

IN THE BUTCHER SHOP OF SUBJECTIVITY

AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL WORKS FROM THE
BLACK LIBERATION MOVEMENT, 1970-1987

by

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Abstract

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Through an examination of autobiographical works by imprisoned members of the Black Liberation Movement who were targeted by illegal government counterintelligence campaigns, “In the Butcher Shop of Subjectivity” argues for a realignment of the field of contemporary American literature. This realignment must incorporate the massive expansion of the American prison regime, perhaps the most nation’s most critical historical development of the past fifty years. In exploring the qualities that the autobiographies examined herein share with developments in the field of critical theory and avant-garde poetry, this study suggests that critiques of the prison regime offered in Black Liberationist works provide crucial analyses otherwise missing from contemporaneous and more well-known works of American writing. In particular, the political claims made by the “language regime” in American letters—language-based schools of critical theory and language-focused movements within experimental American poetry and prose—are examined as prototypes for a culture of ignorance that has aided and abetted the widespread imprisonment of America’s most vulnerable citizens.

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Introduction

As kids we'd ask each other, "Hey man, what hospital were you born in?" and if the dude was born in New York more often than not he'd say, "I was born in Harlem Hospital," and more often than not you'd sharply shoot back, with an air of put-on amazement, "What! You were born in that butcher shop? No wonder your face is so fucked up." After a while dudes would get uptight, and you couldn't get anybody to say they had even been inside Harlem Hospital."—Cetewayo, *Look For Me in the Whirlwind: The Collective Autobiography of the New York 21*. (7)

If knowledge bears some relationship to power, what shall we make of knowledge that disables, renders speechless, inhibits, or incapacitates?¹ *In the Butcher Shop of Subjectivity* has been written under the assumption that those who study American literature and culture must find some way to reconcile critical methodologies with the massive expansion of the U.S. prison regime. The magnitude of this expansion represents one of the most crucial historical developments of the past forty years; the relative absence of literary and cultural criticism that acknowledges the prison regime's growth signals a remarkable and unsettling silence. *In the Butcher Shop of Subjectivity* focuses on four autobiographical texts from the Black Liberation Movement that bear witness to and attempt to resist the prison regime's continuing elaboration: *Soledad Brother: The Prison Letters of George Jackson* (1970), *Look For Me in the Whirlwind: The Collective Autobiography of the New York 21* (1971), *Angela Davis: An*

¹ Here as in subsequent examinations of the relationship between knowledge and power, I am indebted to David Graeber's *Fragments of an Anarchist Archaeology* (Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press, 2004).

Autobiography (1974), and *Assata: The Autobiography of Assata Shakur* (1987). Written under the shadow of the prison regime, in some cases while the writers themselves languish in captivity, these works refuse speechlessness in order to record resistance. Knowledge of the prison regime that leaves others silent becomes the driving force behind the autobiographical texts studied in the chapters that follow.

As suggested by Cetewayo's epigraph, *In the Butcher Shop of Subjectivity* takes its title from the nickname for Harlem Hospital. In *Look For Me in the Whirlwind*, the "butcher shop" turns out to be a communal recollection shared by several of the book's sixteen contributors. These contributors, arrested and jailed as members of the Black Panther Party's New York offices, offer fragmented, "personal," "individual" narratives that overlap and reconfigure one another. The result is a single, "collective autobiography" that paradoxically represents all twenty-one members of the New York 21. This curious process of effacement and inscription serves as a fitting example for each of the works discussed in *In the Butcher Shop of Subjectivity*. The mechanizations through which the writers of these works experience criminalization and imprisonment push them to conceptualize identity as a process subject to government intervention and control. The state's campaigns to discredit the authors recast notions of selfhood and individuality— notions long associated with American values of freedom and self-determination—as the building blocks of an oppressive ideology. In the language that traces the lives of these authors, identity transforms itself continuously; nonetheless, it maintains a descriptive quality, a means with which to measure the world. Identity describes a relationship to power. It fixes a subject, determining her distance from—or access to—power's elusive handles.

In each of the works discussed, the authors must negotiate new and creative means with which to understand this relationship between identity and power, for which models offered by the autobiographical tradition prove inadequate. Narratives that trace the individual development of self-awareness and self-determination risk entrapping the authors in forms of knowledge that silence and incapacitate. In distinct ways, these authors—the “Soledad Brother” George Jackson, the sixteen Black Panthers who contribute to *Look For Me in the Whirlwind* (including several born in the “butcher shop” of Harlem Hospital), Angela Davis, and Assata Shakur—all depart from classic, ostensibly liberating trajectories associated with the African American autobiographical tradition. From the slave narratives of Frederick Douglass and Linda Brent, to the contemporary autobiographies of Malcolm X and Maya Angelou, this tradition has frequently traced the resurrection of *individual* self-worth through hard-won language and literacy. The authors examined herein seek alternative literary and ideological frameworks. As a result, their texts not only depart from established autobiographical traditions, they also exhibit innovative formal structures that resist conventional notions of subjectivity and individuality.

Through their imaginative treatments of subjectivity, these texts complicate familiar forms of black identity associated with Black Power and the Black Panther Party. The government’s repressive tactics force the narrators of these works into the jails and prisons that mark the threshold between America’s democratic ideals and the underworld reserved for its criminalized citizens. Critics of the Black Liberation Movement have argued that this movement failed in part because its patriarchal structure produced homophobic, hyper-masculine, anti-feminist versions of black subjectivity. According to

such critics, the enforcement of rigid gender distinctions subsequently influences the elaboration of black studies within a variety of cultural contexts—including institutions of higher education—ultimately replicating forms of oppression that the movement itself had hoped to combat. In their co-authored introduction to *Black Queer Studies*, E. Patrick Johnson and Mae G. Henderson argue that connections between “the Civil Rights and Black Power movements... provided the historical backdrop and social street scene fueling the interventions staged on the manicured lawns of the ivory tower.” As these “interventions” helped to create the field of black studies, Johnson and Henderson suggest that they also led to new forms of discrimination: “the political and rhetorical strategies of the larger race and rights movement were deployed by intellectual and cultural activists demanding institutional support for the formation of black studies. Unfortunately, it was precisely this discursive maneuvering—largely formulated by black male leadership—that provided the anchor for an exclusionary agenda that effectively cordoned off all identity categories that were not primarily based on race” (3).

Such assessments may indeed apply to elaborations of the Black Liberation Movement within the *already* patriarchal, often homophobic, pervasively anti-working class sphere of the college or university. However, by suggesting that the “exclusionary agenda” within black studies emerged as a result of the Black Liberation Movement itself, Johnson and Henderson extend a legacy of misreading and simplification. This legacy has repeatedly failed to measure the impact of the government’s own covert operatives, whose efforts to disrupt and delimit the movement’s discursive and political possibilities had a devastating influence. Indeed, according to the research contributing to the chapters that follow, I would argue that the government’s infiltration into and

influence over the Black Liberation Movement was so thorough and pervasive that it is ultimately impossible to discern fully and unequivocally where the movement ends and the government's disruptive operations begin. The mass media's biased portrayals of the Black Panthers (many of which appeared in articles by journalists consciously working in collaboration with the FBI, or unconsciously manipulated through the efforts of the FBI's cover counterintelligence maneuvers), have subsequently been adopted by conservative and liberal critics alike.

In describing the historical contexts, political events, and counterintelligence campaigns surrounding the publication of the four autobiographies mentioned above, this dissertation attempts to challenge the critical legacy of misreading and oversimplification that surrounds the Black Liberation Movement. These texts suggest that the occlusion of politically-nuanced stances from critical assessments of the Black Liberation Movement owes as much to the covert political police operating at the behest of the government's law enforcement bureaucracy as to the narrow-mindedness of movement leaders and participants. Like the "butcher shop" put-downs that silence more discussions of the inequities of Harlem Hospital amongst Cetewayo and his peers, allegations of the political shortcomings of the Black Liberation Movement have effectively discredited the movement itself. Meanwhile, the criminalizing practices originally developed for use against black political organizations, against which the autobiographies addressed in the following chapters protest, have continued throughout urban America.

In the four works this dissertation examines, incarceration plays a vital role in the experiences of the narrators, imposing strict limitations upon what may or may not enter into discourse. In *Forced Passages: Imprisoned Radical Intellectuals and the American*

Prison Regime (2006), Dylan Rodríguez notes the ways in which the prison alters the perspectives of political activists:

What distinguishes imprisoned radical intellectuals from other radical and revolutionary “organic intellectuals”... is that they do not construct their political identifications through participation in discrete social movements or political organizations. Rather their individual formation as imprisoned political subjects occurs in a context of systematized repression that, in turn, forces them to map out new ‘cognitive territories’ within which ways of knowing, feeling, and living the experience of unmediated state violence create new spaces and political trajectories of dissent, radicalism, and antisystematic possibility. (105)

In departing from dominant tropes and traditions within the African American autobiographical tradition, the works discussed in this dissertation propose a vital addition to the “political trajectories of... antisystematic possibility” that Rodríguez discovers in the work of “imprisoned radical intellectuals.” Through determinedly anti-individualist forms of self-representation; through narratives that record shape-shifting self-transformations without resolution; through liquid self-representations that seem to occupy the space available; or through collective articulations that provide de-centered yet precise, localized, and historically-contextualized accounts, these authors construct “apparitional subjectivities,” autobiographical personas that refuse self-realization in search of some literary counterweight substantial enough to alter the longstanding and misguided American obsession with individuality.

In refusing narrative arcs that privilege individual transformations, the apparitional subjectivities created by these authors serve to shelter the activities of dissidents and revolutionaries from the government's repressive agents and juridical apparatuses, simultaneously archiving the spirit of resistance that has guided their own efforts, and under which they write. The apparitional subjectivities examined *In the Butcher Shop of Subjectivity* thus avoid the fixed, legalistic, prosecutable notions of identity favored by state-dictated narratives. In so doing, they establish an alternative chronicle of late twentieth-century U.S. politics and culture in which the expansion of the legal system and prison regime represents a historical rift that is also a continuation. Transforming contemporary society by extending, elaborating, and complicating disparities along racial and class boundaries, reshaping the economies of urban spaces and rural territories, remaking stereotypes of African American identity, reinvigorating the fears that motivate familiar reenactments of white supremacist violence, and reinforcing ignorance as the violent means with which power tightens the reigns over its subjects, the prison regime reconfigures contemporary American life according to the dehumanizing logic supposedly abandoned through landmark events such as the emancipation of slaves or the passage of the Civil Rights Act.

COINTELPRO, "Deep Politics," and the Prison Regime

Completed before the expansion of criminalizing apparatuses in the wake of 9/11, Christian Parenti's book *Lockdown America* (1999) attempts to understand the explosive growth of the American prison regime in the closing decades of the 20th Century.

"Beginning in the late sixties, US capitalism hit a dual social and economic crisis, and it

was in response to this crisis that the criminal justice buildup of today began. After a surge of expansion in the late sixties the growth of criminal justice plateaued in the late seventies, only to resume in earnest during the early and mid eighties with Reagan's war on drugs. Since then we've been on a steady path toward ever more state repression and surveillance," Parenti writes, thus anticipating the changes that have become even more pronounced in the wake of 9/11 (xii). While reconfiguring autobiographical traditions and documenting nuanced political positions within the Black Liberation Movement, the texts at the center of this project contribute vital testimonies in an effort to resist the proliferation of the American prison regime.

These texts emerge as products of the first phase of prison expansion described by Parenti, in which law enforcement apparatuses serve as the most available quick-strike force in the government's effort to crack down on resistance movements: "The criminal justice crackdown began in the late sixties as counterinsurgency by other means; the police were ill-prepared for the task of a multifaceted rebellion, and thus federal aid focused on policing and other 'front end' forms of criminal justice," Parenti writes (167). FBI director J. Edgar Hoover had for several decades employed law enforcement personnel as a tool with which to limit the content and circulation of political discourse, especially the political discourse emerging from within the black community. In 1919, Hoover became head of the fledging Bureau of Investigation's General Intelligence Division. While serving at this post, more than forty years before his efforts to destroy the New Left, Hoover helped to engineer the notorious Palmer raids against political dissidents. He began requiring agents to submit weekly reports on the activities of political organizers. According to historian Theodore Kornweibel, Jr., these demands

resulted in an enormous file that included almost 55,000 names by October of the same year, many culled from the pages of radical periodicals.² Raids began that November, leading to thousands of arrests nationwide. As this surveillance expanded during the 1920s and the Red Scare, Kornweibel argues that black radicals consumed an extraordinary amount of the bureau's investigatory energies; Hoover seemed to automatically categorize black political activists, writers, and intellectuals as communists, revolutionaries, or both. Publications oriented toward African American audiences—the *Chicago Defender*, Marcus Garvey's *Negro World*, and the *Messenger*, to name a few—were targets of intense scrutiny. Efforts to shut down some publications included coordinated efforts of multiple government agencies; in the case of the *Defender*, Postal Service administrators threatened to suspend its distribution.

By the time Hoover confronted the resistance movements of the sixties and early seventies as head of the FBI, the agency's counterintelligence capabilities had advanced significantly. A forthright declaration of the nation-wide campaign against the Panthers and related political organizations appears in a letter from Hoover dated August 25, 1967; Hoover advises field officers to “expose, disrupt, misdirect, discredit, or otherwise neutralize the activities of black nationalist[s].” At the time of this correspondence, the Panthers were less than a year old. Founded by Bobby Seale and Huey P. Newton in Oakland in October of 1966, the Panthers thus served as the testing ground for the FBI's increasingly sophisticated disinformation and counterintelligence techniques. Despite witnessing an unprecedented rise to national prominence within their first two years of existence, by the end of 1969 the Panthers had begun to collapse under governmental pressure. After numerous high-profile arrests of Black Panther Party leaders from

² Kornweibel, Jr., “*Seeing Red*”: *Federal Campaigns Against Black Militancy, 1919-1925*.

Oakland to New York throughout 1969, the *New York Times* reporter Eric Caldwell notes that party leaders consider the arrests part of a governmental plot to destroy the Panthers. “Most of the Party’s leadership,” Caldwell observes, “is now in [police] custody,” although he shows no interest in pursuing Panther accusations of a governmental plot (Caldwell, 39).³

Caldwell’s article reached print at the same time that Bobby Seale appeared in court, bound and gagged, while on trial with the Chicago Eight (Lukass, 38). Earlier that same year, the New York Police Department had issued arrest warrants for twenty-one members of the Black Panther Party’s New York City branch. By November of 1969, eighteen of the twenty-one Black Panthers sought by the NYPD were in custody (“FBI Seizes Two in Columbus,” 38). The three remaining “New York 21” who avoided capture went into exile and joined Eldridge Cleaver, who had already left the country to avoid his own arrest, in Algeria. Recently freed from the yoke of French colonialism after a long and violent struggle for independence, the appeal that Algeria held for the Panthers was certainly not shared by U.S. government officials. Nonetheless, the government’s counterintelligence officials must have recognized potential benefits in the Panthers’ widely-reported exile to a nation that many Americans, even those somewhat familiar with its history, likely regarded as exotic. In addition, government officials must have considered the fact that Algeria would be familiar to politically-influential members of the Jewish American community. For this particular demographic, reports of the

³ After two previous trials ended in hung juries, Wells was convicted of assault against a police officer in the gun battle leading to Eldridge Cleaver’s parole revocation and Algerian exile (see Caldwell, Eric. “Panther is Given 15 Year Sentence.” *New York Times* 30 Oct. 1969.)

