites against free and enslaved blacks:

At present, the slaveholders blind them to this competition, by keeping alive their prejudice against the slaves, *as men* -- not against them *as slaves*. They appeal to their pride, often denouncing emancipation, as tending to place the white working man, on an equality with the negroes, and, by this means, they succeed in drawing off the minds of the poor whites from the real fact, that, by the rich slave-master, they are already regarded as but a single remove from equality with the slave. The impression is cunningly made that slavery is the only power that can prevent the laboring white man from falling to the level of the slave's poverty and degradation. To make this enmity deep and broad, between the slave and the poor white man, the latter is allowed to whip and abuse the former, without hindrance. (his italics, 310-11)

Douglass then notes that in Baltimore, "there are not infrequent murmurs, that educating slaves to be mechanics, may, in the end, give slave-masters power to dispense with the services of the poor white man altogether" (311). He claims that when he was there, white fear of job displacement caused a violent backlash against free Negro mechanics; whites came to resent "having their labor brought into competition with that of the colored people at

all," but they were too cowardly "to strike directly at the interest of the slaveholders" (311). This is a tricky argument. Douglass's goal is to rouse white Northern laborers to stand up for their rights and strike back at the purveyors of Slave Power. He wants them to believe that, left unchallenged, slaveholders will expand their economic system to every spot of free soil, foreclosing honest competition by training slaves for occupations now held by whites.<sup>9</sup> But here's the rub: many of these workers were Democrats and Know-Nothings who had no love for the Negro and in some cases had sought to ban free blacks from the territories. In playing to their economic insecurity, Douglass must be careful not to cause them to view African Americans working in the North as competitors. Thus, he distinguishes that it is slaves, not blacks, who threaten to force whites out of the labor market. In the 1853 speech, "The Slavery Party," placed in the appendix, Douglass goes one step further to prevent the scapegoating of blacks, as he indulges in some of the anti-Irish, anti-Catholic nativism that would lead to the founding of the Know-Nothing party in 1854 (Anbinder 20-22). Tapping an ideological powderkeg, the author complains that "every hour sees us

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<sup>9</sup> In "The Slavery Party," an analytical speech delivered in 1853 and included in the appendix of My Bondage and My Freedom, Douglass make this case explicitly, defining five "cardinal objects" of Slave Power, including "the unending perpetuation of slavery in this republic" and "the nationalization of slavery" (451).

[blacks] elbowed out of some employment to make room perhaps for some newly-arrived emigrants [from Ireland], whose hunger and color are thought to give them a special favor" (454).

This is an entirely different style of argumentation and denunciation than appears in the Narrative. It is more self-consciously reasoned. The author is more willing to tackle nuanced issues, like the moral justification for murder, at the risk of misinterpretation by whites. He is more responsive to contemporary politics, especially the fears and beliefs of conservative whites and free Negroes. And he is less reliant on rhetorical fireworks to advance key points. None of this should be taken as Douglass's comment on the validity of the Narrative as an autobiographical or historical work. But it is clear that Douglass aspires to project a more "learned" and intellectual voice in the second autobiography. In fact, in his introduction to My Bondage and My Freedom, Dr. James McCune Smith defends Douglass against the misperception that "his descriptive and declamatory powers" surpass "his logical force" (xxvii).<sup>10</sup> Perhaps Douglass believed that

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<sup>10</sup> Smith, one of New York City's most prominent African American leaders, argues that Douglass's capacity for analysis is higher than simply "the exhibition of the formulas of deductive logic":

Mastering the intermediate steps by an intuitive glance, or recurring to them as Ferguson resorted to Geometry, it goes down to the deeper relation of things, and brings out what may seem, to some,

the textual image of *intellectual* black subjectivity would have the same effect as his goals for The North Star -- "to prove [blacks] worthy of a higher consideration; to disprove their alleged inferiority, and demonstrate their capacity for a more exalted civilization than slavery and prejudice had assigned to them" (388-9).

In terms of discursive practices, Douglass's revisions in My Bondage and My Freedom also allow for greater use of the three forms of dialogue discussed in the previous chapter. As mentioned earlier, the new use of interior dialogue creates a remarkable juxtaposition of implied readers, drawn from across the social spectrum. Douglass also employs confrontational dialogue differently. In the Narrative, the author's strongest confrontations are with slaveholders and hypocritical Southern Christians. My Bondage and My Freedom intensifies those dialogues,<sup>11</sup> while

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mere statements, but which are new and brilliant generalizations, each resting on a broad and stable basis. Thus, Chief Justice Marshall gave his decisions .... Thus, also, in his "Lecture on the Anti-Slavery Movement" [contained in the appendix] ... Mr. Douglass presents a mass of thought, which, without any showy display of logic on his part, requires an exercise of the reasoning faculties of the reader to keep pace with him." (xxvii-xxviii)

<sup>11</sup> For example, he includes his famous confrontational letter to Thomas Auld, a deepened and more specifically directed expression of rage and retaliation than any speech-act in the Narrative; in it he vows "to make use of you as a weapon with which to assail the system of slavery -- as a means of concentrating public attention on the system, and deepening the horror of trafficking in the souls and bodies of men" (428).

launching others in new directions. The January 1, 1846 letter from England bitterly attacks the practices of Northern segregationists. In the post-slavery sections of the autobiography, Douglass adds new material protesting Jim Crow laws on the ship returning from England (391) and in the state of Massachusetts (399), which is a direct protest of Northern injustice that, as we have seen, he does not allow himself in the Narrative. Eliminating any trace of the "gentleness and meekness" Garrison had praised (36), he justifies slave violence as self-defense and issues the militant call, popularized by Henry Highland Garnet in his famous 1843 speech, "Hereditary bondmen, know ye not / Who would be free, themselves must strike the blow?" (249).

The expanded use of confrontational dialogue points to the key dialogic revision in My Bondage and My Freedom -- Douglass's use of communal dialogue to reach out to African American readers. In the introduction, James McCune Smith points out that, when Douglass returned from England in 1847, "the wide gulf which separated the free colored people from the Garrisonians, also separated them from their brother, Frederick Douglass" (xxiv). In myriad ways, the autobiography employs communal dialogue to show that this gulf no longer exists. His account of escaping from Garrisonian bondage helps make this case, as Douglass displays himself no longer willing to be led by whites. So too does his "Pledge for the Future" (as it is called in a



chapter sub-heading [xvi]) to serve his entire race, the oppressed as well as the enslaved. In the book's great final paragraph, he writes:

Believing that one of the best means of emancipating the slaves of the south is to improve and elevate the character of the free colored people of the north I shall labor in the future, as I have labored in the past, to promote the moral, social, religious, and intellectual elevation of the free colored people; never forgetting my own humble origin, nor refusing, while Heaven lends me the ability, to use my voice, my pen, or my vote, to advocate the great and primary work of the universal and unconditional emancipation of my entire race.  
(405-6)

As William L. Andrews brilliantly observes in To Tell a Free Story, throughout the 1855 text, Douglass places new emphasis on his lifetime membership in the African American community (1986b, 218-230, 237-239). For example, My Bondage and My Freedom does not re-produce the dramatic hellish opening of the Narrative, where the reader watches through a child's eyes Aunt Hester getting flayed; instead, Douglass humanizes the picture of his early life by portraying his "first home" (43) with his grandparents on the Maryland Eastern Shore, where he was "a spirited, joyous, uproarious, and happy boy, upon whom troubles fall only like water on a duck's back" (42). In the Narrative, Douglass writes that upon being removed from his grandmother to live with Thomas Auld in Baltimore, "I found no severe trial in my departure. My home was charmless; it was not home to me; on parting from it, I could not feel that I was

leaving any thing which I could have enjoyed by staying ....  
 I looked for home elsewhere" (1845, 73). In 1855, the same  
 event is cast totally differently:

... while standing there, one of the children, who  
 had been in the kitchen, ran up to me, in a sort  
 of roguish glee, exclaiming, "Fed, Fed! grandmammy  
 gone! grandmammy gone!" I could not believe it;  
 yet, fearing the worst, I ran into the kitchen, to  
 see for myself, and found it even so. Grandmammy  
 had indeed gone, and was now far away, "clean" out  
 of sight. I need not tell all that happened now.  
 Almost broken-hearted at the discovery, I fell  
 upon the ground, and wept a boy's bitter tears,  
 refusing to be comforted .... The reader may be  
 surprised that I narrate so minutely an incident  
 apparently so trivial ... but ... I cannot  
 withhold a circumstance which, at the time,  
 affected me so deeply. (49-50)

What Douglass does here is to create a record of cultural  
 heritage -- to assert that his racial and communal identity  
 precedes and transcends the white-imposed atrocities of  
 bondage and oppression. This marks a profound revision of  
 the Narrative, where Douglass makes no open attempt to  
 define either a personal racial identity or a larger racial  
 community. Countless examples can be found in the 1855  
 text. While in the original, he makes only passing  
 reference to his mother, Harriet Bailey, claiming that her  
 death was like "the death of a stranger" (49), My Bondage  
and My Freedom includes a sentimental scene in which she  
 protects him from being starved by cruel old Aunt Katy.  
 Douglass declares that it "has been a life-long, standing  
 grief to me, that I knew so little of my mother .... The  
 side view of her face is imaged on my memory, and I take few

steps in life, without feeling her presence" (57). He then adds the crucial new detail that Harriet Bailey was literate, extraordinary for a "field hand," which means that his "love of letters" derives not from "my admitted Anglo-Saxon paternity," but from "the native genius" of his "sable" maternity (58). Later, he recounts the great religious influence on his life of a previously-unmentioned slave named Father Lawson, his "spiritual father" (168), who taught young Fred that the "Lord had a great work for me to do" (169). As Andrews observes, in the Narrative, the climactic battle with Covey is figured as an individual act of heroism and resistance; in contrast, My Bondage and My Freedom shows two slaves refusing Covey's orders to help subdue him, including Caroline, who is only portrayed as a helpless victim in the first autobiography (1855, 245; Andrews 1986b, 284-6).

Another element of African American culture that Douglass lauds is the oral practice of preaching and educating, which is how he claims to have begun "my public speaking" -- no longer through Garrison, but by travelling to plantations with two fellow bondsmen to condemn slavery (275). Still another element is the use of coded language, enormously important as a moral gesture to keep hope alive. The hymn, "O Canaan, sweet Canaan, / I am bound for the land of Canaan," was "a favorite air, and had a double meaning

.... [In] the lips of our company, it simply meant a speedy pilgrimage toward a free state" (279).

Overall, Douglass extends the text to African American readers by blending references to the life-sustaining elements of black culture and community with the Narrative's chronology of his life. True, he still must defensively address implied biased questions, but he is also able to affirm the existence of loving relatives, caring role models, mutual assistance, aesopian language, literacy, collective resistance, faith, and home. In the 1845 account, he had not been forthcoming about any of these subjects, perhaps because of Garrisonian message discipline, perhaps because he anticipated only white readers and thus saw no use for communal dialogue. In either case, here communal dialogue represents another example of what Houston Baker has called "the journey back" (Baker, 1980) -- Douglass's attempt to re-present and re-connect with a ruptured ethnic and racial identity. As always, the author does this with political acumen, on the one hand avoiding any explicit criticism of militant black emigrationists such as Henry Highland Garnet and Martin Delany, while on the other hand implying by example that to emigrate is a failure of duty. In addition, as a speech-act, communal dialogue conveys a message to non-members of the community, for it rebuts the common "truth" (so often expressed by the white

abolitionists) that slavery destroys the bonds of family, community, and culture, turning people into "things" (360).

These revisions of rhetorical practices employed in the Narrative allow Douglass to re-present himself as a different kind of writer than the Garrisonians had wanted, and even more important, a different kind of leader. Although for Douglass the roles of writer and leader are interrelated, in the contemporary context, the latter was more important. Increasing his public influence was Douglass's enduring goal. He viewed his writing as a tool -- not an end in itself -- to help fulfill the larger duty of helping to forge a new era of justice, equity, and empowerment for African Americans. And he seems to have understood the autobiographical speech-act of establishing a public identity to be a critical element of successful leadership.

In 1841, when he took the stage in Nantucket, one quality authorized him to speak: he was the "brand new fact," the representative fugitive slave -- virtuous, intelligent, forgiving, Christian, marginalized, and imperiled. In and through the Narrative, Douglass expands this public identity just a bit; the book animates his eloquence and his depth of feeling, and presents a strong image of black manhood and resistance. That said, immediately after the Narrative, he was still known as a fugitive slave -- and while that persona legitimized a

public role, the role had limits, neither including greater leadership in the American Anti-Slavery Society, nor authorizing him to address the daily reality of racism in the North.

Accordingly, when Douglass began to yearn for the power to be heard on a broad range of issues through his own newspaper, the abolitionists attacked the aspiration as ridiculously out of line with his identity. They claimed that he had forgotten who and what he was. "My American friends looked at me with astonishment! 'A wood-sawyer' offering himself to the public as an editor! A slave, brought up in the very depths of ignorance, assuming to instruct the highly civilized people of the north in the principles of liberty, justice, and humanity!" (1855, 394). Significantly, Douglass says he understood their objections: of his desire to found a newspaper, indeed, "The thing looked absurd" (394). "Looked" is the key word. The only way to prevent the appearance of absurdity was to look the part. That is why autobiography was such a powerful literary medium for Douglass above and beyond its standard use-value as the most credible genre for a former slave to provide the "truth" of slavery to a white audience. In his case, it also was a genre to present and re-present a public identity in concord with his evolving leadership goals and shifting political winds.