Panthers living in an Arab nation from which some 140,000 Jews had fled following Algerian independence in 1962 likely carried significant implications.

For the Panthers, Algeria represented an important history of resistance to imperialism, one unmatched by many African nations still under the grip of European colonialism, American influence, or both. In “The Black Panther Party and Palestine Solidarity,” Matthew Quest points to the Panthers’ conceptualization of the Palestinian struggle against Israel as evidence of the complicated domestic and international political intrigue that the Panthers attempted to navigate. In 1970, “the BPP called a press conference in response to [false] media allegations... that there was a Panther delegation in Jordan led by Stokely Carmichael (later known as Kwame Ture) promoting the... Black Power movement’s solidarity with Palestine “against the Jewish people” (2). Quest uses this press conference as the impetus for a broad discussion of the Panthers’ relationship to certain international movements, including their disavowal of previous varieties of Pan-Africanism. Quest notes that Huey P. Newton “could not support Pan-Africanism because too many advocates of this philosophy were African governments which in fact aligned themselves with U.S. imperialism” (3). Similarly, Newton recognized a crucial contradiction in the incomplete embrace of the Palestinian cause by Arab and Muslim states; the ruling elites of Arab nations had never fully supported the Palestinian cause because doing so would endanger their own business interests, which were bound up in the same forces driving the imperialist ambitions of American and European capitalism. Furthermore, to fully embrace the Palestinian cause might “inspire visions of freedom among their own [disenfranchised] subjects” (6).

As the Panthers looked to Palestine, Algeria, Cuba, and elsewhere for revolutionary models that appeared to have successfully disengaged from varieties of American capitalism and imperialism, the government's lawyers attempted to use the Panthers' international search for revolutionary models against them. In the case of the New York 21, Peter Zimroth argues that prosecutors committed a significant blunder by insisting that the jury sit through a viewing of Gillo Pontecorvo's critically-acclaimed 1966 film *The Battle of Algiers*. Prosecutors hoped that the testimony of police officer and BPP infiltrator Ralph White (who, as Chapter 2 notes, contributed significant displays of violence to the Panther branch in which he worked) would convince jurors that the film, repeatedly screened by members of the New York Panthers, was part of a military education designed to familiarize party members with the tactics of urban warfare. Zimroth describes the courtroom mechanizations according to which the Judge, "allowed the prosecutor to show the movie over the strong protests of the defense counsel. And so the Judge and jury, the assistant district attorneys, the defense counsel, White, the defendants, and spectators sat together in the courtroom and watched *The Battle of Algiers*. (The seating in the courtroom had to be rearranged for some of the defendants, who complained that they had paid \$100,000 for a seat but still couldn't see!)" (Zimroth, 160). This courtroom viewing makes explicit the government's interest in using the image of Algeria as a means with which to portray the Panthers as a dangerous terrorist organization. Ultimately, the film seems to have detracted from the prosecution's case by spawning confusion amongst jurors over whether the Panthers had actually attempted the acts of "terrorism" depicted in the film—or if they had simply

appreciated and absorbed Pontecorvo's remarkable film, for its own sake, as had spectators throughout the world ever since its completion and distribution.

U.S. foreign policy initiatives thus intersected with a variety of domestic, authorized (as well as unauthorized), covert campaigns to dismantle the Black Liberation Movement. The FBI's repeated attempts to use fears and allegations of anti-Semitism as a means with which to drive a wedge between the Panthers and their potential Jewish American supporters proved remarkably successful. In the wake of ongoing domestic as well as international concern over the territorial seizures initiated by Israel in 1967, such efforts provided a means with which the Zionist cause might gain traction in the media. As chronicled by Ward Churchill and James Vander Wall in *Agents of Repression: The FBI's Secret Wars Against the Black Panther Party and the American Indian Movement* (1988) and *The COINTELPRO Papers* (1990), efforts to disrupt alliances between African American and Jewish American activists actually predated the Panthers' rise to prominence. At the 1967 National Convention for a New Politics, Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee organizers (and soon-to-be Black Panther Party leaders) James Forman and H. Rap Brown urged the convention to issue a condemnation of Israel, thus making the SNCC the first black political organization to assume a public position against Israeli aggression. By conflating the anti-Israeli stance taken by the Black Liberation Movement with anti-Semitism, the FBI's domestic campaigns influenced national political discussions in ways favorable to America's foreign policy goals.

Soon after the Black Panthers opened their New York City branches in 1968, efforts by African American and Puerto Rican communities to obtain local control over neighborhood schools led to the Ocean Hill-Brownsville teacher's strike. Between 1968

and 1969, this strike pitted powerful Jewish American members of the teacher's union against community leaders who, with the support of the Black Panthers, demanded that city schools revamp curricula and hire more faculty and administrators of color in order to better represent the communities served. However local, this dispute yet again appears to have reinforced America's international policy objectives with regard to the Middle East by tying allegations of anti-Semitism to a group whose members had become outspoken critics of Israeli policy.

As discussed in Chapter 2, this conflict also altered the voting tendencies within the city for years to come, dismantling previously powerful voting blocks between marginalized communities in the outer boroughs. The Ocean Hill-Brownsville dispute thus provided additional opportunities for provocateurs and infiltrators to spread mistrust amongst the interested parties. In 1969, FBI efforts accelerated to disrupt potential alliances; in an effort to employ the right-wing "thugs" associated with Jewish Defense League member Rabbi Meir Kahane against the Black Panthers, the bureau fabricated letters addressed to Rabbi Kehane. These correspondences invented a narrator whose son was a Panther, who had listened in on some of their meetings, and who reported overhearing plots to extort money from Jewish store owners. In one COINTELPRO document, a sample letter includes an introductory paragraph explaining the narrator's motivation for writing. The letter claims that his lasting appreciation for the Jewish people is the result of his experiences as a veteran wounded in World War II and healed by a "Jewish Army Dr. Rothstein" (*COINTELPRO*, 135; 137).

These bizarre if creative efforts to enlist the Jewish American far-right as strongmen against the Black Panther Party were complemented by more pragmatic steps

to eliminate the Panthers' ability to raise money. Thus, a report from the New York field office to J. Edgar Hoover explains that, "On 2/27/70, correspondence was directed to individuals known to have attended a BPP fund-raising function at the home of the well known musician, LEONARD BERNSTEIN. The correspondence outlined the BPP's anti-Semitic posture and pro-Arab position" (*COINTELPRO*, 162). This fundraiser provides the setting for Tom Wolfe's famous satire, "Radical Chic: That Party at Lenny's." While ridiculing party members and their white supporters in the service of his so-called New Journalism, Wolfe's article ultimately furthered the FBI's agenda by disturbing potential alliances between wealthy, well-connected whites and the Black Liberation Movement.⁴

In addition to encumbering emergent Jewish and African American relationships, the FBI's counterintelligence campaigns effectively reduced the progressive potential of the party line. Winston A. Grady-Willis notes that Huey P. Newton recognized the importance of establishing solidarity between the Panthers and all "marginalized groups, including homosexuals"; unfortunately, this perspective too became fodder for FBI counterintelligence efforts that were designed to prey upon homophobia—not only within the party, but in its prospective supporters, regardless of race (374). The use of such tactics thus appears to have tempered the progressive potentials of the Panther platform; similarly, allegations initiated in the San Francisco office after a reprimand from Hoover, who believed the office had not sufficiently lived up to his goals of eradicating black resistance movements, included accusations that venereal disease and extra-marital

⁴ This strategy is well documented by Churchill and Vander Wall, who call attention to a series of COINTELPRO letters authored by FBI agents and made to look like correspondences from Panther members. The letters discredit Panther leaders or "alert" the organizations with which the Panthers were attempting to partner or risks in doing so by inventing allegations regarding the Black Panther Party and its members (*The COINTELPRO PAPERS*, 136-139).

affairs were consuming the health and energies of the national headquarters (*COINTELPRO*, 146). The employment of stereotypical forms of black sexuality and masculinity by government counterintelligence agents thus becomes difficult to disentangle from critical assessments that point the finger at party leaders, who thus stand accused of failing to live up to the progressive possibilities of the political movement they helped initiate.

As fundraising became increasingly difficult amidst waves of negative media reports and publicity, the Black Panther Party's innovative social agendas—its free breakfast programs, educational curricula, community health clinics, and grassroots organizing efforts—languished. Meanwhile, the FBI backed its complicated but coordinated counterintelligence efforts against the Panthers with extreme forms of violence. On December 4, 1969, Illinois Black Panther Party leader Fred Hampton was killed in his bed by Chicago police in an FBI-coordinated raid on his apartment. Four days later, on December 8, 1969, a similar raid took place in Los Angeles, resulting in the arrest of LA Panther leader Geronimo Pratt for “assaulting the police.” FBI agents appear to have targeted Pratt after his refusal to turn informant provoked an attempt to “badjacket” him—to insinuate, through the covert distribution of disinformation, that Pratt himself was an informer, in the hopes that such reports might disrupt organizing activities or even make him a target for assassination by fellow party members. As it had done in Chicago, the FBI encouraged the Los Angeles Police Department to raid the local Panther office (*COINTELPRO*, 157). Remarkably, Pratt “had decided to sleep on the floor alongside his bed on the night of the raid,” thus surviving when “the opening burst of gunfire which was apparently supposed to kill him missed entirely” (Churchill and

Vander Wall, 142). As suspicion of informants and agent provocateurs spread anxiety and distrust throughout the Party, court costs drained the Panther coffers and contributed additional waves of negative publicity. “Black Panther leaders have argued that the arrests are part of a systematic plot by the Government to destroy the party,” Eric Caldwell reports his 1969 article for the *Times*, though he shows no interest in investigating this claim.

Innovative Autobiography and the Language Regime

The autobiographies that inform this study emerge as a result of the government’s attacks against black revolutionary groups. Responding to the government’s nationwide crackdown, these works constitute experimental efforts to maintain political resistance in the face of criminalization and imprisonment. In reconfiguring autobiographical forms in order to challenge the oppressive actions of the American government, the authors position themselves amidst longstanding, largely unsettled cultural and philosophical debates, not the least of which concerns the autobiography itself. If autobiography has a unique and defining role in the formation and crisis of American identity, it also maintains a relationship to more archaic forms of knowledge. In *The Limits of Autobiography* (2001), Leigh Gilmore notes “how autobiography functions as judicature, how self-representation exists within a juridical frame through the mechanisms of judging and assessment which inform its production of knowledge” (43). Neither a classic “literary” form, nor a document of purely historical discourse, the autobiography has no “natural” home amidst the genealogies of knowledge that partition varieties of cultural production into fields of disciplinary study. Nonetheless, the genre of

autobiography connects the idiosyncratic works found in this study—from the non-narrative, fragmentary prison letters of George Jackson to the experimental “collective autobiography” of the New York 21—to canonical texts in the history of Western European thought, such as the *Confessions* of St. Augustine or Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Thus, when New York 21 defendant and *Whirlwind* contributor Cetewayo goes into exile in Algeria, he returns to the homeland of Augustine, and thus the native grounds of the varieties of subject formation associated with autobiography. As a bastardized form that necessarily interrogates processes and disciplinary measures through which knowledge is produced and acquired, the autobiography emerges out of the blind spot where collective, social, historical time gives way to fantasies of the independent, self-possessed individual. Autobiography constitutes a political instrument to which questions of perspective and viewpoint inevitably cleave.

Considering the scale and impact of the prison regime’s expansion, it is curious that resistance to (or even discussion of) its elaborating forms remains largely absent from much contemporary American literature, not to mention the varieties of politically-informed theoretical analyses that surround the field. The same years that mark the expansion of the prison regime also trace the emergence of a liberal, ostensibly anti-racist, anti-capitalist, largely white avant-garde whose texts, in concert with the viral spread of “critical theory” within the academy, address questions of “language” and “discourse,” while generally disavowing direct, politically-driven messages or statements. For the most part, the writers and critics who participate in these developments fail to address the disturbing growth of prisons and incarceration. The intersection of white avant-garde poetry and critical theory contributes to the silence that

surrounds the prison regime. The chapters that follow trace the emergence of theoretically-informed, anti-individualist species of avant-garde American poetry alongside the work of Black Liberationists, describing, analyzing, and attempting to understand the failure of theory and avant-garde literature to challenge (or even to notice) the prison regime. In so doing, these chapters also note the ways in which the autobiographical works they address offer the means with which to shift the discourses and frames through which contemporary American literature is read and analyzed.

In explaining his use of the term “prison regime,” Dylan Rodríguez writes that the prison is “consistently a work in progress, in fact the geographic and discursive site of a seemingly endless political-military labor that variously establishes, rearticulates, and reforms, the material content and putative social meaning of state-proctored human capture... its dominion must be constantly (re)defined, defended, and justified” (42-43). The labor required to maintain this “work in progress” exceeds the site of the prison itself, extending across a field of ideological formations and socially “naturalized” practices of containment and confinement: educational systems and their disciplinary apparatuses, mass-marketed films and television series; a seemingly endless array of historical, economic, political, social, and cultural factors contribute to the ongoing “rearticulation” of the prison regime. In revisiting texts composed in the historical moment at which the contemporary prison regime undergoes crucial ruptures and reconfigurations as part of its ongoing transformation, I have sought to understand *how* this process annexes existent cultural tools, appropriates discourse, and silences resistance. Through careful readings of texts that bear witness to—and attempt to resist—the expansion of the prison regime, I have sought to understand the patterns of

reproduction and methods of self-preservation by which the prison regime maintains its powerful role in American society.

Rodríguez's analysis of the prison regime suggests that its reproductive methods extend far beyond the walls of the prison itself. As part of my own effort to understand this reproductive process, the open-ended structure of the poetry that follows in the tradition of Charles Olson, Robert Creeley, and other white members of the first wave of the American postwar avant-garde—poetry often considered the forerunner of what is now referred to as “language writing”—provides a critical sounding board. The works associated with this tradition offer productive perspectives on the interrelated roles that cultural institutions and the disciplining of academic studies within systems of higher education play (however unwittingly) in the elaboration of the prison regime. Thus, in 1950, as poetry begins to consume his labors, Charles Olson writes to Robert Creeley of his desire for a “return... into the work of language... otherwise we better go into, say, politics” (*Selected Letters*, 110). Olson recognizes Cold War American politics as a fool's gambit, full of deceit; poetry provides him with the space to pursue radically interdisciplinary, cross-cultural research projects rooted in the local politics of Gloucester, Massachusetts. As discussed in Chapter 4, Olson's rejection of the career that awaits him in the upper-echelons of the Democratic Party is in fact a political decision; Olson refuses to participate in the Cold War patriotism and imperialism that overtakes the party. He cannot have anticipated that his interest in the “work of language” would be mistaken for politics *in and of itself* in the work of many writers who position themselves as inheritors of the avant-garde tradition with which Olson is associated.

Rodríguez's insistence upon the prison regime as a transforming, mobile collection of ideologies, geographies, and discourses helps to frame the works I examine as responses to the elaborating structure of the prison regime. In turn, these innovative Black Liberationist autobiographies indict the U.S. tradition of individualism as the elemental genetic code that predicts and perpetuates the prison regime. This rejection of American individualism raises the possibility that similar attempts to critique or undermine subjectivity found in more abstract (and less overtly politically) works by contemporary writers might represent the previously unrecognized literary cousins to the innovative autobiographies of the Black Liberation Movement. In this light, the fragmented, asyntactical, non-linear texts produced by the group of writers associated with what has become known as "language writing" stand out as the potential literary and intellectual comrades to the Black Liberationist autobiographers chronicled in the chapters that follow. Indeed, some language poets have attempted to legitimize their assimilation into the academic sphere and the poetry establishment by insinuating that the curious textual deformations and unconventional formal arrangements found in their work embody or fulfill the demands of revolutionary politics.

The suspicion with which the writers examined in my study view American individualism emerges alongside varieties of critical theory, cultural and ethnic studies movements, and schools of avant-garde writing that similarly attempt to dismantle fundamental components and legacies of Enlightenment thought, from the racist foundations of Humanist philosophies to the patriarchal origins of civil rights. In particular, the expansionist years of the modern American prison regime coincide with the arrival and ascension of what I would like to call the language regime within

American academic departments and literary circles. My use of the term “language regime” reflects the dissemination of formally, structurally, and linguistically-focused theoretical endeavors that inform a vast array of literary, cultural, and academic works in the last quarter of the 20th Century. The publication of Jacques Derrida’s *Of Grammatology* (1967; first American edition 1976), the legendary (some would say infamous) dissemination of deconstructionist approaches in the U.S. through the work of Paul de Man, Frederic Jameson’s critiques of Russian formalism and structuralism in *The Prison-House of Language* (1972), the adoption of Ludwig Wittgenstein’s philosophical language games by literary scholars, the fascination with Martin Heidegger’s postwar investigations of language as technology, the popularity of French structuralism as modeled by Levi-Strauss and Roland Barthes, the heteroglossia and dialogism of Mikhail Bakhtin...

Such developments contribute to the paradoxical process through which supposedly left-wing varieties of critical theory ultimately reproduce oppressive social structures, becoming in and of themselves a means of containment. Critical theory’s linguistically-driven assessments of *language* or *discourse* ultimately foster fields or zones of contact that further institutionalize, marginalize, contain, or cordon off the radical political goals that ostensibly motivate such theories, pushing discussions toward ever-more specialized debates over the perceived tyrannies of *language* or *discourse*, thus tracing a circular process through which revolutionary energies are redirected into academic obscurity. This process has achieved a reactionary, conservative agenda, containing and marginalizing the potential for social change by absorbing into theory the energies that might provoke social change if directed toward mass political movements.

These shifts in academic discourse parallel the dissemination of language-based experimentations and Language poetics within avant-garde American literary communities.

For their part, even as they articulate alternative histories through innovative, non-traditional autobiographical practices, George Jackson, the New York 21, Assata Shakur, and Angela Davis come to writing as a means of documenting failed political aspirations or experiences of persecution. Writing does not fulfill the demands of their political beliefs, it merely records the process through which the government has succeeded in preventing their political beliefs to inform revolutionary actions, practices, and movements. These authors identify themselves as political actors first and “writers” only as the result of certain historical and political accidents; this distance from the overdetermined tradition of the writer as an identity contributes to the innovative qualities of their texts. The fact that their works share qualities associated with the structural or linguistic inventions of a largely white literary avant-garde, most of whose members self-consciously create themselves as “writers,” is the result of extraordinary experiences (and responses to those experiences) within the prison regime. In their experimental disarticulations of individuality, these accidental writers explore the relationship between language, socially-sanctioned narrative, censored forms of discourse, subject formation, and ideology; in the process, their autobiographies traffic in varieties of “critical theory” that emerge alongside (and that contribute to) structurally inventive schools of avant-garde American literature. Analyzing the formal features found in these four Black Liberationist autobiographies alongside the historical and political machinations that contribute to their development suggests the vital role these documents should play in

discussions of contemporary American literature and culture—as well as in discussions of critical theory itself, the institutionalization of which also occurs alongside the massive expansion of the American prison.

Critical theory and the related emergence of avant-garde texts associated with language writing thus mark two crucial cultural developments contemporaneous to the publication of the autobiographies of the Black Liberation Movement. In the case of both theory and language writing, practitioners cite the demise of the New Left in order to justify their own forms of cultural production, which for the most part bear no direct relationship to specific political engagements, movements, or resistance groups, but which nonetheless lay claim to radical politics through various “outsider” or “anti-institutional” stances. Considering such claims, the fact that these forms of cultural production also occupy institutionally-sanctioned or established positions of influence—positions from which innovative autobiographical works from Black Liberation Movement have generally been, and at present, from which they continue to be, excluded—begs further inquiry. This exclusion prevents the productive crosspollination that Black Liberationist autobiographies may bring to a variety of cultural institutions and academic disciplines; it also dismisses possibly uncomfortable discussions of the political challenges such works may pose to the established values that define and partition such spaces of cultural production.

The banishment of innovative Black Liberationist autobiographies from influential disciplinary and cultural domains suggests the degree to which state-administered strategies of captivity and containment, as modeled by the prison regime, have grafted themselves onto the structure of American cultural institutions. In

retrospect, the obsession with language and discourse that emerges within the disciplined study of theory constitutes a critical and disturbing development, one that has channeled the energy generated by ostensibly political concerns into apolitical analyses that become consumed in minute institutional battles with little relevance to any external, extra-institutional political movements. Amidst avant-garde poetics, an obsessive, almost inhibiting, incapacitating study of language itself as a fundamentally alienating, de-individuating, totalizing limit in which society's evils take up residence, becoming the grammar police of the mind, appears to provide linguistic catharsis for mostly well-off artists who would rather not recognize that their own politics of resistance have collapsed along with the New Left.

Nonetheless, the following chapters repeatedly note the political and formal affinities between Black Liberationists and various contemporaneous, white writers associated with the literary avant-garde. In particular, poets and authors associated with what many critics now refer to as “language writing” provide an important point of comparison. The work of language poets gains notoriety as a result of perceived textual ingenuity and inventiveness. The mostly white community of authors and critics responsible for the installation and preservation of such formally “radical” works, works that become cornerstones for contemporary American literary history, has frequently implied that political values inhere in works of formal innovation.

The assumption that formal innovation or experimentation effectively captures (or might even constitute) a variety of political action deserves revision in the context that produces the innovative, experimental Black Liberationist autobiographies examined in the chapters that follow. The failures, fears, or oversights that have prevented these

works from gaining critical consideration equal to that directed toward select coteries of white artists call for corrective interventions. An influential network of literary critics and the avant-garde authors these critics champion provides for the selective coronation of mostly white “innovative” writers. For the most part, the politics embodied in the work of these writers has been accepted as sufficiently leftist by critics, perhaps because critics have also failed to recognize and confront the proliferation of the prison regime; in addition, there remains an assumption that the formal or structural dynamics of avant-garde texts are sufficiently “radical” and “anti-institutional” that their contents need not speak to specific political movements or goals. It is telling that, as we shall see, the writers caught up in such networks have enjoyed the privilege of guiding (and in some cases authoring) the critical accounts according to which their own “radical” formal innovations have been judged sufficiently political.

There are concerted risks in seeking literary connections between works by white avant-garde writers and the four works by Black Liberationists on which this dissertation focuses. To do so seems to imply the need to “legitimate” marginalized texts by aligning them with works already sanctioned by or assimilated into influential cultural and academic institutions. In carefully describing the particular circumstances—for example, the role of prison rules that determine the length and regularity of George Jackson’s letters—that contribute to the formal innovations found in the autobiographies under discussion, I have sought to distinguish the concrete, practical connection between oppressive state apparatuses and the structure of these texts. As much as texts associated with the American avant-garde recognize forces of power and oppression in the regulation of knowledge and the restriction of discourse, the expression or embodiment

of such relationships through formal innovation is crafted, fabricated, forced. The chapters that follow attempt to challenge the operating logic by which such fabricated forms of innovation have been granted greater cultural value over similarly inventive texts that emerge as a result of their authors' direct experiences and attempts to evade, dismantle, or challenge racist state violence.

By relegating the innovative autobiographical works that emerge from the Black Liberation Movement to the socio-political background over which an elite, white avant-garde reigns transcendent, contemporary American literary histories risk recapitulating classic forms of racism and further marginalizing discourse that addresses the expansion of the American prison regime. The coronation of the largely white writers associated with language writing as inheritors of an American avant-garde tradition under the auspices of formal radicalism masks the role played by specific social factors in shaping this community. Common educational backgrounds, including access to selective cultural and educational institutions, familiarity with the middle- or upper-class values dominant within the confines of such institutions, personal friendships developed through professional as well as informal social networks surrounding such institutions, an interest in varieties of continental philosophy and theory popularized by humanities departments at elite American colleges and universities, a familiarity with avant-garde European and European-American visual arts—these factors play significant roles contributing to the establishment of the language regime as a powerful conservative force in American literature and culture.

Thus, while outlining various “objective,” “structural,” “language-based” principles that supposedly distinguish avant-garde, “anti-institutional” works, writers and

critics have reserved such designations for an elite collection of artists, while ignoring contemporary, formally-related works such as the autobiographies studied in this dissertation and written by members of the Black Liberation Movement. In harmonious yet distinct ways, the texts I examine break from conformist American and African American literary genres and traditions of self-representation. However, they do so while documenting the circumstances of political imprisonment through which their strategic, formal innovations and interventions take shape. *In the Butcher Shop of Subjectivity* thus pursues the study of the “innovative autobiographical maneuvers” of the Black Liberation Movement alongside contemporaneous (white) avant-garde works so that the critiques these autobiographies make manifest might begin to transform the institutional dynamics that have previously provided for their exclusion. This gesture refocuses the discussion of contemporary literature according to the controversial politics of resistance that both white avant-garde writers and members of the Black Liberation Movement claim has motivated their activities and informed their texts.

The study of critical theory in the humanities has exacerbated the problem of segregation within literary history, while helping to produce an elitist stance that privileges various “political” conundrums or “aporias” of language above all other political, social, and philosophical questions. This stance typifies language writing as well as various brands of critical theory and philosophy that thus constitute what I call the language regime. Beginning in the 1970s, theory’s expanding influence throughout humanities departments produced an explosion of structuralist, post-structuralist, and deconstructionist analyses. The discursive and conceptual currencies introduced as part of this process have contributed to a curiously symbiotic relationship between “anti-

establishment,” “anti-institutional” contemporary American writers and institutionally-affiliated critics who comment upon their texts. Thus, in Libbie Rifkin’s book, *Career Moves: Olson, Creeley, Zukofsky, Berrigan, and the American Avant-Garde* (2000), the author examines the uncomfortable tension produced by the installation of “authentic,” “anti-institutional” (white) avant-garde texts and authors as fixtures within established academic and cultural institutions. Rifkin quotes Ron Silliman, who observes that innovative American poets, many of whom have defined their careers, like Silliman, by adopting the avant-garde, “anti-institutional” identity associated with language writing, have in fact “grown out of the same historical conditions that raised the question of theory itself within the academy” (Rifkin, 16).

The familiarity with theory and academic speech amongst this self-selected group of poets and writers imposes significant limitations on discourse. Thus, in his critique of *The Marginalization of Poetry* (1996), by fellow Language poet and University of Pennsylvania Professor of English Bob Perelman, Silliman suggests that the demands of academic labor contribute to erroneous readings. By attempting to explain what language writing is “about” through a “metanarrative,” Silliman argues that Perelman fails his subject: “What might this book have become if it had been written for poets instead of for professional advancement? Almost certainly it would have turned the present text inside out. It would embrace—rather than attempt to contain and explain away—the question of meaninglessness.” Even as he identifies the emergence of language writing out of the same historical moment and cultural milieu that produces critical theory, Silliman attempts to sever the work of language poetry from the academic discourse that helps to produce and perpetuate interest in its “meaninglessness”; by attempting to explain the

“meaninglessness” or “opacity” of language writing, Silliman claims that Perelman destroys the works he attempts to analyze. It seems that for Silliman, silence is preferable to speech with which he disagrees.

Silliman also takes issue with Perelman’s selection of authors. He does not explain why such oversights matter if, as he suggests, Perelman’s analyses “destroy” the works they address. Furthermore, in his criticisms of such oversights, Silliman appears to assume an audience of elite “initiates” familiar enough with the material to understand why, for example, “it is fitting that Perelman discusses the work of Clark Coolidge only in the context of his and Larry Fagin’s critique of Maya Angelou.” Nowhere does he question the endless discussions of inclusion and exclusion that appear to define “language writing” better than any precise formal or structural features found in the writing itself: to be a language writer is to argue over who belongs in the club. The ironies in Silliman’s critique are perhaps too numerous to name briefly; nonetheless, it is curious that in his criticism of the academic features of Perelman’s work, Silliman employs the pejorative associations that surround the word “metanarrative,” a term known to signal critical sins to even the greenest of theory-initiates.

This criticism becomes considerably more problematic in light of Silliman’s own attempts to describe the emergence of the work as part of a particular historical and political moment. Writing in *Change* of his affiliation with language writing, Silliman describes a seemingly natural progression:

Begun in the sixties, the writing of the American poets gathered here for *Change* matured into an organized, ongoing literary discourse in the following decade, a period of significant transition for the United States.

From the perspective of capital, the war in Indochina was lost, a critical blow to national military prestige. More importantly, 1974 marked the end of capital's longest "boom," the expansionist years following the Second World War (on top of which the essential optimism of every variety of "New American" poetry had been constructed).

Simultaneously, the largest generation in U.S. history, the "baby boom" of the early 40's and early 50's, passed from college to the daily practices of material life. Tied to that generation and crippled from the beginning by its rejection of historical knowledge, the American New Left rapidly dissolved... For writers, persons constituted as "individual subjects" by their social context, and as subjects of a specific type, previous assumptions were shown to be false. Career expectations, within literature and elsewhere, for example, had been *socially imposed* with no real comprehension of the impact of technological innovation and the resulting recomposition of American class structure. Both the writer and (any potential) audience found themselves displaced, their existence in jeopardy. In such a context, it is no accident that poets such as this *Change* grouping should turn their attention to the origin of this displacement, the constituting mechanism of "private life," language itself. (*In the American Tree*, 484)

Silliman's emphasis on history suggests a point of convergence and divergence, at which his chosen community of poets and the Black Liberation Movement locate change and construct oppositional viewpoints regarding its meaning. The notion that members of the

American New Left had been “crippled... by [their] rejection of historical knowledge” would certainly draw objections from the Black Liberationists whose autobiographies form the basis for this dissertation. From George Jackson and Angela Davis to the New York 21 and Assata Shakur, these writers place a primary, uncompromising importance upon history as the dominant force in the shaping of lives and narratives. The fact that the history of America has been so widely misrepresented only reinforces the collective insistence upon its importance; the systematic misrepresentation of history demands analysis as much as the misrepresentation of history demands a corrective lens.