Douglass revises the Narrative to create in My Bondage and My Freedom a public persona that includes four new leadership traits. The first, once again, is leadership in the black community, as reflected in the new presentation of the centrality of his racial heritage, his "duty" to serve all members of the race, and his refusal to be censored by white authorities. Three additional examples should be mentioned. Smith's introduction praises Douglass for fighting on behalf of free Negroes in the mid-century struggles for voting rights in New York and against the black exclusion laws in Illinois (xxv). In re-presenting his foiled attempt to start a Sabbath school, Douglass strengthens his credentials as a black leader by adding that the slaveholders likened him to Nat Turner (1855, 200), an impossible comparison for him to have made in the Narrative (Sundquist 1993, 84). And near the end of the autobiography, he exercises the leader's prerogative of articulating a hopeful vision, asserting that whites do not have an "inherent, and an invincible repugnance" toward blacks (402) and that "notwithstanding the ten thousand discouragements and the powerful hindrances, which beset [blacks'] existence in this country ... progress is yet possible, and ... 'Ethiopia shall yet reach forth her hand unto God'" (405). This is an important statement, subtly defining the author in opposition to more pessimistic emigrationist leaders and offering a rationale to the vast

majority of African Americans who did not want to leave the country why staying and working for change was no act of surrender. Pragmatically, in 1855, it was important for Douglass to display himself to the African American community as someone who wants to promote their interests *forcefully*. With the passage of the Fugitive Slave Law in 1850 and the extradition of the fugitive slave Anthony Burns from Massachusetts to Virginia in 1854, free Negroes and fugitive slaves feared that they could be kidnapped into bondage from any state in the country. That insecurity, combined with frustration over poverty, segregation, failed suffrage battles, the repeal of the 36° 30' compromise, ethnic political riots, and a racist recoiling against "black equality" by office-seekers in all parties, created a climate in which indecisive leaders would have no one to lead.

A second new leadership trait that Douglass introduces into My Bondage and My Freedom is the presumption of leadership -- the sense, communicated on every page, that the author regards himself as a major social and political figure. Of course, by 1855 Douglass was the pre-eminent African American in the country, but it took a conscious effort of revision to graft that stature onto the autobiography. Douglass adds a portrait of himself as the frontispiece, befitting his status as an eminent public man. He also includes formal chapter titles and summary



subheadings not used in the Narrative. Seven major speeches and one published letter are displayed in the appendix. New references to sights seen in Europe show him to be a man of the world (98). In re-presenting incidents from his slave life, he inserts new material that presages his prominence, such as Father Lawson's prophecy of his greatness. He adds leaderly details to his account of the battle with Covey, noting that he "had reached the point, at which he was *not afraid to die*" (his italics, 247) and that, after the conflict, he tried to "provoke" Covey to attack him, without success (248). Describing his first days in New Bedford, he recalls "putting on the habiliments of a common laborer" as if they were a costume (348). At the same time, endeavoring not to look too eager to impress, Douglass opens the book with a letter to the editor claiming "somewhat positive repugnance to writing or speaking anything to the public, which could ... make me liable to the charge of seeking personal notoriety, for its own sake" (vi).<sup>12</sup> The task is to project a leader's bearing, a comfort with and easy acceptance of his public role.

A third way that My Bondage and My Freedom revises Douglass's public image as a leader is by presenting the author as what James McCune Smith calls a "Representative American man" in the introduction (xxv). By representative,

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<sup>12</sup> Describing the twenty-one months in England, he suggests that it was his extremist opponents who turned him into a sensation, not anything he did (380).

two things are meant: "of a type" and, as Emerson implied in his famous 1850 lecture, "to be imitated." In the Narrative, Douglass embodies both of these values, *but only in relation to other fugitive slaves*.<sup>13</sup> My Bondage and My Freedom preserves these two forms of representativeness, but also adds something new and deeply Gramscian, as Douglass -- in collaboration with Smith -- revises the work to portray himself as representative *in relation to all Americans, regardless of race*. The introduction sets the tone. Whereas Garrison portrays Douglass as a marginalized "wanderer" and "outcast" occupying a borderland between slavery and freedom (35), Smith puts him in the American mainstream. The author is representative of the entire country, the national ideal, in that he was forged in the crucible of deprivation and then rose "through every gradation of rank comprised in our national make-up," now bearing "upon his person and upon his soul every thing that is American" (xxvi). He is the Gospel of Success personified. He is also representative to America, an example worthy of emulation by all because he symbolizes that "the worst of our institutions ... cannot keep down

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<sup>13</sup> As Garrison points out in the preface, and reviewers such as Margaret Fuller and Ephraim Peabody later echo, he was representative of the potential "of the colored race ... to attain to the highest point of human excellence" (36-7). Then Douglass draws himself as exemplary of the moral imperative for slaves to resist their captors, saying that in his life story "you shall see how a slave was made a man" (1845, 107).

energy, truthfulness, and earnest struggle for the right" (xxxi). The "son of a self-emancipated bond-woman," he "rent his own bonds, and ... in his every relation -- as a public man, as a husband and as a father -- is such as does honor to the land which gave him birth" (xxxi).

The Americanization of the representative Negro Douglass was part of a sustained ideological strategy. Two years earlier, at the National Black Convention in Rochester, Douglass had chaired the committee that drafted the "Declaration of Sentiments." Directed to "The People of the United States," the Declaration asserted:

We are Americans, and as Americans, we would speak to Americans. We address you not as aliens nor as exiles, humbly asking to dwell among you in peace; but we address you as American citizens asserting their rights on their own native soil. Neither do we address you as enemies (although the recipients for innumerable wrongs); but in the spirit of patriotic good will. (Harding 180)

Smith is not so direct as to claim equal citizenship rights for Douglass. Rather, his assertion that Douglass has written "an American book, for Americans, in the fullest sense of the idea" (xxxi) seems to have several functions. He defines Douglass as broad-minded, having "full sympathy with every thing American" (xxvi), as opposed to being focused on his own well-being or taking a narrow sectional or partisan stance. He casts Douglass's story within the national ideals of hard work, self-reliance, progress, and love of liberty, perhaps hoping white readers will see their values reflected in his life, and thus accept his claim to

leadership.<sup>14</sup> He announces a new power dynamic between Douglass and white readers -- Americans all, and thus political and social equals -- which is a significant shift from the more supplicating posture that, ten years earlier, Garrison assumed the "outcast" must take. This implicitly removes Douglass and all African Americans from the liminal zones of slavery, three-fifths citizenship, possible deportation, and, of course, "blackness," investing in them equal status with all other native-born Americans. Thus, Smith lays the groundwork for Douglass to assert several profoundly American claims -- that there was no need to dissolve the Union and that the Constitution is "an anti-slavery instrument, demanding the abolition of slavery as a condition of its own existence, as the supreme law of the land" (396).

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<sup>14</sup> Douglass adds new material to support the notion that much of his experience is quintessentially "American." He makes much of his love of "liberty" (156-59, 280, 284). Describing his early days in New Bedford, he emphasizes his ethos of self-reliance, saying he would not accept Nathan Johnson's generosity for long: "My cry was like that of Hood's laborer, 'Oh! only give men work'" (348). In a tone evoking Twain-like tales of rural boyhood, Douglass observes that because a slave-child is not educated for cultivated life, he can be "a genuine boy, doing whatever his boyish nature suggests .... [He] has no pretty little verses to learn in the nursery; no nice little speeches to make for aunts, uncles, or cousins, to show how smart he is ... If he feels uncomfortable, from mud or from dust, the coast is clear; he can plunge into the river or the pond, without the ceremony of undressing .... In a word, he is, for the most part of the first eight years of his life, a spirited, joyous, uproarious, and happy boy, upon whom troubles fall only like water on a duck's back" (41-2).

Douglass's shift on the Constitution, which the Garrisonians viewed as apostasy, strongly reinforces his attempt to define himself as a full-fledged American. First, it is implicitly a claim to membership in the national community, as Douglass arrogates to himself the right to interpret the country's defining document. Second, it signals the author's recognition that the Union is worth saving -- his stake, even as one who was victimized, in preserving the quasi-religious belief of many moderate Northerners of what it meant, in a corporate sense, to be Americans. Third, it cracks the ideological bond between the American ideal of liberty and the economic practice of slavery in a way that *preserves the ideal*, for emancipation is posited as the fulfillment of great American values. Finally, this admittedly "radical change" of belief (396) connotes a corresponding change of opinion about the role of American civil government. No longer is abolition a cause to be undertaken only by morally-concerned private citizens, outside the realm of politics and government. By arguing that the Constitution is not simply neutral towards slavery, but fundamentally opposed to it, Douglass asserts that the three branches of government have a legal duty to join the antislavery cause. His vision remains moral -- the abolition of slavery -- but the earlier strategy of promoting private activism evolves into one of promoting government responsibility. And Douglass becomes a defender

of the nation's great founding document, rather than one of its detractors. As he writes in the 1881 autobiography, "Measures change, principles never" (284).

From this change of Constitutional interpretation, then, derives the fourth major element of Douglass's revised public identity. If abolition is a government affair, to be gained or thwarted through the national political processes, then effective abolitionist leadership requires more sophisticated political engagement than the radical moral outrage of the Garrisonians (and the Narrative). Douglass announces that he now believes that "to abstain from voting, was to refuse to exercise a legitimate and powerful means for abolishing slavery" (396). Throughout My Bondage and My Freedom, Douglass engages in countless overt political speech-acts -- from attacking the Fugitive Slave Law to defending the Constitution, from appeasing the nativists to giving the Garrisonians the back of his hand, from honoring temperance values to emphasizing his ties to the African American community. This portrait of himself as a man of politics -- though not of one political party -- is a far cry from the author ten years before who compares office-seekers to slaves fawning before an overseer (1845, 57). But, in 1855, coalition politics clearly held more promise to defeat Slave Power than the abolitionist jeremiads of the early movement years, including the Narrative.

The leading scholars of My Bondage and My Freedom have commented upon some of these revisions of persona; as noted, Andrews explores his attempt to project a distinctly African American cultural identity, while Eric J. Sundquist analyzes the revisions as "the central element of [Douglass's] entry into America's revolutionary tradition of liberal individualism and the sign of his embrace of the principles of autonomy, property, and equal rights" (89-90). What has not been commented upon is that Douglass, unlike many of his black contemporaries, admits no inherent contradiction between these twin pillars of his revised persona. We should be clear on this point: in the privacy of his mind, Douglass probably mulled the classic tension between the values of cultural preservation and acculturation; but he displays no desire to air these thoughts publicly or even to acknowledge the possible opposition of his African American and American identities. Why should he have? His goal was to project a multifaceted political identity to diverse constituencies, that is, to appear to both white and black groups to be the apotheosis of their values. In that quest, there was nothing to gain from picking up a polarized debate in which, by taking one side or the other, he would limit the political breadth of his appeal. This discretionary silence is a powerful measure of Douglass's authorial control in the second

autobiography, and an example of how, in certain contexts, silence can be an empowering rhetorical practice.

Thus, having outgrown the persona of the Narrative, Douglass recasts his public image. However, even as My Bondage and My Freedom becomes an emancipatory performance -- a display of the author's boundary-shattering growth -- the text remains ensnared within social and political strictures of its own. For one thing, Douglass does not escape all of the rules and expectations for fugitive slave accounts within which he wrote the Narrative. The anonymous editor's preface begins with the astonishing Garrisonian advertisement that "the reader ... is not invited to a work of ART, but to a work of FACTS -- Facts, terrible and almost incredible, it may be -- yet FACTS, nevertheless" (v). Douglass still cannot provide the details of his escape, which remain to be told, finally, in the 1881 edition of Life and Times of Frederick Douglass (196-201). Likewise, the details of Douglass's near-fatal beating at Pendleton must wait for the third autobiography (1881, 234). Again, he must offer a series of defensive explanations (if more philosophical than before), not only for stereotypical slave behavior like stealing, but also for controversial public activities of his past.<sup>15</sup> And once

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<sup>15</sup> He claims that he is not self-promoting (vi), that he did not completely yield to Garrisonian rules and regulations, that he was not wrong to purchase his freedom from Thomas Auld (375), and that, while lecturing abroad, he did not improperly criticize America (377-9) or "allow



more he must yield to the political imperative not to "mince matters" with too much concern for shades of grey.

According to William McFeely, he perpetuates the Narrative's polemical distortion of Thomas Auld, among other things falsely stating that Auld had "turned [his grandmother] out like an old horse to die in the woods" (427), when, in fact, she was owned by the Anthony family, not Auld (McFeely 159).<sup>16</sup> Although he edits out the first autobiography's Southern-hell versus Northern-heaven dichotomy, he replaces it with the parallel simplification of racist America versus colorblind Great Britain. In this regard, the Narrative and My Bondage and My Freedom are captive to the exact same imperative: the necessity to distort, even obfuscate, certain aspects of enslavement and oppression in order to make the most effective arguments against them.