Critical Theory, Public Secrets, and the Reproduction of the Prison Regime

Silliman’s threshold year of 1974 (the year that *Angela Davis: An Autobiography* was published) certainly marks a shift in the nation’s economic fortunes, but the influence of the boom that he describes, as well as the declining economy that follows thereafter, remains a topic of some controversy. In his book *Prisons: Inside the New America, From Vernooykill Creek to Abu Ghraib* (2005), David Matlin uses 1974 to mark a different history: “From 1974 to 2002 the number of inmates in state and federal prisons increased six-fold.” (xxix) Measurements vary, but the early to mid-1970s are regularly cited as the transition years for the American prison regime. H. Bruce Franklin writes, “From 1976, the year when free higher education was established, until the end of the century, on average a new prison was constructed in America every week. The prison population went from under 200,000 in 1971 to 2 million in 2000.”⁵ Had every form of “New American” poetry until 1974 assumed an optimistic stance, as Silliman suggests?

⁵ Franklin’s comments appear in “The American Prison in the Culture Wars,” an address delivered at the Modern Language Association’s 2000 conference in Washington, D.C., and archived on Franklin’s website: <http://andromeda.rutgers.edu/%7Ehbf/priscult.html> (April 6, 2009).

In describing his magnum opus begun in the mid-fifties and considered a foundational text within the “New American” poetry to which Silliman refers, *The Maximus Poems*, Charles Olson writes, “the States as a measure of men’s misses, is my story, yes?” (*Selected Letters*, 196). Certainly Olson’s project does not subscribe to the optimism that Silliman universally assigns.

The structural or formal qualities that innovative Black Liberationist autobiographies share with avant-garde works produced within the mostly white communities of elite American writers and intellectuals cast such poetic works in a strange and sometimes unflattering light. The autobiographies examined in the chapters that follow render hollow most critical assessments of white avant-garde poetry that read a politics of resistance into the formal experiments such works supposedly invent. Indeed, in light of the contexts in which George Jackson, or the collective contributors to *Look for Me in the Whirlwind*, or the exiled Assata Shakur compose their texts, the formal “innovations” sometimes cited as evidence of a political agenda on the part various avant-garde writers appear facile at best; at worst, such claims appear part of a larger set of reactionary, counter-revolutionary moves within supposedly liberal intellectual spheres that effectively conceal the fact of the prison regime.

In 1975, H. Bruce Franklin published *The Victim as Criminal and Artist*. This wide-ranging analysis incorporates slave narratives, the early redemption tales sanctioned by religious leaders, the role of the whaling industry’s forced labor in the work of Herman Melville, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, and the poems of prisoners who survived the 1971 Attica Prison uprising to argue that captivity provides the definitive experience upon which American literature is based. Three years before the publication

of *The Victim as Criminal and Artist*, Franklin was fired from his tenured professorship at Stanford University. The story of his career offers a glimpse into the marginalization of radical politics in the age of the prison and language regimes.

Franklin began his career as a Melville scholar; a graduate from Amherst, he earned his Ph.D. in English at Stanford and was immediately hired by his own department. In 1966, at the age of just 31, Franklin was regarded as a prodigy of sorts, having already published two books on Nineteenth-century American literature. After spending a year teaching in France, Franklin's politics began to change. By the early seventies, he was meeting with a variety of revolutionary organizations that emphasized the tactics of self-defense modeled by the Panthers, and he was thoroughly engaged in the anti-war movement. From his position at Stanford, Franklin also witnessed a number of crucial developments during these years that likely contributed to his interest in the role that captivity has played in American literature. In August of 1971, police under the direction of psychology professor Philip Zimbardo began rounding up students for what would become known as the Stanford Prison Experiment, one of the most famous psychology experiments in the history of the field. Although Zimbardo was forced to halt the experiment when the "guards"—who, as they themselves had been informed, were randomly selected for their roles from the same student population as the "prisoners"—became increasingly abusive, the experiment nonetheless demonstrated that violence and abuse were virtually inevitable outcomes within the prison environment.

That same month, George Jackson was murdered by a prison guard at San Quentin, less than 100 miles to the north of the Stanford campus. During this time, Franklin helped lead a series of protests that culminated in a successful effort to prevent

former U.S. Ambassador to South Vietnam Henry Cabot Lodge from speaking on campus. After an extended investigation, a board of faculty members recommended his dismissal. Alan Dershowitz, then a 33 year-old Harvard professor visiting Stanford while working on a book, became an informal observer and submitted a report to the committee on behalf of the American Civil Liberties Union. “I’ve been made to feel like a Northern lawyer who went down to Mississippi and started speaking out on behalf of the blacks,” Dershowitz said of his attempts at discussing Franklin’s case with members of the Stanford community.⁶

In *The Victim as Criminal and Artist*, Franklin argues that narratives of captivity provide glimpses into truths and realities ignored or obscured by other features of American culture, including most of its literary histories and criticism. Unfortunately, Franklin’s book does not employ the abstract critical vocabulary pioneered by scholars such as Frederic Jameson, who, despite his insistence to “always historicize,” helped usher in the era of theory with his publication of *The Prison-House of Language* in 1972. As discussed in Chapter 1, Jameson’s more well-known text acknowledges the value of the prison only so much as “prison-house” appears to provide a metaphor for the eminently more important subject of language itself. Though H. Bruce Franklin’s apparent comfort with the notion of “prison literature” as a genre has subsequently become a matter of dispute amongst those who share many of his political beliefs, his book nonetheless remains a landmark study. *The Victim as Criminal and Artist* stands out not only for the original and disconcerting connections it draws between the prison and American culture, but also because its contributions have gone largely ignored during

⁶ Lamott, Kenneth. “In the Matter of H. Bruce Franklin.” *New York Times* 23 Jan. 1972, SM 14.

the very decades when the prison regime has witnessed its massive, unprecedented expansion.

Franklin's work mines the uncomfortable differences and similarities of institutions designed to segregate, quarantine, and discipline: the university and the prison stare at one another as one stares at one's own distorted reflection in the funny mirror of an amusement park. Which set of eyes provides a clearer view of knowledge? Of power? In a lecture delivered twenty-five years after the publication of *The Victim as Criminal and Artist* entitled "The American Prison in the Culture Wars,"⁷ Franklin expands upon his earlier work, establishing a historical connection between higher education and the expansion of the American prison regime. In April of 1969, students at City College of The City University of New York began protesting the school's admissions policy, leading to the university's open admissions policy. "At this point," Franklin writes, "a fierce counteroffensive against the progressive campus movements was launched and coordinated by the White House":

In June Nixon delivered a speech in which he equated "drugs, crime, campus revolts, racial discord, [and] draft resistance," expressed horror at the "patterns of deception" in American life stemming from contempt for moral, legal, and intellectual standards, and denounced the campus movement as central to this national crisis.... Later that year, Roger Freeman—a key educational adviser to Nixon then working for the reelection of California Governor Ronald Reagan—defined quite precisely the target of the conservative counterattack: "We are in danger of

⁷ This paper was delivered during the 2000 Modern Language Association Convention in Washington, D.C., and is archived on Franklin's website: <http://andromeda.rutgers.edu/%7Ehbf/priscult.html>.

producing an educated proletariat. That's dynamite! We have to be selective on who we allow to go through higher education."

In California, Freeman succeeded in eliminating free tuition by 1970. "In 1975," Franklin writes, "President Ford announced that he would withhold federal aid from New York City, then in a financial crisis, until it eliminated open admissions and free tuition at CUNY." The dramatic increase in prison building thus began at the same time that the prospect of free education was vanishing:

From 1976, the year when free higher education was eradicated, until the end of the century, on average a new prison was constructed in America every week. The prison population went from under 200,000 in 1971 to two million in 2000 as America became the prison capital of the world....

Within prisons, Franklin argues that anti-prison movements, aided by a growing interest in political imprisonment as well as prison literature on the outside, made the educational programs and publishing opportunities formerly considered part of prison's "rehabilitative" foundations targets for elimination:

By the late 1970s, prison literature was becoming a powerful force in the culture wars. Then came the repression that was to build during the 1980s and 1990s. Educational opportunities, including creative writing courses, in prison were defunded. Congress eliminated Pell Grants for prisoners. By 1984, nearly every literary journal devoted to publishing poetry and stories by prisoners was wiped out.... While prison literature was being outlawed by the state, it was being deligitimized by fashionable critical theories that, like New Criticism, revered coterie literature brimming with

complexity, indeterminacy, and ambiguity, while disdaining socially purposeful works accessible to a mass audience.

Without naming language writing as a culprit by name, Franklin nonetheless provides an uncomfortably appropriate description of the kind of “coterie literature” that consumes the literary world alongside critical theory in the same years that the prison crisis unfolds. “Just as now we assume that one cannot intelligently teach nineteenth-century American literature without recognizing slavery as a context,” Franklin concludes, “one cannot responsibly teach contemporary American literature without recognizing the American prison system as context.”

The fact that America’s massive acceleration in its rates of incarceration follows virtually the same historical timeline as does the expanding interest in critical theory poses serious questions regarding the political implications of theory’s rise. How can the silence that surrounds this crisis be explained? In “The Public Secret: Information and Social Knowledge,” Sharon Daniel grapples with the widespread acceptance of the prison regime’s growing influence, despite its disgraceful institutional failures. “The injustices of the justice system,” Daniel writes, “the existence of the prison industrial complex—its pervasive network of monopolies and its human rights abuses—are extremely well documented yet wholly submerged and repressed.” Combining texts produced by prisoners, popular media reports, and high theory in an attempt to understand this phenomenon, Daniel nonetheless ultimately professes “amazement” at “the paradoxical doubleness, the aporia of the public secret.”

Here we return to the question with which this introduction began, the question of knowledge that disables, renders speechless, inhibits, or incapacitates. Daniel introduces

her essay with a line from the anthropologist Michael Taussig: “If secrecy is fascinating, still more so is the public secret into which all secrets secrete...” By what mechanisms are the endless documentations of prison failures, violence, and horrors filtered from public discourse? “There are secrets that are kept from the public and then there are ‘public secrets,’” Daniel writes, “secrets that the public chooses to keep safe from itself...” the injustices of the war on drugs, the criminal justice system, and the Prison Industrial Complex are ‘public secrets.’” The effort required to maintain innocence in the face of guilt produces more guilt and demands ever-more substantial resources of ignorance; violence becomes the mechanism through which this necessary ignorance is supplied.

As Chapter 4 discusses in greater detail, here David Graeber’s *Fragments of an Anarchist Anthropology* (2004) proves useful. Graeber notes that ignorance, generally expressed and reinforced through violence, defines the assertion of power more often than does the accumulation of knowledge. This reversal of the familiar alliance that Michel Foucault constructs between knowledge and power aptly characterizes the functioning of day-to-day life within the prison, in which dumb violence overrules the knowledge and wisdom that sympathy, forgiveness, and understanding would require. Ignorant violence—or violent ignorance—thus describes the fundamental structure of the prison regime itself. Thus, after refusing to submit to a full body search before her extradition to California for trial, Angela Davis recalls being beaten by two male guards employed as a reserve goon squad by New York City’s Women’s Detention Center. The fact that Davis has already been searched multiple times during the (two-week period) that she has been held in custody cannot, according to the dominant ignorance of the

penal system, allow officers to depart from the procedural guidelines according to which all prisoners must have their orifices probed before entering or exiting the facility.

Among the bitter ironies of these prison protocols is the fact that such rigid adherence to the letter of the law seems a neurotic attempt to ignore other segments of American life in which lawbreaking is a regular and expected occurrence. As much as American politicians enjoy reminding their constituencies that “America is a nation of laws,” there is also a strong national tradition of lawbreaking. Drawing upon myths of the nation’s revolutionary origins, its so-called frontier spirit, and its history of protest and civic unrest, this tradition traverses the political spectrum, from the irreverent transgressions of “small government” conservatives and right-wing religious groups to the brash actions of liberal activists. Reports of the failure of government officials to abide by the tax codes (in some cases the very tax codes that they themselves have authored) are now so commonplace that they rarely elicit any significant public backlash.⁸ War profiteers do not bother to hide their filthy businesses; instead, they trumpet quarterly profits. Outlaws, cowboys, tycoons, gangsters, gangstas: Americans love the legendary identities fostered by lawbreaking as much as they love to believe in theirs as a “nation of laws.” This lawbreaking legacy has its official, systematized, bureaucratic equivalent: the effort to “neutralize” political activists through counterintelligence programs conducted by various “law enforcement” agencies studied in the chapters that follow constitute illegal actions designed and carried out by the very officials charged with upholding the law.

⁸ Here I am thinking of New York Congressman Charles B. Rangel, whose failure to pay income on a rental property, revealed in the fall of 2008, constituted a violation of the tax code he had helped write as chairman of the House Ways and Means Committee (see David Kocieniewski, “Rangel Owes Back Taxes, Lawyer Says.” *New York Times*, September 10, 2008).

The disregard for the law illustrated by these cultural and bureaucratic traditions suggests the limited efficacy that might be expected of legal or constitutional reforms to the American system of justice. In this light, the American academy's fascination with the work of Italian scholar Giorgio Agamben emblemizes the continuing and misplaced fascination with the power of language amongst American scholars and intellectuals—in this case, the word of law is overvalued at the expense of political histories and cultural legacies. Agamben situates his work as a response to Bush administration policies in the wake of 9/11, from its treatment of detainees taken prisoner in Afghanistan and Iraq, to its unauthorized monitoring of phone calls as part of its “domestic surveillance” program. His efforts to position his analyses thusly have in turn fed the popularity with which his works have been received by American scholars. Translations of his works—especially his *State of Exception* (2005)—have become essential texts with which American scholars analyze U.S. government policies. In *State of Exception*, Agamben employs careful analyses of the language appearing across a range of legal precedents in the history of Western European and American lawmaking that describe the “state of exception. The term describes a provision that allows for the suspension of the rule of law in times of crisis. Such a suspension ostensibly was intended to provide the means with which a sovereign, through martial law or other means, might ultimately restore the rule of law. Today, many scholars appear fascinated with the idea that the state of exception describes permanent features of day-to-day governance in supposedly democratic states, including the U.S. Agamben's *State of Exception* thus builds upon Walter Benjamin's analyses of German jurist and professor of law Carl Schmitt; it is

Benjamin, in his “Critique of Violence,” who hypothesizes that, “the state of exception... has become the rule” (quoted in Agamben, 6).