As with the original, the second autobiography also reflects a strong commitment to the strictures of message discipline. Douglass does provide more information about his mother and grandmother, but once again he employs discretionary silence about complicating personal topics such as his relationships with his siblings, wife, and

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myself to address Englishmen as against Americans" (379).

<sup>16</sup> In the 1881 autobiography, Douglass includes a deathbed reconciliation scene with Thomas Auld, in which the former slave admits having made a "mistake" about this accusation. Moreover, Douglass reports having said to his former master, "I did not run away from you, but from slavery; it was not that I loved Caesar less, but Rome more" (445-450).

children and with free Negroes in Baltimore. In political affairs, Douglass ignores most of his major stands since 1845. One of these is his strong opposition to the war with Mexico. Another is his involvement in the great Free Soil Convention of 1848, which he describes in 1881 (282). Another is his leadership in the women's movement -- including arguing on behalf of women's suffrage at the 1848 Seneca Falls Convention and signing the Declaration of Sentiments there (McFeely 156) -- which also finds no expression until the third autobiography (1881, 480-82). Still another is his attempt, starting in 1852, to create manual labor schools for African Americans, which some militant leaders criticized as segregationist (1881, 289-96; Huggins 52). Really, Douglass provides only two extended discussions of post-slavery political stands. He recounts his evolution away from Garrisonian doctrine, which only would have increased his appeal both to African Americans and moderate pro-Union whites; and he describes efforts in Great Britain to rescue Scottish Methodism from the corruption of its association with American slavery (380-87). Neither of these acts in his political past would have undermined the fragile platform upon which Douglass and others hoped to unite a host of discordant interests in 1855.

Moreover, the overriding big tent goal of attracting white moderates, many of them anti-black, occasionally

compels him to cater to the very racist sympathies he deplored. Perhaps no compromise is entailed in the scene that portrays a proslavery aristocrat, Col. John Henry Clifford, greeting Douglass warmly on a Massachusetts train car while other whites make it clear they wish he would sit elsewhere (403-5). But merely displaying didactic role models was not enough to recruit and retain Barnburner Democrats and Know-Nothings into the antislavery coalition in 1855. It was also necessary to seem to endorse some of their racial beliefs and address some of their fears. One example stands out. In the 1840s and 50s, Liberty, Free Soil and Republican office-seekers faced campaign charges that, because they opposed slavery, they were proponents of racial "amalgamation" (Sewell 98; McPherson 1988, 225). Proslavery propagandists struck this chord with visceral fury, as in the case of the young women who marched during the 1858 Indiana Senate campaign with signs reading "Father, save us from nigger husbands" (Foner 1970, 262). To counter these charges, politicians including Lincoln went to great lengths to prove that theirs was truly a "white man's party" (McPherson 1988, 227). In a similar manner, Douglass, the son of a white man, inoculates himself against the charge of espousing miscegenation. Discussing a favored slave on the Great House Farm, he speculates that the slave was the owner's child, and then he concludes scornfully, "Practical amalgamation is common in every neighborhood where I have

been in slavery" (his italics, 116). In other words, it is the peculiar institution, not the antislavery movement, that promotes the undesirable blending of races.

In pointing out limiting forces brought to bear upon My Bondage and My Freedom, I do not mean to undermine the argument of this chapter and suggest that Douglass exerts no control over his second autobiography. That is patently not the case. But also, I do not agree with Sundquist that "Douglass makes authorial revision a mode of revolutionary action -- revolt ... against any form of mastery that he has not forged for himself" (91). The 1855 autobiography should not be regarded as completely unfettered expression -- an exultant shattering of boundaries -- even if that is the effect the author aspires to create. For Douglass, discursive freedom and discursive captivity are almost always relative phenomena, experienced by degrees and in tandem.

Years later, in the 1892 autobiography, the author made this exact point: "I write freely of myself, not from choice, but because I have, by my case, been morally forced into thus writing" (511). Contained therein is the great paradox of My Bondage and My Freedom and his entire career: Douglass writes autonomously, but within a circumscribed discursive field, as dictated by the larger moral cause. He is "free" but "forced," forced but free, forced and free. This is the dialectic of freedom and captivity for Douglass.

Working within rules and restriction, he seeks to expand opportunities for himself and his people. True, in 1855 he does not and cannot rebel against every pre-set parameter. He must write about himself, in a certain style, with deference to certain goals and constituencies. But this submission serves a just cause, one that he chose, one dedicated to cutting chords of oppression that bound him and his people. Moreover, within its terms of authorship, the 1855 text empowers him to realize socially-productive goals: to establish a new narrative voice, address a new multitude of audiences, update his public image, and re-insert his life story into the public arena in ways that help the cause. Thus, I believe that in this revisionary 1855 speech-act, Douglass's "freedom" is relatively greater than his "bondage." One final example bears this out.

It could be argued on several grounds that the strongest limiting force that Douglass faces in My Bondage and My Freedom is the 1845 Narrative itself. After all, in 1855 Douglass still was dependent upon his former slave status, codified in the Narrative, as a major source of his authority both as a writer and a leader. To whites, the distinction of enslavement enhanced Douglass's stature as an "inside" witness of slavery, made him a model of American success and self-reliance, and exemplified the potential for Negro "progress." To African Americans, one of the things that made Douglass distinctive in comparison to the more

radical former slaves Henry Highland Garnet, Samuel Ringgold Ward, Alexander Crummwell, and Martin Delany was that he had experienced the horrors of slavery *as an adult*. He could draw on this first-hand adult perspective in promoting abolitionism; he could have greater credibility when invoking slavery as a metaphor for the social condition of free Negroes; and he could portray himself in a particularly heroic light, since he alone (as he told it) was responsible for his escape to freedom.

Douglass faced an interesting quandary: to ignore the original work would mean to ignore his authorizing experience as a slave, but to adhere too closely would limit the growth in leadership, intellect, rhetorical skill, and self-reliance that he wants to project. With the fungible text -- the acceptability of revising a published work -- he breaks this impasse and creates instrumental roles for both autobiographies. Here's how: on the whole, Douglass does not add new passages to relate or approximate his strongest feelings, to display his captive consciousness, or to show the act of writing about slavery to be indescribably painful. Instead, he relies on four quoted excerpts from the Narrative to portray his most intense emotions in his most impassioned and sermon-like language. One of them is the famous slave song passage, introduced with the line, "I cannot better express my sense of them now, than ten years ago, when, in sketching my life, I thus spoke of this

feature of my plantation experience" (98). Another is the celebrated passage about the angst caused by Covey's slave-breaking methods:

... I was somewhat unmanageable when I first went there but a few months of this discipline tamed me. Mr. Covey succeeded in breaking me. I was broken in body soul and spirit. My natural elasticity was crushed my intellect languished; the disposition to read departed the cheerful spark that lingered about my eye died; the dark night of slavery closed in upon me and behold a man transformed to a brute! ....

[He then portrays himself watching ships depart from the Chesapeake Bay] "You are loosed from your morning, and free I am fast in my chains, and a slave! You move merrily before the gentle gale, and I sadly before the bloody whip! ... O, that I were free! O, that I were one of your gallant decks, and under your protecting wing! Alas! betwixt me and you the turbid waters roll. Go on, go on. O that I could also go! ... O God, save me! God, deliver me! Let me be free! Is there any God? Why am I a slave? ...

(1855, 219-21; 1845, 105-7)

Douglass could have acknowledged dozens of mundane passages that are lifted straight from the first work, or, conversely, he could have subsumed the four excerpts as well. Doing neither, he preserves the Narrative as a reliable source of one way that he "knows" slavery -- through the soul -- while My Bondage and My Freedom becomes the measure of another way, through the mind. If the first work is no longer the definitive autobiography, it still speaks for him, and, as a cited presence in the second autobiography, it displays the author's new, more philosophical style of argumentation. The fungible text allows Douglass to create a complementary relationship

between his two life stories. They become two sides of one brain, two aspects of one subjectivity, one work to be heard and one to be read -- and together they keep fresh what was for Douglass the credibility-enhancing persona of the former slave.<sup>17</sup>

But there is another reason why we should not think that My Bondage and My Freedom is hamstrung by the persona of the Narrative. For political reasons, publishing a second narrative of slavery was a brilliant stroke in 1855, when the emerging Republican party was beginning the movement that would result in the 1860 election of the moderate Abraham Lincoln. As a part of that process, radical, moderate, and conservative elements of the new party -- some of them anti-Negro cross-over Democrats -- debated how far the party should take its opposition to slavery. Many moderates and conservatives argued only for the non-extension of slavery instead of universal emancipation. Some radical abolitionists supported this approach because they saw it as a smart short-term political strategy, in Horace Greeley's words a "first practical step" toward abolition (Foner 1970, 118). Others stridently protested what Salmon Chase called the "the obvious disposition among many to place our cause on the lowest

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<sup>17</sup> In the 1881 and 1892 autobiographies, Douglass has no interest in creating a symbiotic relationship between the 1845 and 1855 texts. As a result, the first autobiography is only quoted twice, and one of those is truncated. My Bondage and My Freedom is never quoted.



possible ground -- to connect it with the least possible advocacy of principle" (Foner 1970, 139). In his journalism in the 1850s, the non-Republican Douglass more often weighed in with the latter faction. Shortly before the publication of My Bondage and My Freedom, he wrote that his difficulty with the new party was that "it leaves the slaves ... in fetters -- in the undisturbed possession of his master, and does not grapple with the question of emancipation in the States" (Martin 38). In the autobiography, however, Douglass takes a different tack; politic and discerning, he chooses not to address the non-extension debate directly, perhaps not wanting to harden his own or his opponents' positions, weaken the growing party, or commit to time immemorial an incomplete record of a debate that he might not win. Nevertheless, with this autobiography, he injects a strong statement of principle into the debate; by resurrecting the image of himself as a slave, as well as the horrors that he endured, Douglass does his part to keep abolition on the table as the only morally acceptable antislavery position for the new party. He combats the momentum towards a watered-down Republican platform in 1856 that would only revive the failed concession ethos of the Compromise of 1850. Coming during this early debate about the Republican stance on slavery, he issues a well-timed reminder that slavery is an abomination. Douglass is not held captive to the story of his enslavement; rather, he

strategically revises and resurrects that story at a critical political juncture, writing "freely of himself" within the circumscription of the cause.

3.

Autobiography and the fungible text enhance Frederick Douglass's contributions to the African American freedom movement. But it would be a mistake to think that, for Douglass or any other oppressed writer, writing an autobiography is a selfless act, with all personal and individual concerns given over to the larger collective struggle. After all, just like any other author, writers who are members of oppressed groups may be concerned about making a name for themselves and enhancing their opportunities. They may view publishing as a means of legitimizing themselves in society and of earning money. No one who writes under his own name -- not even those most committed to a cause -- entirely removes self-regard from the social and narrative act of public self-definition. In this more self-interested aspect of maintaining a public voice, the fungible text can be of great help, as exemplified in the autobiographies of the Rev. Josiah Henson.

In 1830, at the age of forty-one, Henson escaped from slavery in Kentucky and emigrated to Canada West (now

Dresden, Ontario). Working with white Americans and travelling frequently to New England, he helped establish the British-American Institute, which in turn purchased 300 acres of land to create an experimental Negro colony at Dawn. Henson moved to Dawn in 1840 and, within ten years, the community had grown to about 500 people and 1,800 acres. The colonists grew corn, wheat, oats, and tobacco and operated a saw mill, grist mill, brick yard, rope factory, and lumber yard (Pease 63-83). They also founded a manual labor school, which was Henson's brain-child. However, under Henson's stewardship and, starting in 1852, the management of the Londoner John Scoble, Dawn suffered chronic fiscal instability. The chief fundraiser, Henson received much of the blame and was often accused of fraud. In March, 1851, The Liberator editorialized, "Mr. Henson is a time-serving hypocrite, unworthy of respect and unfit to be entrusted with the integrity of his people" (Pease 75). Plagued with mismanagement, Dawn declined steadily until 1868, when the British-American Institute was abandoned and its land at Dawn was sold (Pease 81). Historians cannot determine for certain whether Henson was a crook or simply an inept leader prone to causing dissension. In either case, in 1849, as part of his mission to raise funds for Dawn (which was at that time \$7,000 in debt [Pease 73]), Henson published a plain-spoken, seventy-six page autobiography.

The Life of Josiah Henson, Formerly a Slave, now an Inhabitant of Canada, as Narrated by Himself was dictated to Samuel A. Eliot, a moderate former mayor of Boston who later supported the Fugitive Slave Act (Pease 75). A summary of the autobiography reveals this moderate influence as well as the pragmatism necessary in the mid-1800s for a fugitive slave to request large charitable donations from American, British, and Canadian whites. The youngest of six children whose parents were owned by different masters, Henson was born in Maryland in 1789. When he was very young, he recounts in unadorned and unemotional language, his father received one hundred lashes, had his right ear amputated, and was shipped off to Alabama for allegedly striking a white man. A couple years later, after the death of his "kindhearted, liberal, and jovial" master Dr. McP. (the names are withheld [2]), the family was dispersed, and Henson and his mother were sold to a "coarse . . . , vulgar . . . , unprincipled . . . , cruel . . . , [and] licentious" (5) farmer named Isaac R. Henson claims to have grown up to be a "robust and vigorous lad," stronger and more hard-working than anyone on the farm (7), tender enough to steal food occasionally for suffering slave women (9), and a devout Christian (12-13). At an early age, in part because he caught his white predecessor stealing for "selfish ends," (10), he earned a promotion to overseer. In that job he served his master well, managing "to raise more than double

the crops, with more cheerful and willing labor, than was ever seen on the estate before" (10). Around age twenty, he suffered a crippling injury. While performing his regular task of extricating his drunken master from a bar-room brawl, he knocked down one of the pugilists, "a little more rough ... than usual" (15). One week later, Mr. L. beat him with a six-foot stake, breaking his right arm and both shoulder blades (17). No longer able to perform heavy labor (despite, he claims, having re-broken his shoulder blades trying), Henson continued as the trusted overseer of the farm (19). His greatest display of loyalty came in 1825, when, at the beckoning of Isaac, he escorted twenty-one slaves to the Kentucky plantation of Isaac's brother Amos. This odyssey involved transporting the caravan through the free state of Ohio, where free Negroes begged them not to submit to bondage. With regret, Henson explains that at the time he was unwilling to gain freedom dishonestly:

No other means of obtaining [freedom] had occurred to me, but purchasing myself of my master. The idea of running away was not one that I had ever indulged .... I had promised that man to take his property to Kentucky, and deposit it with his brother; and this, and this only, I resolved to do. (23-24)

While toiling for Amos R. in Kentucky from 1825-28, Henson began a ministry of preaching the Word of Jesus not with "theological knowledge ... [but] from the fulness [sic] of the heart deeply impressed with its own sinfulness and imperfection" (26-27). In 1828, with Amos's permission,

Henson embarked upon a stint of preaching in free states to earn the money to buy himself and his family. After much success, the unschooled preacher traveled back to Maryland and cut a deal for his freedom with his master -- the payment of three hundred and fifty dollars on the spot to Isaac and one hundred dollars to Amos. But upon returning to Kentucky to settle with Amos, it became apparent that Henson had been deceived, for the brother expected to receive one thousand dollars, an amount he could never muster (35). Compounding this "villainy" (35), Amos ordered Henson to accompany his son, young Amos, to New Orleans to sell some "cargo," including, no doubt, the slave himself (38). During the journey down the Mississippi in a flat boat, the author reports that he faced the dark night of his soul, turning from a "pleasant-tempered fellow," into the stereotypical "savage, morose, and dangerous slave" (41). Finally, he claims, with the specter of a lifetime of brutal deep South servitude looming before him, he grabbed an ax and contemplated killing his four white companions, only to stop himself just before striking the fatal blow: "What! commit *murder!* and you a Christian?" (42).

I then made to resign myself to the will of God, and take with thankfulness, if I could, but with submission, at all events, whatever he might decide should be my lot. I reflected that if my life were reduced to a brief term, I should have less to suffer, and that it was better to die with a Christian's hope, and a quiet conscience, than to live with the incessant recollection of a crime that would destroy the value of life, and under the weight of a secret that would crush out the

satisfaction that might be expected from freedom and every other blessing. (43)

God rewarded the choice, for Amos Jr. came down with a deadly stomach disorder. Nursing the young man "carefully and constantly" while navigating the boat back to Kentucky, the loyal slave saved his life (46). Disaster was averted for Henson, and in the process, he learned a lesson: Isaac and Amos could not be trusted to honor a deal and the rights "I had acquired ... by the money I had paid for myself" (47). Because of their perfidy -- not that they enslaved him, but that they broke the contract -- Henson finally decided it was legitimate to take flight. The escape was perilous but successful for the entire family.

One can see that this self-portrait is crafted to appeal to potential white benefactors. Henson portrays himself as someone who understands and honors the mutual obligations of business agreements. Ever the company man, he profitably administered Isaac's farm keeping his word and delivering twenty-one slaves to Amos. Even when he stole from the master "in small matters" such as giving more food to the slaves, "it was unequivocally for his [master's] benefit in more important ones" (19). In fact, he shows that he is not one to complicate commercial transactions and assigned duties, "whether they were good or bad," with moral considerations: "I had no reason to think highly of [Isaac's] moral character; but it was my duty to be faithful to him in the position in which he placed me; and

I can boldly declare, before God and man, that I was so" (19).

Moreover, Henson does not display a Douglass-like ethos of non-compliance with slaveholders that might have made backers wary. His brand of Christianity emphasizes "submission" to earthly trials, not resistance and rebellion (43). Not once in the Life does he abjure his readers to combat slavery. Henson does indicate that he helped other slaves escape (70), but he expresses no support for organized abolitionism, whether through moral suasion or political action. Furthermore, unlike Douglass in the Narrative, he makes it clear that he feels no anger and harbors no grudges. He remembers "with honest satisfaction" the wealthy Georgetowners to whom he sold fruit as a slave (20) and he describes forgiving "the causeless blows and injuries [Isaac] had inflicted on me in childhood and youth" (19). Indeed, he celebrates the American work ethic. Describing his efforts to promote black self-sufficiency at Dawn, he writes for his American readers: "The advantages of this course need not be dwelt upon in a country which [has] ... acquired an indestructible character for energy, enterprise, and self-reliance. It was precisely the Yankee spirit which I wished to instill into my fellow-slaves, if possible" (67). One word of explanation: before we judge Henson as a time-serving sycophant, we should not underestimate how difficult it must have been for African



Americans to solicit funds from whites in the 1840s and 1850s. Even a leader of Douglass's stature struggled to find the right voice, when, in responding to Harriet Beecher Stowe's 1853 inquiries about a proposed manual labor school, he suggested that "colored people are wanting in self-reliance" while "your favored race" always knows what needs to be done (Harding 179-180).

Henson spends the final fifteen pages of this short narrative relating two sets of activities during his nineteen years in freedom: his attempts at self-improvement (including working, preaching, and learning to read); and his efforts to promote blacks becoming "independent proprietors" in a self-contained community, rather than working "for hire" (66) and dealing with "insurmountable prejudices" (74) in integrated society. These themes are finely calibrated to appeal to several discrete audiences. For Northern blacks, Henson offers a way "to become independent of the white man for our intellectual progress, as we might be for our physical prosperity" (74). For Northern whites, he offers a more viable option than African colonization to deal with the "Negro question." And for Canadian whites, he addresses the concern that "Negroes were incapable of self-leadership and cooperative action" in an era when, due to heavy Irish immigration, they were less needed in the workforce than in the 1820s and 30s (Winks 1971, 143). Henson's goals provide a case-book example of

the difference between what Raymond Williams calls the "alternative" and "oppositional" responses of marginalized groups to dominant communities (1977, 108-114). Henson does not employ confrontational dialogue to challenge the legitimacy of white racism, segregation, political domination, or capitalism; he does not attempt to expose the contradictions in the beliefs of slavery-supporting Christians or democrats; he does not present black culture as unified around a coherent set of values and experiences that oppose those of the dominant group; and he does not angrily confront his victimizers by name. Rather, with diplomacy and tact, Henson accommodates the beliefs of the larger American and Canadian societies, creating a self-portrait in which his personal qualities are commensurate with the public trust to which he aspires, all toward the larger goal of establishing an alternative, self-sustaining black community on Canadian soil. Henson presents himself as a black leader with whom moderate whites can feel comfortable. Like Douglass in 1845, he is willing to compromise discursive freedom to achieve specific material goals, only his compromises are greater and his goals more narrow, and less a matter of social transformation, than Douglass's.

Henson's Life sold well, about 6,000 copies in three years (Andrews 1986b, 97). Ephraim Peabody praised it for being "simple, straightforward, and to the point" (26), in

contrast with Douglass's more bombastic Narrative (25). But in 1853, due to a stroke of luck, fame was thrust upon Josiah Henson. In that year, Mrs. Stowe published A Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin to demonstrate that her sensational novel was a "mosaic of facts" (1853, 5), not a false picture of "Life Among the Lowly." Among the many primary sources she cites is Henson's Life. To corroborate her portrayal of George Harris (13), she presents the "parallel facts" of four narratives, one of which is Henson's, and she quotes his account of being separated from his family (1849, 3-4). Then, in defense of Uncle Tom's verisimilitude, she mentions accounts of loyal Baltimore and Virginia servants, a New York convict who became a devout Christian, a pious woman in Maine named Phebe (sic), and finally, Henson, excerpting the passage where he chooses slavery over murder (Stowe 1853, 23-30). Of course, the self-schooled preacher is only one of dozens of "sources" Stowe cites, and no direct correspondence exists between his Life and her characters. Even so, with Stowe's acknowledgement, Henson revised his life story in ways that earned him a good deal of money.

In 1858, most likely with Samuel Eliot's assistance, Henson published Truth Stranger than Fiction: Father Henson's Story of His Own Life. With an Introduction by Mrs. H. B. Stowe. Like Frederick Douglass's second autobiography, this text, undoubtedly drafted by working off the original, updates Henson's activities since the 1849

publication. Stowe's three-page preface, featured so prominently (if misnamed) on the title page, foreshadows many of the revisions. She praises the work as an "instructive" Christian story (iii), commending it to "those who, under much smaller temptations, think themselves entitled to render evil for evil" (iv). Accordingly, right from the start of Truth Stranger than Fiction, Henson reinforces the Christian elements of his original self-portrait. He inserts a new opening paragraph, forswearing any anger, in which he praises God "that my soul has been tempered by him in so fiery a furnace and under such heavy blows" (2). Later he says of young Amos, "May God forgive him" for trying to sell Henson in New Orleans (95). A new early lesson is offered as the key to his formation: one Sunday, he claims, he heard an itinerant preacher's sermon to the effect that Jesus Christ died "for every man" (27). The blessed feeling that "I was loved!" gave Henson a new awareness -- not that all humans have equal rights, but that "Now I can bear all things" (28-29). "Swallowed up in the beauty of divine love," he maintains, "I loved my enemies" (29) and felt sorry for his master. Henson presents this new "memorable day" as the transformative moment from which he dates "my conversion, and my awakening to a new life" (29-30). Concomitantly, he removes those passages that contradict this persona. The sentence about the bar-room brawl that prompted a white man to beat him is revised from,

"I suppose I was a little more rough with him than usual" (1849, 15) to "By ill luck ... Bryce Litton got a severe fall" (34). The discrediting fact that he was once arrested for "a small debt" (1849, 72) is omitted altogether. Except for one flaw -- excessive "pride" -- which, like a good Christian, he learns to overcome (19, 52, 66), the author's preference is to show himself as a serene and devout man grateful for the charity of whites. The supreme representation of his character is the dramatic scene showing the final leg of the escape to freedom, when a ferry captain sets the Henson family ashore in Canada and then wishes him good luck:

Never shall I forget the spirit in which he spoke. He put his hand on my head and said, "Be a good fellow, won't you?" I felt streams of emotion running down in electric courses from head to foot. "Yes," said I, "I'll use my freedom well; I'll give my soul to God." (126)

This is a patronizing self-portrait -- pious, to be sure, but also pacified, compliant, needy, and perhaps even obsequious. It builds on Stowe's plea for white paternalism in the preface: "Whoever would help Jesus, were he sick or in prison," she writes "may help him now in the person of these his little ones, his afflicted and suffering children" (v). In turn, Henson adds several scenes showing white "good Samaritans" aiding fugitives (114, 158-59), lists dozens of respectable white women and men who have helped his crusade for Dawn, and makes no mention of the many black efforts in the 1850s to promote community empowerment.