In transposing the theoretical frameworks found in such works onto the U.S., the constitutional changes introduced amidst Teutonic traditions—in other words, amidst a culture with a respect for rules and rulemaking that frequently elicits awe in its foreign visitors—is grafted onto a culture whose national traditions include a similarly distinctive appreciation for irreverence, “maverick” but “principled” law-breaking, or outright “cowboy” lawlessness. Yet again, American academics appear smitten with a European text, the practical, political applications of which become muddled or perhaps vanish entirely in light of various societal and cultural differences. Thus, Joy James argues that Michel Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (the American translation of which appeared in 1978), perhaps the most widely-read academic text addressing the development of the prison, “contributes to the erasure of racist violence” in its failure to account for the role that race plays in the construction of the modern penitentiary (24). Because racist violence has defined the elaboration of the American prison regime, Foucault’s book effectively inhibits critical discussions of this regime. Similarly, Agamben’s readings of the history of Western constitutional law cannot effectively accommodate the peculiar cultural, political, and historical networks through which America’s racist legacy repeatedly carves out spaces in which vigilante forms of “justice,” from lynching to the Minutemen’s border patrols to the widespread practice in which police murder ostensibly “innocent-until-proven-guilty” suspects who fail to heed police instructions and attempt to flee rather than surrender themselves to arrest.

Agamben's work speaks not to this cultural legacy, but to the American preference for language and discourse over political actions effecting change. In recent years his work has become a viral presence amongst American writers, scholars, and intellectuals. Thus, in her otherwise perceptive analysis of the prison regime as a form of "public secret," Sharon Daniel ultimately invokes Agamben's analyses of the state of exception, despite the fact that his work arguably has very little relevance in the sphere of U.S. governmental violence. The history of this violence repeatedly demonstrates the utter contempt with which governmental officials, especially those entrusted with the enforcement of its laws, regard the law itself, as well as language. "I don't want to get involved in looking [at the photographs], because what do you do with that information, once you know what they show?" an unnamed U.S. Army lieutenant general tells Antonio M. Taguba, the Army investigator charged with looking into the alleged abuses at Iraq's Abu Ghraib prison.⁹ The unnamed lieutenant who refuses knowledge of Abu Ghraib already possesses some understanding of the powerful varieties of ignorance that Taguba encounters as he presses his case through higher and higher channels; at every level, even after he has forwarded his report and the photographs he has collected, he finds himself in meetings with officials who profess no understanding of the abuse Taguba has so carefully documented.

The pictures from Abu Ghraib, David Matlin writes, "are the common practices of a world we have created and choose not to see, or believe cannot exist" (136). Such rehearsed forms of ignorance have become part of the standard operating procedure within organizations such as the CIA and the FBI, where agents operate in secret. Questions of constitutionality or unconstitutionality are rendered irrelevant when no one

⁹ Quoted in Seymour Hirsh's article, "The General's Report." *New Yorker* 25 June 2007.

can actually say what anyone else is really doing. Douglas Valentine argues that the CIA has developed a model of linguistic distortion, subsequently adopted by other government agencies, in which elaborate forms of ignorance allow agents the freedom to act without regard for the law. In *The Phoenix Program* (1990), Valentine's account of the torture, disinformation, and execution employed by clandestine U.S. operatives and secret forces in and around Vietnam, the author underscores the doctrine of "plausible deniability" as the CIA's operating principle. In his analysis of former CIA deputy director Richard Bissell's congressional testimony, Valentine notes that Bissell defines "plausible denial" as "the use of circumlocution and euphemism in discussions where precise definitions would expose covert actions and bring them to an end" (47). The word of law by which the "state of exception" comes into existence has no relevance for agencies that have institutionalized distortion and concealment as the means with which to protect the operatives they employ from future prosecution.

Although Agamben cites various instances in which the U.S. government authorizes or redefines the "state of exception," disregard for the law nonetheless constitutes a pervasive cultural phenomenon. Regardless of the state of exception, the general acceptance of lawless behavior amidst law enforcement personnel appears far more pervasive, and may be far more dangerous, precisely because it occurs for the most part beyond any recognizable textual archives or documentary forms. Such secret actions have served (and in all likelihood continue to serve) as a means with which to transform, manipulate, or otherwise control the populace; they have reinforced boundaries of class and race, regulated the distinction between "American" and "alien," and fostered the elaboration of the prison regime; and they have emerged through the work of clandestine

operatives whose illegal actions, when accidentally disclosed by whistle-blowers or other information leaks, clearly violated the rights of American citizens. The “liberties” thus taken by “law enforcement” personnel constitute widespread violations of human rights through legal as well as extra-legal actions on a national and international scale.

The tacit understanding that law enforcement agents must ultimately act outside the law in order to catch and prosecute criminals is common in the United States. Indeed, some may assume that the very best agents in fact *must* do so, not only because the scale of criminality actually provides the moral imperative or “emergency” for them to do so, but also because the rules and regulations represent overly constrictive safeguards that would otherwise prevent any successful efforts at policing and prosecution. This tradition is rooted in the cowboy mentality mythologized by the “Wild West” narrative that has erased much of the genocidal terror that defines the settlement of the American frontier. A vast array of American cultural products might serve as evidence. For example, in the movie *Dirty Harry* (1971) and its offspring (*Magnum Force*, 1973; *The Enforcer*, 1976; *Sudden Impact*, 1983; and *The Dead Pool*, 1988), the violent, unconventional actions of a renegade superhero policeman played by Clint Eastwood appear to answer fears of a criminal element threatening to undo the legacy of white supremacy and male superiority. Eastwood’s rise to fame chronicles the cultural and historical relationship between the Wild West and the lawbreaking police officer. Early in his career, Eastwood found success in the television western *Rawhide* (1959), helping him to land his subsequent, iconic roles in westerns such as *A Fistful of Dollars* (1964) and *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly* (1966). As precedents to his *Dirty Harry* persona, these performances articulate the need to reinforce and re-affirm white male supremacy, a

need that also appears to define the career of J. Edgar Hoover, to name one figure whose actions constitute a crucial part of the historical context this dissertation examines. Clint Eastwood's mastery of the mythologized Wild West captures the endless fascination with and respect for the lawless violence wielded by the white male as the necessary answer to a similarly lawless land. The frontier has been transformed, but the roles remain unchanged; cowboy cops administer urban versions of lawless violence.

In light of this cultural legacy, lawbreaking to enforce the "rule of law" is widely understood as a kind of "necessary evil." Moreover, the "rule of law" in many cases refers not to what is written in the law so much as the unwritten codes that preserve the boundaries of race, class, and gender, and that circumscribe the acceptable range of political discourse. The concerted effort on the part of law enforcement officers to control or dismantle political organizations that threaten to complicate the narrow discursive range in which American political debates unfold results in the COINTELPRO operations discussed in this project. In the effort to delimit the boundaries of acceptable political discourse, the FBI, acting covertly and in concert with numerous state and local police officers, has repeatedly violated the law itself, all the while framing, entrapping, or encouraging members of political groups to break the law in order to "justify" arrests and facilitate imprisonment.

In his analyses of the "deep political intrigue" through which covert agencies and secret alliances have shaped American foreign policy from Vietnam to the present, Peter Dale Scott notes the persistent "psychological resistance that inhibits frank recognition of the dysfunctional and sometimes even criminal underpinnings of our political establishment" (9). In planning the conceptual framework through which I have sought

to introduce the autobiographical works at the center of this dissertation, and while researching the counterintelligence programs that influence these works, I have frequently revisited Scott's critique of the "archival bias" that has skewed research into the war in Vietnam. Archival bias assumes that historical truths "should be studied chiefly from recorded bureaucratic discussions, statements, and rationalizations." As a result of archival bias, Scott writes, "we risk losing sight of the possibility that a significant part of the process [through which governments enact policies] lies elsewhere, in deeper forces that articulate themselves obliquely in other arenas or not at all" (13). Similarly, despite the release of selected, redacted FBI COINTELPRO files, the persecution of the Black Panther Party and other revolutionary black organizations described in the chapters that follow involve far more complex "interventions" and attempts at "neutralization" than what is documented in the files made public thus far.

As discussed in Chapter 2, the arrest of the New York 21 was not the product of an FBI operation. It was spearheaded by the NYPD's own undercover bureau at a time when this bureau was under attack following a series of corruptions charges and investigations. The FBI and the NYPD appear to have seen their uncoordinated but simultaneous efforts at counterintelligence as a kind of rivalry; regardless of the defendants' acquittal, the trial of the New York 21 would ultimately destroy the Panthers, disabling the party more thoroughly and successfully than any FBI COINTELPRO that had preceded it. As described in Chapter 3, the events surrounding this case are enormously complex, but appear tied, at the very least, to specific local politics, as well as New York state politics; they may also endure crossfire as a result of the rivalry

between various factions of the New York Republican Party, not to mention the largely democratic union ranks that had for so long wielded power in the city.

After the trial of the New York 21, many former members ostensibly went underground and formed the Black Liberation Army (BLA). Soon after the acquittal of the New York 21, the BLA supposedly delivered letters to various media organizations claiming its members had orchestrated a series of assassinations and ambushes that had targeted police officers. However, these claims remain dubious given the internal struggles of the department to come to terms with its own culture of corruption; the sensational news conferences announcing the NYPD's "discovery" of the BLA deflected attention from its own problems by fostering fears of black urban "guerilla" fighters at war against the police. Though there was already a history (in the attempted assassination of Frank Serpico) of police attempting to exact revenge upon officers unwilling to play by the established rules of corruption, the Black Liberation Army's supposed role as self-declared police assassins provided a less controversial explanation, one that offered to unite the department against a new scapegoat: the Black Revolutionary.

In his book *Mimesis and Alterity*, origin histories of the Cuna people prompt Michael Taussig's musings on the nature of the public secret. Taussig notes the curious means through which the public secret thrives on reenactments of change that manage in fact to change nothing, so that "one thing becomes another thing while in some profound sense remaining the (mimetic) same" (116). Collective ignorance and innocence shelter collective guilt; "secret," Taussig writes, "equals slippage." The necessary effort required to maintain innocence in the face of guilt produces more guilt and demands

ever-more substantial resources of ignorance; violence becomes the mechanism through which this necessary ignorance is supplied. The public secret is the process through which the “(mimetic) same” is reproduced; in helping to construct complex spiritual, political, and societal views by providing ontological narratives that connect the living and the dead, origin histories preserve fundamental tenets of Cuna culture. So too might we seek to understand the “origin histories” through which the public secret of the prison regime has managed to reproduce itself. This reproductive tendency demands investigations into the cultural, historical, and political legacies that allow for its elaborations and that prohibit challenges to its supremacy. The critical essays of Angela Davis frame the catastrophic horror of slavery as the peculiar origin history from which issue steadfast forms of public secrecy, as well as endless efforts at “change” and “reform,” efforts that ultimately reproduce Taussig’s “(mimetic) same” in the form of the prison regime while claiming to effect more meaningful transformations.

While awaiting trial, Davis, Bettina Aptheker, and others contributed to *If They Come in the Morning: Voices of Resistance* (1971), a collection of writings by and about American political prisoners.¹⁰ In her essay, “Political Prisoners, Prisons & Black Liberation,” Davis notes the unstable distinction between “political” prisoners and those criminalized by the state’s law enforcement apparatuses as a result of racism. “For the Black individual,” Davis writes, “contact with law-enforcement-judicial-penal network directly or through relatives and friends, is inevitable because he is Black” (*If They Come in the Morning*, 40). Thirty-odd years later, Davis’s continuing efforts to dismantle the prison regime continue; in *Are Prisons Obsolete* (2003), she asserts that the history of the

¹⁰ The book’s front matter underscores the collective effort leading to its publication: “This book was edited and prepared for publication by Angela Y. Davis, Bettina Aptheker and other members of the National United Committee to Free Angela Davis and All Political Prisoners.”

contemporary American prison system is directly linked to the legacy of slavery through the racist, reactionary lawmaking that flourished in the South following the Civil War. Recalling various historians who note the reintroduction of forced labor after the abolition of slavery through the establishment of prison work farms throughout the South (many such “work farms” located on sites formerly occupied by plantations), Davis makes explicit the origin history of the prison regime: “As black people were integrated into southern penal systems—and as the penal system became a system of penal servitude—the punishments associated with slavery became further incorporated into the penal system” (*Are Prisons Obsolete?*, 31). The framing of the prison regime and its attendant forms of public secrecy by way of these “origin histories” that begin with enslavement introduces the disconcerting possibility that this ongoing legacy of captivity, this chronology of spent flesh, violence and brutality, rape and degradation, cruelty and tyranny, is not only an economic phenomenon, not only a legacy of racism, not only a product or perverted elaboration of Enlightenment philosophy, but a profound wound in the American psyche, a wound so deeply-scored and painful as to become familiar, almost reassuring, an agonizing reminder of the unresolved, catastrophic cruelties of the past. The prison regime thus becomes the site at which knowledge of this past is further effaced through the violent ignorance that power exerts in the present.

Chapter Overviews, From *Soledad* to *Angela*

In order to understand the fundamental potential that anti-individualist stances may provide in the effort to cut through the ideological tissues that bind the structures of the prison regime together, it is important to recognize how crucial “individualism” has

been in the formation of distinct “American” identities and ideologies. When Americans discuss questions of liberty in the context of racist legacies, the rhetorical fog of the “individual” rarely lifts. So bound up are notions of national identity with fantasies of “personal freedom,” “individual responsibility,” “self-expression,” and the like, that even the most perceptive critics regularly forget that these principles also act as basic ideological and rhetorical units in the authorization of discriminatory juridical practices. The rhetoric of individuality becomes yet another means through which the prison regime’s punitive mechanisms exact punishments; regardless of the societal inequities or individual circumstances surrounding a given case, if a crime has been committed (and if the accused cannot muster the tremendous financial resources necessary to secure an effective defense team), the ideological roots of the prison regime insist upon the notion that he or she must “take responsibility” and serve out the “appropriate” sentence.

Thus, in her essay “Challenging Sexism in Black Life,” bell hooks writes, “justice and integrity of the race must be defined by the extent to which black males and females have the freedom to be self-determining” (hooks, 75). The works I have chosen to examine in the project that follows pursue very different understandings of black liberation, refusing the rhetoric of selfhood in the search for some other (truly revolutionary) conceptual structure. Although hers is intended as a criticism of the masculine forms of “self-determination” championed by writers such as Paul Gilroy, hooks imagines liberation as an individual pursuit. As discussed in Chapter 1, Gilroy’s reading of Frederick Douglass in *The Black Atlantic* relies upon Douglass’s individual departure from supposedly universal ideals; Gilroy argues that this departure signals the moment at which autobiographical truths challenge Enlightenment values. For Douglass,

the opinion of the wider community no longer serves as the measure through which one should view oneself. Gilroy thus quotes Douglass: “I prefer to be true to myself even at the hazard of incurring the ridicule of others, rather than be false and incur my own abhorrence” (69).