Moreover, he adds passages that depict blacks in a lesser light, including the assertion that slaves are "cringing, treacherous, false, and thieving victim[s]" (15). Indeed, his virtue is the exception that proves the "general rule" (15) of African American inferiority. After hearing his first Christian sermon, he begins to "impart to the poor slaves those glimmerings of light from another world" (30). When it comes time to escape, he must convince his wife of the value of freedom, because "She was a poor, ignorant, unreasoning slave-woman" (104). This act of heroism becomes a practice, as he offers the new information that he has rescued 118 people from slavery (163). Learning to read inspires him to do more for other fugitive slaves, "who did not know how degraded and ignorant they were" (137). Another way that Henson reinforces the paternalistic stereotype is by adding material that portrays the slaves as a "light-hearted race" whose inborn happiness is such that even the "sternest and most covetous master cannot whip the fun out of us" (20). Indeed, he waxes fond about the good side of slavery:

Slavery did its best to make me wretched; I feel no particular obligation to it; but nature, or the blessed God of youth and joy, was mightier than slavery. Along with memories of miry cabins, frosted feet, weary toil under the blazing sun, curses and blows, there flock in others, of jolly Christmas times, dances before old massa's door for the first drink of egg-nog, extra meat at holiday times, midnight visits to apple orchards, broiling stray chickens, and first-rate tricks to dodge work. The God who makes the pup gambol, and the kitten play, and the bird sing, and the fish

leap, was author in me of many a light-hearted hour. True it was, indeed, that the fun and freedom of Christmas, at which time my master relaxed his front, was generally followed up by a portentous back-action, under which he drove and cursed worse than ever; still the fun and freedom were fixed facts; we had had them and he could not help it. (20-21)

Besides the ideology, what is striking about this passage is the prose itself, replete with visual images, parallel verb usages, and alliteration. Probably reflecting the association with Stowe, Henson revises the autobiography into a fictional form, employing chapter divisions, self-consciously literary language, and melodrama. For example, he rewrites the Life's factual account of his father's torture into a riveting scene, the most powerful in either book, which depicts fifty slaves watching as white men nail the man to a post by his ear and then slice off the ear (4-5). Likewise, he creates dramatic moments to convey in scenic form his conversion to Christianity and his awakening to a hatred of slavery. He replaces the Life's bland description of slaves in Mississippi (41) with a garish account of their "cheeks ... literally caved in with starvation and disease, and their bodies infested with vermin" (1858, 84-85). These changes reflect the novelization of his experience. Henson rejects the "straightforward," dispassionate approach previously praised by Peabody, opting instead for the Stowe-like authority of flamboyant rhetoric and a fictional voice. The problem, unfortunately, is that Henson's fictional skills sometimes

seem negligible, for in places his writing is comically excessive, almost self-parodic. For example:

The miseries which I saw many of the women suffer often oppressed me with a load of sorrow. No *white knight*, rescuing fair ones from cruel oppression, ever felt the throbbing of a chivalrous heart more intensely than I, a *black knight*, did, in running down a chicken in an out-of-the-way place to hide till dark .... I love the sentiment [of chivalry] in its splendid environment of castles, and tilts, and gallantry; but having fallen on other times, I love it also in the homely guise of Sambo as Paladin, Dinah as outraged maiden, and old Riley as grim oppressor. (his italics; 21-23)

The possible brilliance here, I might add (and this cannot be proven), is that by presenting himself as a ludicrous writer -- a diverting Sambo-version of the real thing, Stowe -- Henson actually enhances the innocuous, non-threatening persona that he projects in so many other ways. Perhaps such vaudevillian excesses are Henson's real triumph, allowing him to manipulate white folks into giving him funds for Dawn and/or himself. By donning the Sambo mask, he portrays a familiar and re-assuring figure -- the honest and contented "good fellow" who is neither inscrutable nor untrustworthy. But on that front, as in most questions of authorial intention, we will never know the full story.

We do know, however, that Henson's third revision capitalized on the link with Stowe in an even larger way, and the title says it all: "Uncle Tom's Story of His Life": An Autobiography of the Rev. Josiah Henson (Mrs. Harriet Beecher Stowe's "Uncle Tom"). In 1871, three years after



the collapse of the colony at Dawn, an impoverished Henson travelled to Great Britain to make a name for himself as the model for Stowe's most famous character (Rice, x). During his travels, he collaborated with John Lobb, the young managing editor of a weekly newspaper called Christian Age (Winks 1969, xxxiii), under whose guidance he made slight revisions that formalized his personal link with Stowe's world-famous Tom. In the 1877 text, Stowe's preface is preserved, even though she says nothing about Henson being a model for the character. To fill this gap, Lobb includes an editorial note claiming that Henson visited Stowe before she published her novel, quoting authenticating passages from A Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin, and positing that the memorable scene in which Uncle Tom rescues Little Eva from drowning was drawn from Josiah's life (1877, 5-11). For his part, Henson enhances all of his virtues in the 1858 profile. He makes himself even more pious, elaborating the importance of his mother's daily prayers to his formation, and removing passages that quote his master cursing. He makes himself even more peace-loving in slavery, recounting an audacious tall tale about his having the "moral courage" to try to prevent Nat Turner's rebellion, supposedly arguing "no, let us suffer in God's name, and wait His time for Ethiopia to stretch forth her hands and be free" (193-94).<sup>18</sup> He becomes

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<sup>18</sup> Henson arrived in Canada the year before Turner's rebellion. Henson's use of Nat Turner, along with Douglass's and, as we shall see, William Wells Brown's,

even more forgiving, as he praises the example of some ex-slaves who stayed on as loyal employees of their former mistress (155). He becomes even more heroic, claiming that he was appointed captain in the 2nd Essex Company of Colored Volunteers during the Canadian Rebellion (176), which the historian Robin Winks says did not happen (1969, xx). And he becomes even more socially respectable, including new references to his mingling with aristocratic Britons during his travels. Somewhat defensively, Henson revises his self-portrait to explain some of the fiduciary imbroglios in which he had been enmeshed, and he includes several testimonials to his character at the end of the work. But most important for Henson's purposes in 1877, "Uncle Tom's Story of His Life" includes a new anecdote of the author meeting with Mrs. Stowe in Andover before she began her novel (which, in fact, could not have occurred [Winks 1969, xix]). Uncle Tom's Cabin was in no way exaggerated, he argues, claiming that "[s]he manifested so much interest in me" (157). He goes on to assert great pride in his "title," Uncle Tom, and his importance to Stowe's enterprise: "If my humble words in any way inspired that gifted lady to write such a plaintive story that the whole community has been touched with pity for the sufferings of the poor slave, I

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shows that the insurrectionist slave became for African American writers a flexible thematic vehicle. The figure of Turner is made to exemplify Henson's pacifism, Douglass's militancy, and Brown's warning to whites of the dire consequences of delaying emancipation.

have not lived in vain; for I believe that her book was the beginning of the glorious end" (158). By this time, Dawn was history, but the revised text was a spectacular success for Henson and Lobb, selling 40,000 copies in Great Britain in 1877 and 96,000 by 1878 (Winks 1969, xxiv). In concert with the book, Lobb wrote a biography for children, The Young People's Illustrated Edition of "Uncle Tom's Story of His Life," (From 1789 to 1877), which sold 250,000 copies and became a Sunday school success (Winks 1969, xxiv). Three years later Henson and Lobb published a "revised and enlarged edition," in which Henson preserves the link with Uncle Tom but also presents himself as a self-made man, describing encounters with Rutherford Hayes and Queen Victoria and a return to the old plantation in Montgomery County. There, he meets his sickly former mistress Mrs. Riley, then seventy, who shouts out, "You are rich!" (1881, 158). If he was so, in large measure the fungible text -- the fungible life -- was responsible.

#### 4.

William Wells Brown was the first African American to earn his living primarily with his pen. He was versatile writer, comfortable in many genres. Besides authoring a best-selling 1847 slave narrative and, in 1853, the first published novel by an African American, he was a published

historian, journalist, biographer, essayist, travel writer, playwright, and poet. In African American literature, Brown may be the consummate practitioner of the fungible text, having strategically revised and republished almost everything he wrote.<sup>19</sup> Most notable of his revisionary accomplishments is the historical novel Clotel; or, The President's Daughter: A Narrative of Slave Life in the United States. In part, he composed the novel through a process of compilation and revision, for sundry portions were previously published as sketches, articles, and short stories.<sup>20</sup> Then he revised the text three times during the politically tumultuous period from 1860 to 1867. I will show that Brown wrote and revised these four novels with

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<sup>19</sup> The Narrative of William W. Brown, a Fugitive Slave appeared eight times, often with revisions (Farrison 112). In 1855 Brown published The American Fugitive in Europe, a revised and enlarged version of his 1852 travel book, Three Years in Europe. In 1874, he published The Rising Son, or The Antecedents and Advancements of the Coloured Race, a work of black history that was a revision and enhancement of The Black Man, His Antecedents, His Genius, and His Achievements (1863) and The Negro in the American Rebellion, His Heroism and His Fidelity (1867). My Southern Home, published four times between 1880 and 1884, revises and represents considerable amounts of Brown's major fiction and non-fiction writings (Farrison 446).

<sup>20</sup> Some of these sources include Brown's 1847 Narrative; "Letter XXII" from Three Years in Europe (Farrison 203-4); the eighth "View" of A Description of William Wells Brown's Original Panoramic Views of the Scenes in the Life of an American Slave (Farrison 174); an article entitled "A True Story of Slave Life" published in London's Anti-Slavery Advocate in December, 1852 (Farrison 210); and "The Quadroons," a short story by Lydia Maria Child (Farrison 417).

great sensitivity to the opportunities and restrictions of their respective political contexts.

Clotel was published in Great Britain, where Brown lived from 1849 to 1855. The first edition includes a short preface by Brown and a fifty-two page "Memoir" presenting incidents from Brown's bondage and letters praising his character. In the preface, the author defines the novel as primarily a political text. If Clotel "should add anything new to the information already given to the Public through similar publications," he writes, "and should thereby aid in bringing British influence to bear upon American slavery, the main object for which this work was written will have been accomplished" (iv). Although Brown does not disavow artistic goals for this pioneering work of literature, he certainly does not advertise them. The authorial persona created to validate the text is that of a provider of information, a fugitive slave, and an antislavery activist, not a self-conscious literary stylist. This point is affirmed late in the novel during one of Brown's authorial asides: "This, reader, is an unvarnished narrative of one doomed by the laws of the Southern States to be a slave" (209).

Brown wrote Clotel in the sentimental novel tradition of Uncle Tom's Cabin. In a complicated plot, Brown weaves three interrelated story lines spanning twenty-five years into 190 pages that also include tableau scenes of slavery

and a good deal of antislavery editorializing. The core characters are a quadroon slave woman named Currer and her two octoroon teenage daughters, Althesa and Clotel. Currer is the former mistress of Thomas Jefferson, to whom she had been hired out, and Clotel and Althesa are the President's daughters.

Cumulatively, this family suffers even greater tragedy than Stowe portrays among the characters in Uncle Tom's Cabin. In 1815, following the death of their master, the three women are separated forever at a slave auction. Currer is sold to a Yale-educated, Methodist minister named John Peck, a proslavery Northern democrat who owns Poplar Farm in Natchez, Mississippi. The novel does not develop her character; one of 4,000 slaves forced to watch a public lynching that Brown portrays (77), she eventually dies of yellow fever. Initially, Althesa fares better at the slave market. She is purchased by a Vermont parson who sells her to Henry Morton, a Yankee physician entranced with the "composure of a beautiful young white girl in the degraded position of a chattel slave" (112). They fall in love, marry, settle in New Orleans, and have two "white" children, Ellen and Jane. After Althesa and Henry die in the yellow fever epidemic of 1831, the racial heritage of their "white" teenager daughters is revealed; because mulatto children follow the condition of the mother, the President's granddaughters are auctioned as slave-concubines. Ellen

commits suicide, and Jane dies of a broken heart when her young lover is killed trying to rescue her. Clotel, the older Jefferson daughter, also lives a tragic existence. Even more beautiful than Althesa, she possesses "a complexion as white" as the men who bid for her and "features as finely defined as any of her sex of pure Anglo-Saxon" (62). Like her sister, Clotel is purchased by a man taken with her beauty, Horatio Green, with whom she falls in love. After they marry, Green gives her a small cottage on his Richmond plantation, but he will not publicly acknowledge their union or, as Clotel asks, buy her mother and move the family to Europe. They have one child, Mary, who is "still lighter than her mother" (80). Steadfast in her love and trust, and "poetic" in spirit (80), Clotel accepts their covert, non-legally binding marriage. But then Horatio begins to feel the stirring of political aspiration. Rejecting his enslaved wife and child, he marries into an influential family to launch his career. The "true woman" (108) Clotel is devastated, and only her profound love for Mary prevents suicide. Horatio simply denies the havoc he has wrought, while his new wife, stumbling upon the truth, sets out to destroy the shadow family. She forces Horatio to sell Clotel into the deep South and begins to terrorize the ten year-old Mary. Teaming up with a slave named William, Clotel escapes a Mississippi plantation and flees Northward. Pursued by her

enemies, the heroine tries to cross the Long Bridge leading into Washington, D.C. As she comes "within plain sight of the President's house and the capital [sic] of the Union," an "appalling tragedy" occurs (217). Rather than submit to capture, the young woman leaps into the Potomac River. As Brown summarizes, "Thus died Clotel, the daughter of Thomas Jefferson, a president of the United States; a man distinguished as the author of the Declaration of Independence, and as one of the first statesmen of that country" (218).

The one member of Currer's family line who survives is Mary, the President's granddaughter. As a young woman, she falls in love with yet another "white" slave (222), George, the liberty-loving son of an unnamed statesman. However, George is arrested for aiding Turner's rebellion, for which he is sentenced to death, despite a passionate courtroom speech on America's failure to live up to its ideals. During a jailhouse visit, Mary convinces him to switch clothes with her and make a break (a common nineteenth-century plot device). The ruse works, for George reaches freedom, but, as punishment, Mary is sold down the river. Hearing this, George gives up on America and moves to Manchester, England where, passing as white for a decade, he advances from clerk to partner in a firm. Unbeknownst to him, Mary's family beauty allows her to escape the South. A Frenchman named Devenant, having seen Mary in the New



Orleans slave market, buys her freedom and takes her to France to be his bride. They live happily in France, and have one child before Devenant's premature death. Ten years after the Richmond jailbreak, the white slaves George and Mary meet coincidentally in a Dunkirk cemetery. In sentimental fashion, the novel ends with their marriage, but the outcome is not quite perfect: in an editorial postscript, the author notes that because of the Fugitive Slave Law, the couple "can receive protection from any of the governments of Europe, [but] they cannot return to their native land without becoming slaves" (243).