Targeted by government counterintelligence campaigns, the writers I discuss associate such “self-determining” logic with America’s ideologies of individualism and “personal responsibility,” formulas that serve the purposes of the prison regime. Notions of self-determination silence debates over institutionalized inequalities; the violent juridical apparatuses that target the poor and communities of color thrive on the myth of the individual. American mythologizes this individual as hero or villain without addressing the socio-political, socio-historical forces that make either position possible. The works discussed in the chapters that follow disarticulate myths of individualism while engaging with forms of black nationalism; in so doing, they establish slippery, fluid, mobile constructions of identity that contradict the static images of black masculinity and patriarchal authority often associated with Black Power.

George Jackson’s prison letters, the autobiographies of Angela Davis and Assata Shakur, and the collective autobiography of the Black Panther 21 thus disfigure familiar autobiographical tropes, forging revolutionary subject formations that resist (and bear witness to) criminalizing state practices. Each chapter examines one work in order to understand its relationship to traditions within the genre, its formal innovations or idiosyncrasies, the relationship of these formal qualities to the context and history of its production, and the lessons that these areas of inquiry might provide, collectively or in particular, for an understanding of contemporary American writing and criticism

emerging in the shadow of the prison regime. Three of the texts I examine—*Soledad Brother*, *Look for Me in the Whirlwind*, and *Assata*—are marked by structural features that bear striking resemblances to qualities often imagined as groundbreaking “inventions” or daring “innovations” of white, culturally and institutionally assimilated, avant-garde writers. Significant portions of each chapter follow in some detail the implications behind such resemblances. As noted throughout, the fact that overtly revolutionary, political works by Black Liberationists, works produced through political struggle and government persecution, thus appear to “trespass” on the sacred ground of formal innovation disrupts the ease with which such distinctions have been awarded.

The first chapter pursues a reading of George Jackson’s prison letters collected in *Soledad Brother*. This book may be considered the forerunner of those that follow, containing letters dating back to the mid-sixties. Aside from chronology, my reading of Jackson’s text appears first because it introduces several themes key to the structure of the dissertation as a whole. As expressed in his letters, Jackson’s critique of the American state depends upon his own erasure; the state he describes must, if it is as he describes it, murder him. Before the publication of his letters, Jackson’s case became a popular cause, ultimately attracting Angela Davis’s energies and then enveloping her after George’s younger brother, Jonathan, was shot to death following his takeover of the Marin Courthouse, part of an apparent attempt to win his brother’s freedom. These developments outside the prison signal Jackson’s own violent disavowal of the formations of subjectivity that have defined autobiography as well as black identity within the U.S. By inscribing this departure as part of his resistance to the prison regime, Jackson establishes the basis for the influential but short-lived anti-prison movement of

the early seventies, inspiring the Attica Rebellion and fostering a variety of revolutionary organizations that claim to carry his mantle. In resigning his fate to the images, icons, and fantasies that his identity assumes for others, the prison letters of George Jackson thus lay the groundwork for the anti-individualist autobiographies that follow.

The second chapter examines the collective autobiographical project *Look For Me in the Whirlwind*. The sixteen contributors to this text conceptualize a radical subjectivity in response to the criminal identities the government assigns them. By enclosing pieces of their own stories in collage-like fashion within a single body of work, they sketch a model for what I call apparitional subjectivity: an amoebic, anonymous, collective subject, an image of a nearly complete revolutionary soldier constructed from the revolutionary fragments of their own writings. In the process, the individuals who contribute to this text become virtually indistinguishable from one another, passing into and through one another's narratives until their narratives belong to all of them and to none of them.¹¹ *Look For Me in the Whirlwind* thus positions the revolutionary soldier as personal and anonymous, present but yet unknown, a living potential that their collective text makes possible.

The third chapter examines *Assata: An Autobiography*, written by another New York City Black Panther, Assata Shakur. Shakur's ruptured narrative inscribes its protagonist's disappearance; the author has literally escaped, and reportedly lives in Cuba while remaining one of the FBI's "Most-Wanted." Shakur's autobiography traces her political awakening as a process of learning and adaptation, in which shape-shifting and

¹¹ Here I intentionally borrow language used by the activist organization *All Of Us Or None*, "a national organizing initiative of prisoners, former prisoners and felons, to combat the many forms of discrimination that we face as the result of felony convictions" <<http://www.allofusornone.org/>>.

the donning of various disguises paradoxically provide the means with which to effect “authentic” revolutionary actions. Her autobiography both assumes the reductive image of Black radicalism, and refuses it; in the process, she narrates the experience of criminalization while also contributing to the iconic image of the Black revolutionary. Punctured by poetry, *Assata* refuses to reveal or disclose, pursuing instead the construction of a mythology for the politics of resistance in which the narrator’s escape offers the promise of a revolutionary return.

Each of the works mentioned above contains formal elements that share in the linguistic experiments of the American avant-garde. The fourth book examined in this study, *Angela Davis: An Autobiography*, does not share such displays of formal ingenuity; it has been included for distinctly different, yet not entirely unrelated reasons. Although this work appears to assume a fairly conventional structure, Davis’s autobiography pursues an anti-institutional mode of inquiry that also distinguishes her book from the “anti-institutional” avant-garde texts previously discussed in relation to language writing. Davis’s text insinuates a disconcerting relationship between the divisions of knowledge enforced by institutions of higher education and the maintenance of the public secret required to enable the elaboration of the prison regime. Beginning with her own body as the instrument of investigation, Davis’s *inter-* yet *anti-*disciplinary effort trespasses the borders of various academic fields in an effort to reconfigure the forms, contents, and perspectives traditionally associated with history, the “individual” autobiographical subject, and the subject of philosophy. In its oscillation between the prison and the academy, Davis’s career trajectory pushes and prods at the curious relationship between two otherwise mutually exclusive, state-administered machines, vast

processors of humanity, according to which career possibilities are established, through which class boundaries are reinforced.

1 Paper Target

The Self-Destructive Subject of George Jackson's *Soledad Brother*

In 1972, a young professor at the San Diego campus of the University of California published *The Prison-House of Language: A Critical Account of Structuralism and Russian Formalism*. The professor, Fredric Jameson, preceded his analysis with a quotation from Friedrich Nietzsche: “ ‘We have to cease to think if we refuse to do it in the prison-house of language’ ” (I). On August 21, 1971, in the prison-house known as San Quentin, some 500 miles to the north of the campus where Jameson was teaching and just months before the release of his book, a prison guard murdered George Jackson. Jameson's book heralded the explosion of language-centered analyses such as structuralism and Russian formalism in the academy at-large; Jackson's murder served as the violent conclusion to a long, occasionally public struggle against the California prison system, prefiguring the decline of an anti-prison movement whose rise had relied heavily upon the unconscionable circumstances of Jackson's imprisonment to energize its activists.

The pages that follow attempt to diminish the distance between these events in the American literary and intellectual landscape. I want to think about what it means that the publication of Fredric Jameson's book and the murder of George Jackson seem to share nothing, save a strange and incompatible relationship to “prison-house.” Whereas Jameson conjures Nietzsche's prison-house as a metaphorical emblem for language's ability to confine thought, Jackson's death seals the legacy of the “prison-house” as a real thing, an actual death chamber in which thought ceases. The letters that define George Jackson's literary legacy constitute a linguistic crossroads, an intersection at which the

prison-house of language meets the language of the prison-house. His doubly-imprisoned texts provide a crucial opportunity to extend and complicate discussions surrounding what Jameson describes as “the organization and status of Language” (Jameson, vii). The puzzling political, philosophical, and linguistic dilemmas manifested in Jackson’s letters serve as catalysts for this dissertation. An engagement with the correspondences included in *Soledad Brother* presents an opportunity to circumvent the arrested logic that has allowed American intellectuals to ignore Jackson’s corpse—and the prison regime his work challenges—while taking up residence in the metaphorical penitentiary Jameson references.

The linguistic experiments found in Jackson’s letters emerge in and through questions of Black identity and the contradictions of self-representation. The constraints of imprisonment force Jackson to understand subjectivity in terms that diverge from rigid, essentialist, hyper-masculine images of Black identity commonly associated with the Black Panther Party, the Party that claimed him as their own before his death. The resistance to reified forms of subjectivity found in Jackson’s letters shifts the terrain of the debate over the power and structure of language from the theoretical, academic realm within which Jameson works—a realm that effectively polices itself—to the spaces and territories that the government polices in the effort to control its subjects. In particular, *Soledad Brother*’s improvisatory qualities and strategies of representation respond to the overwhelming power of the prison regime. The experimental qualities of the language it employs reverse the terms of imprisonment, capturing the distorted, inhumane practices of America’s penal colonies, codes, and institutions. In the language of the prison-house and the prison-house of language, the disintegration of George Jackson as the

autobiographical subject of *Soledad Brother* begs a careful study of the relationship between innovative American writing and the American prison regime. This relationship has yet to be understood; what follows endeavors to begin an investigation into its nuances and complexities.

As products of the prison system's constraints, *Soledad Brother* belongs to a storied history of constraint-based literature, from the traditional sonnet to experimental writings such as those produced by the French avant-garde writing group known as the Oulipo.¹² At the same time, what letters his captors allow to pass through prison walls conform, in ways Jackson and his prison censors likely recognize, to conventions of prison writing: reflections on endless noise, the lack of privacy, the existential angst resulting from day-to-day sameness, the perpetual fear of violence, and perhaps most importantly, the sense that one's individuality is eroding. These subjects recall the attributes assigned to prison writing by H. Bruce Franklin in his groundbreaking text on American prison literature, *The Victim as Criminal and Artist* (1978). Franklin suggests that the history of prison literature in the United States defines America's contradictory legacy as a supposedly free democracy built on genocide and slave labor.

For H. Bruce Franklin, as for George Jackson, the prison is the new plantation; and yet, in linking Frederick Douglass's freedom narrative to prison writings such as *The*

¹² The "Ouvroir de Littérature Potentielle," or Workshop for Potential Literature, founded in 1960 by Raymond Queneau, François Le Lionnais, and others, was (and is) a group devoted to the production of new works through carefully-devised literary constraints. See Harry Matthews and Alastair Brotchie, eds., *Oulipo Compendium*. (London: Atlas Press, 1998), and Warren F. Motte, Jr., trans. and ed., *Oulipo: A Primer of Potential Literature*. (New York: Dalkey Archive Press, 1998). These constraints (along with the observation, implicit in oulipian projects, that all writing operates under some constraints, many of them arbitrarily enforced by convention, tradition, or language itself) are willfully assumed by the writers. Interestingly, the assumption of constraints to drive creative projects by avant-garde writers of the Oulipo, and the fetishization of constraint-based writing by avant-garde writers in general, begins in roughly the same years that mark Jackson's imprisonment. Needless to say, Jackson's constraints—his one-page limit, as well as the constraints on content imposed by prison censors—are, from the perspective of the United States authorities interested in repressing political activism, malignantly practical, but they are not willfully assumed by the writer himself.

Autobiography of Malcolm X, Franklin emphasizes the revelation captivity brings, its power to elicit from its prisoners new visions of revolution and liberty based on individual reflections, on truths visible only to oneself. Thus, Franklin notes, the earliest American prison writings feature Christian revelations, confessions and conversion narratives, instances of reform based on self-reflective truths: “I am changed because I know I am changed.” Similarly, Paul Gilroy’s reading of Frederick Douglass in *The Black Atlantic* relies upon the individual departure from supposedly universal ideals to signal a crucial marker in which autobiographical truths gain special status and Enlightenment values begin to crumble. One’s view of oneself outweighs the opinion of the wider community. Gilroy quotes Douglass: “I prefer to be true to myself even at the hazard of incurring the ridicule of others, rather than be false and incur my own abhorrence” (69).

George Jackson’s letters betray a different understanding of the individual. For Jackson, the notion of individuality emerges not from revelation or self-reflection but from a confrontation with the state. The state employs its logic of retributive justice in an effort to fix his identity, to capture and control his image. The fibers of his own being produce a kind of socio-political abjection: the state’s power and influence, forces that make him who he is, are the very same forces he must purge from himself. Indeed, the state must rely upon the notion of the individual, and more specifically, upon the notion of the individual’s guilt and criminality, in order to legitimate its strategies of personal and spatial territorialization. The world outside the prison walls enforces many of the same rules and logic of the prison itself, so that even his potential release offers no consolation.

Jackson's inability to envision release and reincorporation into society receives extensive treatment in Brian Conniff's essay, "The Prison Writer as Ideologue" (2005). For Conniff, Jackson's conception of United States culture as inherently flawed contributes to the complexity of his writing. Nonetheless, Conniff prefers to view *Soledad Brother* as another example of the conventional prison narrative, albeit with some reservations. Central to Conniff's argument is the thirteen-page "autobiography" requested by Jackson's editor, as well as the letters that follow it and that Jackson addresses to his lawyer Fay Spender, whose efforts have resulted in the book's publication. These writings bear traces of the standard prison narrative. Conniff explains that Jackson acknowledges the petty crimes of his early youth, for example, and that Jackson mentions with some brevity the books he encounters while in prison; both features are common to prison narrative. It seems crucial to note, however that these examples emerge through writings requested by an editor and a lawyer; the main portions of *Soledad Brother* are non-narrative letters on family matters and daily life in prison.

Furthermore, as Conniff himself acknowledges, "Part of the problem [with convict autobiography] is that the genre's tendency to create in its subject a sense of uniqueness militates against any analysis of common oppression" (156). Indeed, I suggest that Jackson's acute knowledge of this very problem is what makes his text a powerful disavowal of both convict autobiography and prison narrative. Instead, what Jackson constructs through years of carefully-written letters—including the "more than four years" of letters that, in Conniff's estimation, "are largely uneventful"—is a critique of American individuality (156). In my view, the reflections on the quotidian that fill these letters lend Jackson's text the complexity Conniff recognizes; to categorize it as

another prison narrative, on a par with Eldridge Cleaver's *Soul on Ice* or *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, however, fails to incorporate the vast number of letters Jackson writes in which no narrative feature can be readily distinguished. In addition, as part of his effort to extend and sharpen H. Bruce Franklin's vision of American literature as a product founded upon captivity and enslavement, Dylan Rodríguez has argued against the study of prison literature as a genre at all. Rodríguez argues that the framework of "prison literature" provides an illusion of coherence that obscures bodies of work (as well as bodies of prisoners) ruled by incoherence.¹³ Indeed, George Jackson's letters, conditioned by institutionalized violence and censorship, distorted by arbitrary length limitations, and complicated by his personal desire to set political movements into motion, require from readers a willingness to submit to the suspension of narrative, in place of which the fragment rules. In fact, Jackson's text can be included in a literary history of innovation and experimentation that thrives on repetition, exhaustion, and banality; his literary companions might include Gertrude Stein, Franz Kafka, and Antonin Artaud, as well as Eldridge Cleaver, Malcolm X, and Assata Shakur.

Jackson's critique of individuality emerges through his realization that the prison's paradoxical use of identity (the prisoner is guilty of his crimes and therefore must be rehabilitated, but rehabilitation can only come through de-individuated punishment) mirrors a larger cultural contradiction in which individual identity serves as the state's means of categorizing and controlling the populace. Writing of his childhood in the missive to his editor which inaugurates *Soledad Brother*, Jackson makes clear the consistency between the life he recalls outside prison and his life on the inside. "We

¹³ Dylan Rodríguez, *Forced Passages: Imprisoned Radical Intellectuals and the U.S. Prison Regime* (Minneapolis: U. of Minnesota, 2006), 75-113.

were sometimes *allowed* to venture out into the world, which at the time meant no further than fenced-off roof area [sic] adjoining our little three-room apartment built over a tavern” (5), Jackson writes of the Chicago apartment in which he spent his early childhood. Even if it arrives as an error, the anonymity of this virtual prison, “no further than fenced-off roof area”—the fact that it arrives sans definite or indefinite article—exemplifies his perception that every space he has occupied, even before his criminalization, is the same in that it has been impoverished and hemmed-round by barriers meant to preserve the racial and economic disparities that define American society. Of his elementary school days at a Catholic school (where he is sent after being beaten for touching a white boy’s hair, a novel sight to him at the time, at the local public school), Jackson writes,

St. Malachy’s was really two schools. There was another school across the street that was more private than ours. ‘We’ played and fought on the corner sidewalks bordering the school. ‘They’ had a large grass-and-tree-studded garden with an eight-foot wrought-iron fence bordering it (to keep us out, since it never seemed to keep any of them in when they chose to leave). [...] The white students’ yard was equipped with picnic tables for spring lunches, swings, slides, and other more sophisticated gadgets intended to please older children. For years we had only the very crowded sidewalks and alley behind school. Years later a small gym was built but it just stood there, locked. (6)

This recollection underscores Jackson’s sense of individual history as a subset of power, space, and materialism. Fences, locks, unused or misappropriated places or chattel,

careful distinctions between who or what may pass through which boundary, these concerns re-emerge throughout Jackson's writings.

Central to this investigation is the erosion of faith in a fully-formed, self-directed subject, an individual given to personal reflection and responsibility whose actions, beliefs, and decisions might be understood and studied apart from the array of institutional, environmental, historical, political, or social factors that surround her. *Soledad Brother* is an epitaph for the person the state identifies as George Jackson. As fragments of an obituary for the individual identified (and simultaneously criminalized) by the state, Jackson's correspondences aspire to become the keystone in the tomb of America's individualist tradition. The censorship under which he composes his prison letters reflects forms of self-censorship already deeply ingrained in the act of writing, regardless of genre. At the same time, writing offers Jackson a sanctuary for the practice of rhetorical forms, styles of self-identification and disguise, and varieties of deception and manipulation. The fluid dynamics of subject formation and self-representation that Jackson discovers in his letters represent aspects of identity that the prison regime's punitive apparatus otherwise disallows. As the foundational concept for the self-possessing forms of subjectivity commonly found in America's autobiographical tradition and ideologies of national identity, Jackson recognizes that such forms of individualism must be destroyed. The prison regime depends upon an unyielding concept of criminality; its varieties of punishment fabricate equations that tether individuals to the crimes of which they have been convicted. This process relies upon a blindness to history, context, and circumstance. The prison-house that murders Jackson makes manifest a very real boundary, a place where thought truly ceases, where the state's

concept of identity also marks the death sentence that this selfsame concept makes possible, authorizes, sanctions; the prison is the secret space for the enactment of the violence that ultimately enforces and preserves the myth of American individualism. The unfortunate irony in *Soledad Brother* is that the death of the subject at the hands of the state confirms the central tenets of his revolutionary vision; by securing his own annihilation within the walls of the American prison, Jackson pushes his critique of subjectivity to its ultimate (and perhaps its necessary) conclusion.

The Cryptogrammatic Structure of Prison-House Language

If George Jackson's letters trace his progression toward death, the subtle textual complexities that accompany this progression may be easily overlooked. *Soledad Brother's* best-known sections include the short autobiography contributed by Jackson shortly before the book's publication at the behest of his publisher, and the long correspondences near the end of the volume, letters addressed to his lawyers and to Angela Davis, a leading figure in the effort to organize his legal defense. Some 270 of the volume's 330 pages contain short letters of less than one page. Most of these letters, addressed to family members, discuss seemingly banal matters. Recent publications by writers living behind bars—social critics whom Dylan Rodríguez convincingly argues should be referred to with the more precise term, “imprisoned radical intellectuals”—have helped to elucidate *Soledad Brother's* subtleties.

Among such works, Victor Hassine's *Life Without Parole* (1999) provides an essential paradigm for understanding Jackson's letters. Hassine documents the inscrutable but ever-present roles mistrust and disinformation play in shaping and

distorting prison-house language. The book's title is taken from the sentence Hassine continues to serve as a prisoner in the Pennsylvania Department of Corrections.

Coincidentally, however, the word "parole" might resonate distinctly for readers of Jameson's *The Prison-House of Language*, or those otherwise familiar with Ferdinand de Saussure's founding structuralist notes compiled in the *Course on General Linguistics* (1915). Saussure famously distinguishes between *langue*, the total system of rules governing the function of language (and the principle focus of his *Course*), and *parole*, the discrete instances in which individual speakers put language to use. For his part, Hassine is interested in the language of the prison-house. Its radically imbalanced power dynamics dictate language games with curious, convoluted strategies that complicate the distinction Saussure draws between *langue* and *parole*. A strategy of resistance known as "playing the opposites" is Hassine's primary example. Hassine explains that prison officials are more likely to deny the things that prisoners most desire; in fact, prison officials often go even further, and attempt to impose additional punishment on prisoners by ensuring that prisoners live under the least desirable conditions. Prisoners who are "playing the opposites" craft statements that wager on this cruel tendency. By making requests or sharing hopes that stand in direct opposition to the things they actually want, prisoners hope to hoodwink prison officials into inadvertently granting their wishes.

Hassine illustrates the concept with an anecdote: while waiting to meet with prison authorities, he encounters another prisoner named Clarence. Clarence desperately wishes to end his stint in solitary confinement, otherwise known as "the Hole," and so plans to "play the opposites" when he meets with prison officials: "I'm going to tell those people... if they let me out of the Hole, I'm going to get my ass kicked... I'm going to

beg them not to let me out of the Hole” (34). The strategy succeeds; soon after his own hearing, Hassine reads in his cell when Clarence suddenly appears, having just gained his release from the Hole.

At the same time that the title of Hassine’s book, *Life Without Parole*, names its author’s prison sentence, it also underscores the severe divide between acts of speech (Saussure’s *parole*) prisoners practice amidst institutional mistreatment and neglect, and the total system of rules governing the prison itself, the prison’s operational *langue*. As much as Clarence’s successful escape from the Hole indicates the potential for prisoners to craft speech that effects change, the strategy of “playing the opposites” that he employs only reinforces the gross institutional deafness that prison authorities maintain in an effort to preserve structural rigidity reflected in the prison’s standardized procedures, its daily routines, visiting rules, and so on. The guidelines for prison life dictate that almost all prisoners experience life without *parole*: an opaque but relentless institutional *langue* renders individual speech acts virtually meaningless. As a result, the possibility for speech to maintain any representational authenticity in relationship to the desiring body or identity of the individual speaker vanishes.

An American citizen who immigrated to the U.S. from Egypt at the age of nineteen, Hassine credits his discovery of Uncle Remus stories, “tales that were passed down by generations of black slaves in America,” for his understanding of “playing the opposites” as a strategy of resistance. Although these tales are rooted in a tradition of African-American storytelling, Hassine hypothesizes that the tales might serve as evidence for more universal practices; common rhetorical patterns might be discovered in liberation and resistance movements otherwise separated by history and geography.

Recalling the tactics employed by Br'er Rabbit to win his freedom after having been caught in Br'er Fox's tarbaby trap—pleading that he not to be thrown in the brier patch, and escaping when Br'er Fox attempts to exact this most cruel punishment—Hassine concludes that playing the opposites represents “not only an adjustment to prison life but a survival tactic of the disadvantaged everywhere [that] encourages deceit as an acceptable means to an end” (35).

Hassine's speculation that this strategy bridges historical, cultural, and geographical divides is important in understanding the context in which Jackson's letters are written. The cross-cultural hypothesis articulated by Hassine recalls James C. Scott's investigations in *Domination and the Arts of Resistance* (1990). In a wide-ranging analysis indebted to both Russian formalism and structuralism (Mikhail Bakhtin and Claude Lévi-Strauss, respectively, appear in the index), Scott decodes what he calls “hidden transcripts,” discursive lineages that emerge amidst radically stratified, inequitable societies or social settings. Hidden transcripts develop in private conversations between members of a particular class or social group. The extent to which hidden transcripts and public transcripts differ may indicate the severity of the stratification that divides particular social groups; extreme divergence between hidden and public transcripts evidences severe forms of domination. Oppressors, like the oppressed, establish their own hidden transcripts, guided by discursive rules and codes that remain shielded from public transcripts. For the oppressed, the opportunity to communicate apart from the wary eyes and ears of the oppressors—as when Clarence explains how he plans to play the opposites to Hassine, his fellow prisoner, before

meeting with the officials he hopes to deceive—leads to subversive modes of speech and expression.

“Domination, then,” Scott writes, “*creates* the hidden transcript. If the domination is particularly severe, it is likely to produce a hidden transcript of corresponding richness” (27). In addition to notoriously violent regimes of domination such as enslavement, Scott notes that contemporary “total institutions,” and prisons in particular, illustrate the complexities that stratification contributes to the hidden transcript. The unrestrained violence prisoners practice against one another, common to many prisons, reinforces hierarchies amongst prisoners themselves, producing varieties of hidden transcripts within hidden transcripts. Indeed, threats of violence between fellow prisoners may prove more threatening than the force wielded by prison officials. These dynamics may entangle or invert the expected dynamics of power that divide certain castes or groups. If a prisoner speaks to prison authorities in the presence of his fellow inmates, direct insubordination to the authorities may indicate a simultaneous subordination to fellow prisoners. In such an event, the hidden transcript that governs the private discourse of the prisoners overrides threatened reprimands with which prison authorities attempt to suppress such discourse (Scott, 25-28). The evolution of hidden transcripts thus allows for the deployment of language in which very different meanings inhere; what signals insubordination to one group may to another group signal subordination, or be understood as a request for collaboration by still another group, while to some other group the same statement might express desperation.

In concert with Hassine’s insights into life without *parole*, Scott’s diagrams of the various forces that influence the development of hidden transcripts, including prison-

bound discourses, provide essential tools with which to investigate George Jackson's letters. Until the last years of his imprisonment, when media reports publicizing his case provided Jackson with unprecedented access to lawyers and other advocates outside the prison (and when the better-known autobiographical introduction to his letters, as well as the letters to Angela Davis, were written), almost all his correspondences were read by prison officials who confiscated any letters that included contents of which they did not approve; confiscated letters might be added to Jackson's file (perhaps to be retrieved during his parole hearings), circulated amongst prison guards who might benefit from the information his letters contained, or simply destroyed. In addition, prison rules dictated the length and regularity of his correspondences: one letter per day, one 8 ½ by 11 inch sheet of paper per letter. Passing into the hands of his correspondents only after institutional review as part of the prison's "public" transcripts, these otherwise private communiqués necessitated extreme forms of restraint. Thus, the letters also suggest hidden transcripts yet to be decoded. Whatever Jackson reveals to one reader he may hope to conceal, disguise, or contradict if and when his text is read by another. Consideration of such factors is crucial in order to understand the complexities of the letters; interestingly, many of these letters involve requests for technologies of communication:

I have the typewriter in my possession here, so all is well. They didn't, however, produce the instructional book or paper. They let me have two extra ribbons. I can get an instruction book. Paper isn't too much of a problem. All things considered, it turned out very well.

You can take a chance if you want to on the shorthand book. Put it in an envelope like you say, but also write a letter stating right in the front, in the first lines, that it is a shorthand book. Mail the letter and the book together. If they don't think it's some kind of cryptogram we have going, it may be allowed or overlooked, but you can't leave it up to them to figure out what it is. That would be asking for too much. (77)

Dated October 3, 1965, this correspondence introduces a device—the typewriter—that frequently appears in the letters. Amidst the continual dislocations and forced migrations Jackson experiences, the typewriter's fate remains a constant presence. As prison authorities move him through different institutions and their various wings, tiers, and cells, punish supposed disciplinary infractions with extended stints in solitary confinement, and charge him with violent crimes, they repeatedly seize his possessions; at each remove, Jackson must recover or reconstruct the materials and technologies writing requires.

In the absence of a coherent narrative, the typewriter's various states of disrepair map the forced migrations and confiscations that consume his life inside prison. In the same letter, like a tripwire Jackson's language stretches across the reader's path, the next paragraph shifts subjects suddenly and surprisingly:

Just read in the *Monitor* that “.6 parts of insecticide to one billion parts of water will kill most all marine animals in salt water or fresh”! (77)

This paragraph, cryptogram in and of itself, ends; in the next, he continues:

Be sure to look into the course on speed reading. It costs sixty cents. I know it is a great help. I [sic] would be nice for me to have someone to talk to.

Take care, and keep your eyes open,

George (77)

Here lobbying for technologies of inscription bumps up against the possibility of coded speech contained in the reference to insecticides and marine animals. This non sequitur seems to test the prison censors, inviting suspicion. “I tried to write several times these last couple of weeks,” another letter begins, “but my letters all came back with a note attached explaining what I can and cannot say” (101). If technologies of inscription such as the typewriter and shorthand—not to mention methodologies of decryption such as speed reading—can pass as admissible under the eyes of the censors, sudden interruptions regarding marine animals and insecticide stand as affronts to the practical logic the letter proposes as its purpose. Just as the letter’s first lines foreground writing technologies, establishing Jackson’s interest in writing as process and a discipline, his interjection concerning the deadliness of insecticides to marine life testifies to the letter as experimental discourse. Indeed, considering the varieties of meaning and purpose Victor Hassine and James C. Scott ascribe to prison language, the symbolic weight Jackson’s perpetually malfunctioning typewriter carries cannot fully encompass the range of potential interpretations this same device might provoke in readers familiar with hidden transcripts that likely inform his letters. The typewriter may not—as the examples of prison ingenuity in the pages that follow will show—serve as a writing device at all, just as the “instructional book” may have purposes far removed from its supposed

importance in supplying the information necessary to maintain the typewriter's proper operating form.