As in Uncle Tom's Cabin, the slaveholding characters are as important to the author's polemical message as the tragic slaves. Brown portrays several types of whites who are implicated in the slave system, including the vicious trader Dick Walker (named after a slave-trader for whom Brown worked); Horatio Green, the Richmond plantation owner who sells his soul when he abandons Clotel; Henry Morton, the white Northern liberal who denounces the American legitimization of slavery but also represses the knowledge that his wife and children are legally black; James Crawford, a bank teller from Vermont who dislikes slavery but purchases Althesa at his wife's insistence; and Mr. Jones, a slaveowner who keeps his slaves so ignorant that one, when asked "Who made you?" cannot recall the name of the "gentmun," God (134). Most important are a cluster of

whites on Poplar Farm, owned by John Peck, who spends ten months a year in the North. Ned Huckelby is an uneducated white overseer who opposes slavery but needs the money his job provides (104-6). Hontz Snyder is a rough-neck New York missionary of Dutch and German extract who preaches to poor whites during the week and is hired by Peck to deliver to the slaves Sunday sermons on submission (94-100). Snyder, who embodies the class of conservative Northerners that the Free Soil and Republican leaders hoped to bring to the antislavery side, delivers a sharp attack on the anti-white elements of the economic system within which he works: "no white man is respectable in these slave states who works for a living. No community can be prosperous, where honest labour is not honoured" (105-6). There are two other whites on the plantation, Peck's true Christian daughter Georgiana, who morally opposes slavery, and Miles Carlton, a school fellow of Peck's whom Georgiana converts to the cause and ultimately marries. Brown's message with this assemblage of whites is in part hopeful, for only a few are irreversibly committed to the bondage system, but he also indicts the entire country, North as well as South, since most of the slaveowners are transplanted Yankees.

Poplar Farm is the scene of debate among whites about the justice of the slave system. Rev. Peck believes that "Rights and wrongs are ... the creatures of society ... both artificial and voluntary," and not natural components of the

human condition (89). Emblematic of the paternalistic mentality that Eugene Genovese argues was central to the self-justification of the slaveholders, he also believes that fair treatment of "his people" obligates them to loyal service (88, 124-25). In his view, the Bible legitimizes slavery. Miles, who has little use for the Bible, and "who had spent too many hours over the writings of Rousseau, Voltaire, and Thomas Paine," abhors slavery on the grounds of personal conscience, not theology (90). The "modest and self-possessed" (121) Georgiana argues that both men are wrong, and she defends Christianity as, in truth, an antislavery set of beliefs (92, 115-120). Brown's version of Little Eva converts Carlton "from infidelity to Christianity; from the mere theory of liberty to practical freedom" (188), and, after her father dies suddenly of cholera, they marry and try to free the slaves. The problem is that manumission would legally require the removal of the ex-slaves from the state of Mississippi. Miles proposes shipping them to Liberia, but, in a winning argument against African colonization, Georgiana convinces him that America is "as much their homes as ours" (157-59, 186-7). Instead, the Carltons set up a system of "gradual emancipation" (160), in which the overseer is fired, the whip is abolished, and they earn wages for their labor, to be placed in credit. "When it amounted to a certain sum, they would

all be free" (161). Under this more lenient bondage, a total transformation occurs among the slaves:

They were no longer apparently the same people. A sedateness, a care, an economy, an industry, took possession of them, to which there seemed to be no bounds to physical strength. They were never tired of laboring, and seemed as though they could never effect enough. They became temperate, moral, religious, setting an example of innocent, unoffending lives to the world around them .... On the Sabbath, Mr. and Mrs. Carlton read and explained the Scriptures to them; and the very great attention paid by the slaves showed plainly that they appreciated the gospel when given to them in its purity. (161-63)

Alas, Georgiana is stricken with the same form of consumption that has killed her mother. In a richly sentimental deathbed scene, she frees the slaves unconditionally and urges them to remember that if "temperate, industrious, peaceable, and pious, [they] can show the world that slaves can be emancipated without danger" (186). Weeping and kneeling, the slaves offer their thanks (187). Like Little Eva, Georgiana Peck Carlton is too good for an ungodly world. Her death licenses Brown's editorial comment that this "ornament to human nature" (189) would have despised the contemporary Fugitive Slave Law. Then, in a race-denying appeal to white Britons, he writes, "Oh, that God may give more such persons to take the whip-scarred negro by the hand, and raise him to a level with our *common humanity!*" (my italics, 189-90). Like Henson's scene with the ferry captain, this part of the novel expresses a fundamentally paternalistic vision of abolition, which is to

say, a fundamentally white vision: grateful, loyal, and voluntarily subservient, the ex-slaves become more productive and industrious workers; and Brown, using the voice of Georgiana, displays with this speech-act that he is one black man who would encourage liberated slaves to ingratiate themselves to whites.

The scene also points to the strong boundaries of racial ideology within which Clotel was composed. In the sentimental tradition, Brown recognizes that the success or failure of the goal of inspiring antislavery activity depends in large measure upon whether or not his audience of white British Christians, many of them women, can identify with his characters. For these readers, he upholds Georgiana as a moral exemplar. By preaching the Gospel of liberation, acting on her moral convictions, and refusing to finance the return of blacks to Africa, she represents the spirit of true Christianity. It is she, not the African American characters, whom Brown portrays gloriously as "the liberator ... surrounded by the sons and daughters of Africa" (187). The fugitive slave author flatters the ideals of his white British audience. It is in their hands to become liberators just like Georgiana. All they must do, he preaches in the novel's final chapter, is "Let British feeling be publicly manifested. Let British sympathy express itself in tender sorrow for my unhappy race. Let it be understood, unequivocally understood, that no fellowship

can be held with slaveholders professing the same common Christianity as yourselves" (245). The author's side of the bargain is that the slaves will be worthy of their freedom.

Furthermore, Brown understands that, to be roused to act, his British readers need to identify with the victims of slavery. Thus, the principle slave characters -- those whose suffering is drawn to elicit sympathetic responses -- are explicitly described as white in appearance and culture and are black only by legal technicality.<sup>21</sup> Althesa and Clotel were raised "as ladies" (60) because their mother earned extra money hiring herself out as a laundress; Ellen and Jane were sent to school in the North; and Mary and George worked in the Big House and learned from educated whites. The "whiteness" of Brown's tragic characters is further set off by the portrayal of the less tragic and more child-like black slaves who speak in comic dialect and are used as sources of comic relief. It is a "full-blooded negro" on Mr. Jones's farm who does not remember God's name (134), and a "mulatto woman" (as opposed to the sympathetic octoroons) who thinks John the Baptist "libs in Old Kentuck" (135). On Poplar Farm, the slave Sam, "one of the blackest of his race" (127), butters his face to make it "shiny" and claims, "If I had my rights I would be a mulatto too, for my

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<sup>21</sup> Brown even includes a gratuitous portrayal of a white German woman, Salome Miller, wrongfully thrown into slavery and "forced to take up with a negro, and by him had three children" (140).

mother was almost as light-coloured as Miss Sally" (128-9). Brown even includes a racist tableau scene of "Negro Dentistry," enhanced by a degrading illustration at the beginning of the novel, in which Sam sits atop a fellow with a toothache and with great effort yanks out the wrong tooth, the better to have "more room to get at the right one" (130).

Although Brown's black slaves are not content in bondage and see through the manipulative Christian rhetoric of their masters (99-100), it is clear that the novel reinforces the white audience's beliefs in biological determination. The "Negro," we are told, "constitutionally, is fond of dress and outward appearance" (144). Pompey, "like most of his race, had a set of teeth, which for whiteness and beauty could not be surpassed" (66). Mary's "last vestige of African ancestry" is her "plaintive expression ... so appropriate to that docile and injured race" (80). With such distinctions comes the implication of white superiority. Clotel's features are, as if rare for an African American, as "finely defined as any of her sex of pure Anglo-Saxon," and her whole appearance indicates "one superior to her position" (62-3). The heroic George is "somewhat ashamed of his African descent" (231), as is the buffoon Sam. If in these ways, Brown plays to comforting white notions of biology and heritage, he also raises a threatening specter of the consequences of delaying

abolition -- the image of the murderous black African bent on inflicting vengeance upon whites. Nat Turner, he notes, was a "full-blooded negro" (212). So too was the mythic Picquilo, "large, tall, full-blooded . . . , with a stern and savage countenance; the marks on his face showed that he was from one of the barbarous tribes of Africa, and claimed that country as his native land; his only covering was a girdle around his loins, made of the skin of wild beasts he had killed . . . . He moved about with the activity of a cat . . . . He was a bold, turbulent spirit; and from revenge imbrued his hands in the blood of all the whites he could meet" (212-13). Picquilo has no function in the plot; he is referred to only in an aside. In this context, he communicates Brown's warning -- most likely counterproductive -- that the primal, animalistic aspect of African Americans' biological composition may wreak havoc upon whites if slavery is not abolished peaceably. That said, it should be noted that the minor character William is a "full-bodied negro, whose very countenance beamed with intelligence" (167) and that having a slight black lineage does not make Althesa, Ellen, Jane, Clotel, Mary, or George biologically inferior to whites; only in larger proportions does it usually result in dangerous or lowly human beings.

If writing to a white British audience seems to have ensnared Brown in ideological restraints, publishing abroad



also brought unusual freedoms. Not having to accommodate the need for Northern white support in the struggle against slavery leaves Brown free to show the involvement of Northerners in the slave system and to cite specific instances in which "the prejudice that exists in the Free States against coloured persons" is "another form of slavery itself" (172-77). He does not have to cater to 1850s' white backlash against "amalgamation," and thus can portray mixed-race characters favorably and even argue that the "infusion of Anglo-Saxon with African blood has created an insurrectionary feeling among the slaves" because they feel the injustice of being enslaved by those with whom they have a "blood connection" (211). Stylistically, he does not have to work within the conventions of the slave narrative; instead, he is able to find a publisher for a work that blends sentimental fiction and documentary reporting, as Brown includes primary historical material such as newspaper accounts of violence against slaves, announcements by bounty hunters, advertisements by doctors for slaves to experiment upon, poems, church association statements, and famous speeches. This historical/documentary novel genre gives Brown far more flexibility than characterized the traditional slave narratives of Douglass and Henson; it allows him to evoke sympathy for his characters instead of himself; to invent scenes without worrying too much about whether they seem realistic; to represent a range of

experiences in slavery beyond his own; to depict the motives and beliefs of many characters, including slaveholders; to write about events occurring twenty to forty years before the date of publication as if they had just occurred; and, to experiment with a wide range of literary styles and strategies. "Truth" becomes more sweeping, more impressionistic, and less subject to the rules of dispassionate, fact-based narrative.

The greatest freedom Brown enjoys in Clotel may be the opportunity to skewer a revered American figure and the father of American democratic philosophy for the personal hypocrisy of putting his own children in chains. Writers from David Walker to James McCune Smith quote the Declaration of Independence to expose the hypocrisy of American society, but no one else goes so far as to damn the third president as one "who has spoken high-sounding words in favour of freedom, and then left his own children to die as slaves" (155). This startling polemical move is extremely powerful. The image-concept of Thomas Jefferson's daughters being sold as slaves and concubines encapsulates both the philosophical incongruity of slavery in a democracy and the personal inconsistencies slaveholders were forced to accept as they rationalized their economic system. However, even this confrontational move apparently has its limits in Clotel. Unlike David Walker, who tells black readers to give their children a copy of Notes on the State of Virginia

to teach them about racism, Brown presents his Jefferson for an all-white audience; hence, unlike the Appeal, Clotel makes no mention of Jefferson's racist arguments, instead only quoting (out of context) those passages from Notes in which the Virginian seems to condemn slavery. Perhaps Brown was wary of giving credibility to racist ideas by showing that the great philosopher-statesman held them.

This condemnation of Jefferson was softened considerably when, back in America, Brown revised and republished Clotel on the eve of the Civil War. The second version, entitled Miralda, or The Beautiful Quadroon, was published in serial form in The Weekly Anglo-African, a New York City newspaper whose audience was primarily African American. It ran in sixteen front-page installments from December 1, 1860 to March 16, 1861, or from several weeks after the election of Abraham Lincoln to less than a month before the first shots were fired on Fort Sumter. During this period, seven Southern states voted to secede from the Union (McPherson 1988, 235). Unfortunately, Miralda may be one of the great lost texts in American literary history. The novel has never been published outside of its serialization in 1860-61, and it is unclear whether all of the issues of The Weekly Anglo-African still survive. However, in studies written more than twenty years ago, William Edward Farrison and Jean Fagan Yellin summarize the major differences in plot and characterization between

Clotel and Miralda.<sup>22</sup> Thus far, my search for the relevant issues of The Weekly Anglo-African has yielded two issues at Howard University's Spingarn-Moorland Research Center containing part of chapter 15 and all of chapters 16, 17, 18, 23 and 24. These chapters are telling: they reveal major differences from Clotel, but they correspond chapter for chapter, and almost word for word, to the available third version of this text, Clotelle; A Tale of the Southern States, published in 1864 (hereafter referred to as A Tale of Southern States). Both Yellin, who found the entire text of Miralda in the original, and Farrison, who found all but the first six chapters, confirm that the second and third versions are very similar. From these two scholarly summaries, the six chapters of Miralda I have been able to locate, and my reading of A Tale of Southern States, I can offer a provisional analysis of the changes Brown made when he revised Clotel to meet the needs and interests of his integrated serial readers in 1860-61.

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<sup>22</sup> See Farrison, William Edward, William Wells Brown: Author and Reformer (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1969), p. 323-328 and Yellin, Jean Fagan, The Intricate Knot (New York: New York UP, 1972), p. 174-75. Farrison was unable to locate the issues of The Weekly Anglo-African containing the first six and one-half chapters of the novel. In a personal conversation, Professor Yellin recalled reading the novel in newspaper form in the collections of the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture in New York City, but thus far the Center has been unable to locate either the original holdings or microfilmed copies. The Library of Congress microfilm collection of The Weekly Anglo-African (the collection libraries are most likely to have obtained) has no holdings during the months when Miralda was published.

First of all, he streamlines the plot considerably, de-emphasizing the stories of Georgiana and Althesa, removing much of the documentary material and poetry, paring down the philosophical debates about slavery and rights, and apparently eliminating some of the antislavery anecdotes (such as the public lynching scene and Hontz Snyder's sermon). Some of these changes are likely made for the purposes of serialization; the sprawling plot structure of Clotel, with the scenes shifting from sub-plot to sub-plot every chapter, would have been difficult to follow reading just one three-chapter installment per week. But it is particularly significant that, in writing for an audience that included many African Americans, Brown removes Georgiana from her role as representative heroine and "liberator" of the slaves. She is now the kind daughter of a slaveholder, not a radical abolitionist. On the eve of the Civil War, Brown provides no endorsement of gradual emancipation or miraculous deathbed manumissions by true Christian owners. Instead, he revises the novel to place more emphasis on the role of African American leadership in the struggle for liberation.

This shift occurs primarily at the level of characterization. The slave woman Currer is renamed Agnes, her older daughter Clotel is renamed Isabella, and her younger daughter Althesa is renamed Marion. Clotel-Isabella is again purchased by an ambitious Richmond slaveholder, now

named Henry Linwood (formerly Horatio Green). Her daughter Miralda (formerly Mary) becomes romantically involved with Jerome Fletcher (formerly George Green) and is shifted to the center of the novel, befitting her new status as the title character. Once again, Clotel-Isabella and Mary-Miralda are "white" in appearance, although Mary-Miralda is made more black -- one-quarter instead of one-sixteenth. Along this line, Brown significantly revises the portrayal of George-Jerome. This alteration is exemplified in chapter 18, published on January 19, 1861 in The Weekly Anglo-African. No longer is the character the son of an American statesman, "as white as most white persons," with light hair and blue eyes (1853, 222). Now Brown colors Jerome as follows:

This slave ... was of pure African origin, was perfectly black, very fine-looking, tall, slim, and erect as any one could possibly be. His features were not bad, lips thin, nose prominent, hands and feet small. His brilliant black eyes lighted up his whole countenance. George Combe or Fowler would have selected his head for a model .... Jerome felt his superiority, and always declared that no master should ever flog him. (1)

This is a major difference. Writing for African American readers, Brown recognizes the racial imbalance in his earlier coloring of the sympathetic slaves. Jerome becomes an African ideal, a paragon of racial pride and resistance who, unlike George, does not take his master's surname. Brown preserves this portrayal of Jerome in A Tale of Southern States, reproducing the exact language from

Miralda quoted above. And, in chapters of the 1864 novel that correspond to chapters I have not been able to find of Miralda, Brown continues to depict Jerome as a model of black resistance. First, in an echo of Douglass's Covey scene, Jerome fights back when his master tries to whip him, an offense for which he is jailed (1864, 58). Sentenced to be lynched for striking a white man, he then delivers a courtroom statement that differs from George's courtroom challenge in Clotel for white Americans to live up to their national values (1853, 224-25). "If I mistake not," this "descendant of Africa" says, "the day will come when the negro will learn that he can get his freedom by fighting for it; and should that time arrive, the whites will be sorry that they have hated us so shamefully. I am free to say that, could I live my life over again, I would use all the energies which God has given me to get up an insurrection" (1864, 65). In all likelihood, Brown first composed these passages in Miralda (since they continue the theme of resistance that appears in chapter 18 there, and since they are well-suited for African American readers) and then preserved them in 1864. Besides creating a character who can be a locus of racial pride for readers, the new depiction of Jerome mitigates the hierarchy of white over black implicit in Clotel. That is to say, the "blackness" of Jerome redeems the "whiteness" of the other slave characters, Marion and her children, and Isabella and

Miralda. No longer is the universe of sympathetic, talented, and attractive slaves populated exclusively by "whites." Now, the mixed-race slave-women can be interpreted to suggest pro-black themes: the hypocrisy of whites who enslave their own children; the falsity of white ideologies of racial purity; and, in their very beings, the potential of white and black to coexist in harmony. The addition of the heroic Jerome dissolves some of the boundaries of white racial attitudes within which Clotel is situated. Although Miralda still uses the non-tragic slaves as objects of humor, now their comic portrayal seems to be pitched towards the condescending attitudes of free readers toward slaves, rather than those of white readers toward blacks.

Another major revision of Clotel occurs in the ending, as summarized by Yellin (1969, iv-v). In the original, George and Mary reunite and marry in France. Jerome and Miralda are likewise reunited, but Brown adds a new scene of their honeymoon, where they encounter Miralda's father, Henry Linwood (formerly Horatio Green), raving mad in a gothic Switzerland hotel. Eyeballs rolling in their sockets, guiltily shouting that he did not kill Miralda when he sold her down the river, Linwood is forgiven and nursed back to health by his Cordelia-like daughter. The weak man sees the error of his racist ways and vows to free his slaves and settle them in one of the Northern states upon



his return to Richmond.<sup>23</sup> This is a crucial revision, reflecting in 1861 both an optimistic desire for racial mending, and, differently, the power of the black character Miralda to convert and to heal in the way that Georgiana had done in Clotel. The sentimental power of Stowe's Little Eva finally appears in an African American character.

A third important revision of Clotel involves the portrayal of Clotel-Isabella's tragic suicide. In the January 19, 1861 installment of Miralda, disguised as a man, Isabella once again escapes and flees to the North during the aftermath of the Nat Turner rebellion. When she runs across the Long Bridge and plunges desperately into the Potomac, Brown reproduces almost the exact wording from chapter 16 of Clotel, with one change. Now Brown writes, "Thus died Isabella, a *descendent* of Thomas Jefferson," and not "the *daughter* of Thomas Jefferson" (1853, 218; Farrison, 326). It is a great loss not to be able to read the first three chapters of Miralda, where the blood relationship of Clotel-Isabella and Althesa-Marion to America's third President is surely defined. However, it is not surprising that Brown would choose to soft-pedal the relationship in an 1861 American newspaper. With the country mobilizing for war, and with the greatest hope for the destruction of the

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<sup>23</sup> This revision of Clotel's Horatio Green is foreshadowed in Chapter 17 of Miralda, where Brown adds the new sentence that, upon losing his daughter, Linwood "felt the deepest evil of the institution" (1/19/61).

slave system now resting with the American government (which for so long had been the protector of slavery), it is incumbent upon Brown not to weaken Northern resolve against Slave Power. If the author has more freedom in 1860-61 to portray his characters with pride in their racial origins, if he no longer needs to plead for more real-life Georgianas to "take the whip-scarred negro by the hand" (1853, 189-90), and if Miralda represents for Brown the essential gesture of reaching out to his own racial community, he also feels less authorial freedom to impugn the American government for its historic hypocrisy.

This restriction is even tighter in Clotelle: A Tale of Southern States (Clotelle is the Mary-Miralda character), which undoubtedly was revised from Miralda, not Clotel, during the military dog days of late-1863 and published in early 1864 (Farrison 387). The novel appeared as one of James Redpath's "Books for the Camp Fire," a series of novels including works by Swift, Balzac, Hugo, and Alcott that were marketed both to families and soldiers (Heermance 192). At the end of the novel, Redpath includes a short postscript justifying the inclusion of Clotelle: A Tale of the Southern States in the series:

The author of the foregoing tale was formerly a Kentucky slave. If it serves to relieve the monotony of camp-life to the soldiers of the Union, and therefore of Liberty, and at the same time kindles their zeal for the cause of universal emancipation, the object both of its author and publisher will be gained. (104)

Of course, in the brutal first half of 1864, when 65,000 Union troops were reported killed, wounded, or missing in May and June alone (McPherson 742), and when the Peace Democrats were calling for a negotiated settlement that would leave slavery intact in the South, it would have been unwise to "relieve the monotony of camp-life" with material that could appear non-patriotic to white soldiers. Thus, all references from the first two novels to Clotel-Isabella's Jeffersonian lineage are erased from the 1864 death scene, and, earlier in the novel, Clotel-Isabella and Althesa-Marion are merely presented as daughters of an unnamed American senator (1864, 6). The American icon Thomas Jefferson is never attacked or even mentioned in the novel. In the same vein, Brown employs discretionary silence in omitting the allusions to Northern "slavery," segregation, and racism that he made in Clotel (1852, 172-77) and may have made in Miralda, emphasizing as the title says that the novel is a tale exclusively of the *Southern* states. Moreover, he edits out the 1853 and 1861 references to the disgraceful Washington, D.C. "slave-prisons" of 1831, employed by "slave-traders, who make their fortunes buying and selling American citizens" (1853, 215; 1/19/61, chapter 16); even though the novel is set in the past, Brown was probably unwilling to hazard the offense to Union pride or to suggest that slavery was still practiced in the nation's capital (Congress had outlawed it in 1862). And, in a

spectacular switch from Clotel (and likely from Miralda), George-Jerome no longer leaves for England completely embittered about America. Instead, even though his beloved Mary-Miralda is evidently lost forever in the deep South, he takes "a last farewell of his native land" from the ship (87-88). Tears glistening, the fugitive slave proclaims, "With all her faults, I love my country still" (88). 1864 was no time for Brown to express radical black anger.

It has been observed that the onset of the Civil War (or the issuing of the Emancipation Proclamation) deflated some of the black radicalism of the pre-War decade (Harding 219-220). Explosive issues such as the future of black-whites relations had to be put aside so as not to disrupt the North's commitment to obliterate the Old South. Therefore, it is not surprising that, in 1864, Brown preserves from the two earlier versions elements that would have comforted whites, especially the reconciliation of Miralda-Clotelle with her father and the trite sketches of dim-witted slaves.<sup>24</sup> Nor is it surprising that, unlike in Clotel, where Brown anachronistically attacks the Fugitive Slave Law (189), he makes no attempt to weigh in on War-era issues of race, which included unequal pay for black soldiers, the anti-black riots, the exclusion of border states from the Emancipation Proclamation, and Lincoln's

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<sup>24</sup> In fact, Brown adds two such scenes that are not in Clotel (although they may be in Miralda). See pp. 27-28 and 41-43 in the 1864 text.

racist statements about African colonization and Negro inferiority (McPherson 1965, 91-92). That said, it appears that neither Brown nor James Redpath desired for Brown to cut out all of the hard-hitting material from Clotel and Miralda that was crafted to appeal to British and African American audiences. For example, transplanted Northerners are still depicted as slaveholders.<sup>25</sup> Jerome is still described as a model of black resistance. Picquillo is still cited in a digression as an example of African venom and vengeance. And, however much Brown yields to the exigencies of wartime patriotism, he still finds the ideological space to write, "The negro has been made the hewer of wood and the drawer of water for nearly all nations. The people of the United States [notice, not "the Confederacy"], however, will have an account to settle with God, owing to their treatment of the negro, which will far surpass the rest of mankind" (86). The point, once again, is that the use of the fungible text brings with it a new matrices of restrictions and opportunities.

However, the anger that finds muted expression in the 1864 novel is amplified considerably in the final revision of the novel, published in Boston in July, 1867 (Farrison 415) under the title Clotelle; or, The Colored Heroine, a Tale of the Southern States (hereafter referred to as The

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<sup>25</sup> The Methodist Parson James Peck-James Wilson, and the Vermont bank teller James Crawford-Augustine Cardinay.

Colored Heroine). Brown faces what may have been one very practical limitation in this fourth version -- the publisher's desire to use basically the same printer's plates as were used in the 1864 version. I suggest this because from page two to the end of chapter 35, The Colored Heroine exactly reproduces, page for page, the text of A Tale of the Southern States. Brown's only revisions occur on the first page, where he merges two paragraphs into one, and at the end, where he adds four new chapters totaling twelve pages. The 1867 conclusion, which continues the story of Clotelle and Jerome Fletcher, is the moving culmination of a fourteen-year process of revision.

Chapter 36 begins with a twenty-year jump from the previous chapter and a slap at Europe, unimaginable in Clotel, as Brown notes that the gunfire at Fort Sumter "was hailed with joy by the crowned heads of the Old World, who hated republican institutions and who thought they saw ... the downfall of the great American experiment" (105). Clotelle and Jerome hurry home to help the cause, arriving in New Orleans one week after the Union General Benjamin Butler occupied the city (which occurred on May 1, 1862 [McPherson 1988, 420]). Initially, the Fletchers make themselves useful by assisting the sick and the starving. Clotelle becomes known as the "Angel of Mercy," and Jerome enlists in a "colored battalion" called the "Native Guard" created by General Butler. In May, 1863, appearing under

the name First Louisiana, the Native Guard takes part in a "heroic" but unsuccessful attack on Port Hudson (105). Brown then pays "sorry tribute to the humanity of the white general who brought the scene into existence" (106). After the attack, a white captain is discovered killed, and a white colonel asks for volunteers from the black soldiers to retrieve the body from the field. In teams of four, twelve African American soldiers get mowed down, until finally a fourth group recovers the corpse; but, "two of their number were cut down. Of these, one was Jerome. His head was entirely torn off by a shell" (106). This is a stunning revision, written to elicit shock and outrage. After the "full-blooded" black hero's romantic escape from slavery and reunion with Clotelle in Europe, and his courageous return to help the North win the War, it is jarring to see him die pursuing a pointless aim. In 1867, with the Civil War over, Brown is free to put aside camp-fire propaganda, de-mythologize the Union army, and recall the racism that pervaded the Union war effort. Farrison calls this a "more realistic and more convincing" ending than in the previous novels (417), but in fact, it is more than that. With this futile death of a representative African American hero -- a hero made African American and made representative through a series of strategic revisions in 1860-61 -- Brown breaks free of the unofficial censorship of the 1864 text, in which racism in the North and the Northern army were taboo

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subjects. The author also breaks free of the sentimental novel genre, undercutting the conventional nuptials ending of the 1853, 1860-61, and 1864 versions. As a speech-act, this blunt decapitation of the hero presages a new era of candidness in African American writing; with slavery abolished, no *single* overarching social goal (not even suffrage) dominates the African American political landscape, imposing an ethos of strategic silence and message discipline.

In the final chapters of The Colored Heroine, Brown uses Clotelle's travels to emphasize, more strongly than in the three previous novels, that African Americans are self-reliant actors devoted both to helping the race and helping the country. After Jerome's death and a period of mourning, Clotelle impersonates a Confederate woman to sneak into the notorious prison for Union troops in Andersonville, Georgia. Ministering to ailing prisoners-of-war, the Angel of Mercy witnesses "hatred," "brutal treatment," and "daily murders committed upon our soldiers," most of whom would have been white (107). She teams up with a free Negro named Pete to help ninety-three men escape, but in so doing, she draws attention to herself and must leave the prison. In Greenville, Alabama, she witnesses the intense cruelty of Confederate women who persecute her as a Union sympathizer and threaten violence. A brave African American woman rescues her -- one of many Southern blacks whom Brown says



did not hesitate to do "white Unionists a service, at risk even of life" (112). Then, near the village of Taittsville, she meets a free Negro named Jimmy who chopped off his own hand to avoid being conscripted by the Confederates (114). When the war ends, Jimmy helps Clotelle return to Mississippi to serve her people. The novel closes with Mary-Miralda-Clotelle using her own funds to set up a school for freed slaves on familiar confiscated land obtained from the federal government -- the late John Peck's Poplar Farm. This is the previously untold story of black heroism in the Civil War, the reconstitution of a racial past which, in 1867, has a political function -- to bolster black claims to equal rights and equal opportunity in a reconstructed country, and to usher in a new era of black consciousness and solidarity.

Thus culminates a remarkable process of narrative improvisation, from playing to white British prejudices to recording black resistance in the Civil War; from featuring a white Christian liberator to highlighting a black Angel of Mercy; from attacking the icon of Thomas Jefferson to yielding to the war-era imperative not to criticize the North. Each time Brown revises and republishes this novel, he breaks some of the rules imposed on previous versions while also bending to the limitations of new social and political contexts. As with Frederick Douglass and Josiah Henson, the readiness to think of texts as protean entities,

always adaptable and never final, gives Brown a tool with which to keep his voice prominent in an ever-changing social and political context.

Is this appreciation for the fungibility of texts unique to nineteenth-century African Americans? Of course not, for writers as diverse as Wordsworth, Whitman, and Henry James all revised and re-published literary works. What is distinctive, however, is that oppression led African American writers to value fungibility; that they valued this quality in texts above other literary values such as originality and universality; and that they (especially Douglass and Brown) deployed their fungible texts pragmatically in the service of transforming their social captivities. Unlike white authors, Douglass, Henson, and Brown lived and wrote within the circumscribed reality of racial oppression. Their appreciation for the fungible text, and their culturally distinct uses of it, evolved from that reality.

## Conclusion

### *Work-able, Do-able Words*

During the past winter -- 1854-5 -- very frequent mention of Frederick Douglass was made ... in the daily papers; his name glided as often -- this week from Chicago, next week from Boston -- over the lightning wires, as the name of any other man, of whatever note. To no man did the people more widely nor more earnestly say, "*Tell me thy thought!*" And, somehow or other, revolution seemed to follow in his wake. His were not the mere words of eloquence which Kossuth speaks of, that delight the ear and then pass away. No! They were *work-able, do-able* words, that brought forth fruits in the revolution in Illinois, and in the passage of the franchise resolutions by the Assembly of New York. (James McCune Smith xxv [his italics])

This dissertation offers a rather specific definition of the captive voice: the literary voice that emerges from and responds to two social conditions of material confinement -- incarceration and nineteenth-century racial oppression. In effect, by defining the captive voice in this way, I opted for an empiricist approach. That is, I chose to define "captivity" in easily-substantiated terms, as opposed to examining conditions of authorship such as depression, illness, mortality, or cultural perspective, which, while no doubt restrictive for some authors, would have made the definition of captivity more problematic. The way that the dissertation presents "voice" is also empiricist, in that I examine five encompassing practices -- five patterns of writing -- that are demonstrably in the

texts of captive writers: the creation of prison presences, the construction of prisoner personae, the display of poetic sensibilities, the use of narrative dialogue, and the strategic revision of already-published works. I do not argue that these patterns are only employed by imprisoned and oppressed authors, that they are invariably "emancipatory" or "subversive" regardless of how they are applied, or that their uses fully liberate authors from restriction. Instead, my claim is that, used in different ways and to varying outcomes, the patterns reflect the engagement of the authors with the sources of their confinement. That is to say, the captive voice must be defined and recognized *situationally*, text by text and writer by writer, and not universally.

This point is also borne out by juxtaposing some of the individual strategies captive writers employ to expand the possibilities of freedom for themselves and others. Conceptually, David Walker's confrontational dialogue and Frederick Douglass's message discipline look like diametrically opposed practices, the former being open and "free," and the latter closed and "contained," and yet in practice, as we have seen, both are put to liberational ends. The same might be said of Rosanna Warren's flamboyant display of aesthetic sensibilities and John L. Sellers's comic forswearing of them, or of Jack Henry Abbott's embrace of the "inmate" persona and Jimmy Santiago Baca's

transcendence of it. These "oppositions" remind us that the proper way to think about rhetorical strategies of resistance is not to analyze them in the abstract, but to examine their practical use in specific texts. For Harriet Jacobs, it made sense to understate the degree of her victimization in slavery and leave out those things that "the world might believe that a Slave Woman was too willing to pour out -- that she might gain their sympathies" (Yellin 1987a, 242). But for the Moroccan Abdellatif Laabi (whose "crimes of opinion" led to an eight-year prison term), the reverse was the case: it was more helpful to try to show the full experience of his incarceration, including torture, in the confidence that one's "words are finally going to be able to express us faithfully" (170). Thus, the captive voice can only be located and understood situationally -- in relation to the particular confines and opportunities within which one works.

Although I might have defined the captive voice with greater emphasis on *what* authors say about their captivities, my focus on *how* people write within restriction has two advantages. First, it reveals the rhetorical sophistication of many of the authors considered herein. This is important because rhetorical ingenuity of a certain "literary" type -- i.e., practices such as euphony, generic innovation, or inventive symbolism -- has traditionally been one of the grounds upon which critics argue for the superior

"power" and "beauty" of canonical works. I would make the case that Harriet Jacobs may be just as great a writer in her way as Nathaniel Hawthorne is in his, the distinction being that she employs rhetorical practices -- James McCune Smith's notion of "work-able, do-able words" -- that are related to her particular social situation. If we cultivate our sensibilities properly, the rhetorical mastery of some captive writers may yield just as much evidence of "power" and "beauty" as Keats's Odes or James's novels. Allow me to provide a few examples.

By the tenets of any school of criticism that treats individual works as organic units rather than as interrelated elements of an author's evolving body of work, William Wells Brown's 1867 novel, Clotelle; or, The Colored Heroine, a Tale of the Southern States, probably would be considered an artistic failure. After all, there is an enormous gap between Chapter 35 (the ending of the 1864 novel, where Clotelle, Jerome, and Clotelle's father Henry Linwood reunite overseas in 1842) and Chapter 36 (twenty years later), where Clotelle and Jerome return to New Orleans to help the Union cause. If we read Chapters 36 to 39 without taking into consideration Brown's earlier fungible novels (and the oppression that gave rise to that practice), what we are left with is a novel whose conclusion is disjointed and confusing. Brown provides no explanation for the twenty-year break or for the disappearance of

Clotelle's young son and Henry Linwood after Chapter 35. One could argue that the author fails to prepare the reader for the major events of four Civil War chapters -- Clotelle's work as an "Angel of Mercy" and Jerome's futile death on the battle-field obeying a racist officer's order that he retrieve a white man's body. However, while the novel may not have the organic unity of an Emma or the formal brilliance of an Invisible Man, read in the context of its composition -- Brown's oppression-guided use of the fungible text -- the author's speech-act of summarily decapitating Jerome may be seen and valued as a move of startling "power." Remember, this is the exemplary character of "pure African origin" who was inserted into the 1861 novel, Miralda, to make the work more meaningful for African Americans; and remember, the 1861 creation of Jerome was itself powerful, for in editing out Clotel's white slave hero, George, Brown made the moral leap of breaking through boundaries of racial representation. Therefore, killing off Jerome in a non-heroic manner that belies his prominence in the earlier novels becomes a strong renunciation both of the optimism that infused the character's creation in 1861 and of the War-era message discipline that prevented Brown in the 1864 novel from writing about Union racism. For readers familiar with the author's revisions, this annihilation of Jerome is a

shocking moment -- but fully appreciating it demands that one be sensitive to Brown's fungible craft.

Similarly, we might recall the passage from Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl where Harriet Jacobs holds up the Public Discourse of Slavery against the slaveholders' private statements that the slaves were capable of "murdering their masters" (68). Through this pairing of the white Other's conflicting idioms, Jacobs's personal voice emerges. Its quality is not lyricism, verbal density, or allusions to high culture, often admired as "literary" language, but rather the keen organizing sensibilities that allow for such a devastating juxtaposition of others' words. The beauty of Jacobs's voice is in its subtlety and poise, in the author's remarkable ability to restrain her anger and create the perfect facade of neutrality that sets up the Public and Private Discourses of Slavery to invalidate each other. In both Brown's work and Jacobs's, as well as in many other texts discussed in "The Captive Voice," creative expression has the dramatic function of enacting and displaying the struggle against restriction in the form of the text. At the same time, it has the performative function of displaying a member of a captive social group moving from silence to speech, a giant step forward that may create in others the ideological readiness to do the same or to undertake transformative action in a different way. In these two senses -- in the dramatic act of enacting combat



and in the performative act of assuming the public stage -- the captive voice often resounds with moral power and beauty. The key is our readiness to understand writing as a context-dependent *practice*, and not simply as a formal *product* of context-transcending power or beauty.

The second advantage of focusing on how writers work within restriction is that it raises the question of whether some of the strategies discussed herein can help us recognize captive voices in other bodies of work. After all, Shakespeare's and Marlowe's plays were subject to review by The Stationer's Register and The Privy Council. Milton's writing faced such extreme and dangerous scrutiny by political authorities after the Restoration that his friend Andrew Marvell attached to the second edition of Paradise Lost a prefatory poem claiming that the epic was concerned with the "sacred Truths" (Marvell 208, line 8) rather than, as others might have surmised, contemporary political realities (Hill 391-92). Sylvia Plath authored the Ariel poems while on the brink of suicide, and Salman Rushdie wrote Haroun and the Sea of Stories within enforced seclusion. For each author, bounded circumstances presented a unique set of challenges, strictures, and opportunities. In each case, the author could not comment directly upon the full extent of his or her confinement. And in each case, the restrictions themselves must be considered as part of the conditions of authorship. Indeed, for precisely that

reason, we must not suppose that the only texts strongly influenced by confinement are those authored by the imprisoned and the oppressed. Having begun in this dissertation within the whirlpool, with conditions of material captivity, I may now need to explore other bounded systems within which authors work -- perhaps restrictive social norms, closed belief systems, or the boundaries of language itself -- and to look for ways that works respond to or are shaped by these forces. The challenge is to do this while avoiding what Jameson calls the flawed "metaphysical" approach of presupposing that all writers pose the same questions about the "meaning" of life, or about the prevalence of restriction (59).

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