The chapter that follows cannot, alas, provide the cipher necessary for a complete decoding of such hidden transcripts. Nor is the aim of the chapter to ascribe a profound mystery to the letters themselves. For many readers, Jackson's letters may already possess an aura of uncertainty and misapprehension so startling and insurmountable as to render commentary unnecessary. What deserves commentary is the process through which Jackson's prison experiences lead him to conclude that American traditions of self-representation must be reconfigured before revolutionary change can occur. As part of this process, the impositions to self-expression play a vital role. The discursive disguises that the hidden transcripts of prison-house language require shape Jackson's critiques of national mythologies. Debates over these mythologies punctuate his family correspondences. "You sound like a high-school civics textbook with that thing about free speech and free press," Jackson writes to Robert, his father. Paraphrasing a famous A.J. Liebling quotation, Jackson continues, " 'Freedom of the press is for *those who own one.*' Even they are kept in line by economic pressure from above. Very little of the repression is done overtly, my friend. You cannot see a tree's roots all the time, but because one cannot see them does not mean that they do not exist. The tree couldn't stand without them" (175). The act of composition necessitates subterfuge, traces a smuggler's route, relishes the uncertain terms metaphor introduces as a means with which to encode hints and allegations. For Jackson's letters to pass unnoticed by the eyes of the prison officials who police his prose, he must find sentences capable of trespassing the increasingly unclear border between self-expression and deception.

The diminishing clarity with which readers of *Soledad Brother* might distinguish misrepresentation from self-representation constitutes a crucial epistemological problem that ultimately transcends the text. A photographed image of Jackson shackled and chained appears on the book's original dust jacket; on the back, a brief biography and case summary is superimposed on top of one of Jackson's handwritten letters. Such efforts likely reflect the publisher's interest in capitalizing on the widespread fascination with (and fetishization of) the radical Black American male. Moreover, the carefully dated presentation of materials and the generous employment of white space between letters further reinforce the sense that the text is presenting Jackson's correspondences as pieces of an incomplete, though potentially (if only circumstances were different!) much larger and more significant, so-called literary project.

The outcome of these presentational features is arguably quite the opposite of the intended effects. The publisher's embellishments appear to compensate for shortcomings totally irrelevant to the intended purposes and prerogatives driving Jackson's terse, demanding, deeply critical correspondences. The employment of photographic images on the front and back of the dust jacket support a fantasy of stabilized subjectivity diametrically opposed to the unstable autobiographical subject found in Jackson's prose. In one of the earliest letters, dated June, 1964, Jackson declares his freedom from emotional concerns: "I have completely repressed all emotion; have learned to see myself in perspective, in true relation with other men in the world.... I have completely arrested the susceptibility to think in rhetorical terms... I feel no pain of mind or body, and the harder it gets the better I like it" (38). Less than a year later, Jackson writes, "I promised myself that I wouldn't write you again from here. I only take pen in hand when feeling

moves me to do so” (44). A month later, he writes again to his mother, “I am not too manly or sophisticated to say that I love you and all the rest with a devotion and dedication that will continue to grow until I pass from existence” (49). These shifting, contradictory stances exemplify the instabilities that remain consistent throughout Jackson’s letters.

The epistolary experiments that elaborate subject formation as mutable in *Soledad Brother* provide unique and advantageous perspectives on a variety of contemporaneous literary works. Later in this chapter, I will examine one such example, Robert Creeley’s *A Day Book* (1972). Read through the lens Jackson provides, Creeley’s text makes manifest the deep ideological roots that produce incarceration as a forge through which contemporary political and literary subjects are fabricated. The differences between these writers remain significant. Jackson’s experiences as a minority subjected to strict state surveillance influence the splintered sense of subjectivity captured in his letters. Creeley, a white New Englander whose family traces its roots to the Puritan founders of the English colonies, does not share these experiences. Such differences suggest that the points at which their texts converge signal crucial forces in the formation of American identity, zones or territories of national culture in which forms of censorship and restriction, though far removed from the prison regime, nonetheless authorize its abuses. A short autobiographical prose work composed over the course of thirty days between 1968 and 1969, *A Day Book* adheres to a measured constraint eerily similar to the restrictions facing George Jackson during his years in San Quentin: one single typewritten piece of paper for every one of the thirty days. Squarely situated in the domestic, familial sphere that also haunts Jackson’s letters, Creeley’s work pursues

similar inquiries into the nature of identity and selfhood as products of history and ideology.

Placing George Jackson's epistolary experiments alongside works of contemporary American literature thus offers an opportunity to extend his critique of the repressive system under which he lives and writes. His letters challenge the boundaries of genre, incorporating epistemological quandaries as elements of cultural, political, and historical critiques. Forced to accommodate an audience that includes prison officials as well as his letters' intended recipients, Jackson must constantly police his own writing. In concert with the disturbing history that surrounds his life and case, Jackson's letters raise vital questions regarding the conceptualization and categorization of contemporary American literature. Too often, scholars reinforce longstanding cultural hierarchies that divide so-called literary (and especially poetic) works from works perceived as the byproducts of particular historical moments or political movements. However unwittingly or unintentionally, the analyses that replicate such distinctions risk overlooking remarkable and unlikely synchronicities that overleap existent boundaries separating the popular from the avant-garde, the political from the literary, and so forth. Such synchronicities deserve thorough consideration as contributing factors that help to produce national legacies and, as in the case of the American prison regime, national travesties.

Like George Jackson, Creeley imagines the disintegration of the subject as a central and necessary precursor to political change; for Creeley, however, this disintegration is virtually indivisible from the "prison-house of language" that filters, organizes, and contains thinking itself. The relationships that interest Creeley—

relationships between speech acts, forms of self-expression and representation, and the dynamics of power—assume more focused and tangibly political forms in George Jackson's letters. The language of the prison-house through which Jackson writes enforces radical limitations on his thinking, but the domestic concerns that fill Creeley's day-by-day entries are no less specific, bounded, and particular; in addition, they may be no less political. Perhaps the restricted, finite scope of concerns that occupy each writer is in part accentuated by the spatial limitations under which they work; or, perhaps these spatial limitations accentuate that particular cultural and historical forces inevitably exert. The concept of personal experience as the byproduct of events, decisions, and behaviors over which the individual has no say or control constitutes a central alienating principle that shapes each writers' reflections.

Through a suturing of the divergent experiences and contexts that lead each of these writers to attempt to understand their lives as byproducts of events seemingly long past, far removed, or otherwise beyond their reach, the dense ideological cords that bind American identity to its legacy of imprisonment become more tangible. The national and international scope of America's prison building enterprises suggests the coordinated collaboration of diverse social, political, and cultural characteristics; the resources and ideologies necessary to accomplish mass incarceration are vast and have required simultaneous articulations at seemingly disparate locales amidst otherwise unrelated groups and individuals. Reading Creeley through Jackson's letters represents an attempt to answer this project's central question: how do the unusual autobiographical subjectivities that emerge from the Black Liberation Movement change the way we understand not only this movement, but also, more broadly speaking, the forces at work

in contemporary American life—the function of the state and its prisons, the formation of American identities, the contradictions of self-representation, the disintegration of the autobiographical subject, the obsession with the prison-house of language. As I have explained in the introduction, my project operates under the assumption that readers of this nation’s literature must find some way to incorporate the massive expansion of the American police and prison regime, perhaps the most crucial historical development of the past forty years, into analyses of American literature and culture. As witnesses to this development, the Black Liberationists whose works this dissertation examines have provided crucial literary, historical, and political documents. It is the function and elaboration of the prison regime that Jackson’s letters (as well as the autobiographical works addressed in the chapters to follow) anticipate, witness, and attempt to resist. Engaging these documents offers strategies for tracing the elaboration of prison ideologies in sites and sources far removed from prisons, that nonetheless practice the articulation of punitive structures and logics of constraint in order to support the sedimentation of incarceration as a central tenet within American life, history, and culture.

“Jackson Worked the Butcher Shop to Death”: Sweetpea and Other Secrets

Soledad Brother reflects George Jackson’s understanding of the decimated subjects prison life produces. Rather than deflect or deny this reality, his text pursues the immolation of the autobiographical subject as the first principle not only of the prison, but also of any revolutionary politics. Witnessing the prelude to decades of mass incarceration through which the prison regime has arrived at its present legacy, George

Jackson's letters posit his own death as the outcome necessitated by the system that holds him captive. The conviction with which Jackson anticipates his murder deflects attention from the covert maneuvers by prison and government authorities that help to bring his predictions to fruition. Any attempt to understand the life and death of George Jackson must consider the uncertain but indisputable influence exerted by anonymous, covert state operatives. Their fingerprints surround his case and the cases that concern his family, friends, and advocates, as well as the political organizations with which they work.

As noted in the introduction, the unacknowledged role that covert operatives play in historical developments leads Peter Dale Scott to hypothesize the influence of forces whose inner-workings he describes with the term "deep politics." Whereas most forms of historical study rely upon the archive, Scott argues that the influence of clandestine actors whose activities are secret by design requires a different approach. By relying upon the materials government archives and agencies make available, Scott argues that, "we risk losing sight of the possibility that a significant part of the process lies elsewhere, in deeper forces that articulate themselves obliquely in other arenas or not at all" (*Deep Politics*, 13). His notion of "deep politics" attempts to describe the dynamic role that undocumented, undercover, clandestine operatives play in the distribution of power and the accumulation of history. Like the hidden transcripts described by James Scott as crucial to the arts and culture of resistance, "deep politics" emphasizes discursive and behavioral dynamics designed to evade detection and to escape documentation in the historical archives. Peter Dale Scott suggests that the culture of secrecy further confounds the efforts of individual actors or the authorities ostensibly directing the

clandestine operations themselves. As secrecy becomes routine, agents and infiltrators are more likely to pursue rogue programs that potentially contradict or undermine the goals set by the covert institutions ostensibly authorizing or governing their clandestine activities.

Although most of Peter Dale Scott's investigations involve major American foreign policy programs such as the war in Vietnam or the CIA's support for anti-Soviet forces in Afghanistan, Scott traces the players involved in developing, directing, or participating in these policies to a variety of developments related to the internal security of the United States. Scott suggests that the culture of secrecy that inhabits governmental departments designed to conduct clandestine operations erodes the principles of just action that the government uses to account for its own policies. In addition, the vast number of covert actors, operating under diverse agencies that frequently compete with one another for funding, influence, and power, virtually guarantees that the practice of secrecy will be exploited and abused. This dynamic—much of which, as Scott notes, is lost to history and excised from the archives—distorts, confuses, or even counteracts the purposes and goals set by the government and its various departments. In George Jackson's case, evidence suggests that a variety of organizations—including the FBI, the California Department of Corrections, and the undercover divisions of various California police departments—conducted clandestine surveillance campaigns. The extent to which these campaigns included outright provocations by infiltrators or undercover operators remains unclear. Secrets abound; it appears that counterintelligence efforts and conspiracies targeting Jackson may have also ensnared an untold number of fellow prisoners, family members, friends, and activists; even the lawyers involved in his

defense became surveillance targets for agents of the state. In addition to the hidden meanings or encoded messages that likely inhabit Jackson's letters, the potential influence covert state operatives may wield over Jackson's experiences further enhances the haunted qualities of his prose.

The "hidden transcripts" produced by such representatives of the state's own repressive apparatuses represent an essential absence that nonetheless informs Jackson's letters, as well as the history of his life, broadly speaking. That these covert operatives became interested in the seemingly unremarkable life of a single prisoner in California's massive penitentiary system remains a crucial, under-examined fact. Jackson's role in exposing these machinations is the direct result of the publication of his prison letters in 1970; Jackson "had become an international *cause célèbre*... largely as a result of the eloquence of his book, *Soledad Brother*"; because of his fame, the odd circumstances of his death provoked significant outcry and concern, leading to investigations that have uncovered information that might have otherwise never come to light (Churchill and Vander Wall, *Agents*, 94).

Thus did George Jackson become a living symbol of the prison regime's gross injustices during the last months of his life. Shuffled through California's labyrinthine prison for over ten years following his conviction for a gas station robbery when he was just eighteen, what Churchill and Vander Wall describe as "eloquence" in Jackson's prose stands in stark juxtaposition to the severity of his prison sentence. As a self-educated political philosopher who attempted to complicate the politics of race in America by incorporating transnational perspectives, Jackson's writings attracted white liberals as well as members of the Black Liberation Movement. Before becoming a

literary sensation, Jackson's effectiveness in organizing resistance among fellow prisoners attracted the attention of the prison authorities. As his reputation spread beyond prison walls, his family and associates, as well as the lawyers and activists involved in his defense, attracted the attention of domestic spies. Facts and details regarding the interventions made by government agents into Jackson's affairs remain cloudy. Information related to his earliest prison years is especially sparse; nonetheless, what facts exist are crucial to understanding the significance of his prison writings.

According to his friend James Carr, Jackson rose to power as the leader of a prison gang known as the "Wolf Pack." Carr's own prison memoir, *Bad: The Autobiography of James Carr* (1975, 2002), is filled with frank depictions of violence that fulfill the voyeuristic traditions of conventional prison literature. "George Jackson worked the butcher shop to death," Carr writes of his friend's early forays into the prison's black market. "When we came by he'd have every different kind of meat and cheese wrapped up and labeled just like a delicatessen, stashed and ready for us to deliver. The cons cooked the meat in their cells. They'd take a gallon can, put holes around the bottom, and weld legs for it to stand on. Then they'd put a smaller can packed with milk cartons under it so it burned like a candle. The flame goes up and the smoke goes out the holes" (70). Carr's recollections soon transcend improvised kitchens to address racial warfare, rape, and homosexuality in detailed accounts that exceed the conventions of prison writing. In addition to providing a portrait of George Jackson not otherwise found in the official prison files or in Jackson's own prison letters, such features mark Carr's text as exceptional. The salacious details in Carr's writing effectively underscore the stoicism of Jackson's letters. Carr describes a system in which

prisoners have been so deprived of agency and self-expression that violence offers one of the few avenues for establishing some semblance of personal worth. Most of the violence Carr describes revolves around race, sex, or both. Sent to a work camp for juveniles, or “juvies,” Carr recalls initiating the gang rape of a white boy who had been assigned to his all-black crew:

The rangers who assigned the crews must have had no sense at all because one noon we got back from work and there’s this new, young, cute white kid waiting at our table. We couldn’t believe our eyes...

...in a switchback between the rocks where the trail widened out, I pulled the kid behind a rock for a little talk. “Listen,” I whispered, “the guys are really gonna rip you off, that’s no shit. But if you come across for me, I’ll tell em you’re all right so they won’t fuck with ya. Okay?”

He stammered out something I didn’t pay much attention to, since by then I had his pants down and already had my cock halfway up his ass. I pushed him up the rock and kept fucking him while he babbled how I was hurting him and he’d never been fucked before and he wished I’d hurry up and come. Soon as I finished Johnny Washington jumped in to take my place... Our plan was to have each guy in the crew go behind the boulder and tell the kid he wouldn’t tell anyone else he’d fucked him... Everyone in the crew punked this poor guy, and then Washington punked him again and took off all his clothes. (56-57)

This anecdote presages the escalation of racial tensions that provides *Bad* with its narrative structure. It also offers a vivid example of the candidness with which Carr

repeatedly describes man-on-man sexual assault while cataloguing the varieties of violence that emblemize his experiences inside California's prisons. Carr's depictions of forced homosexual encounters nominate sexual abuse as the ultimate currency in the domination and exploitation of individual prisoners by their peers, enforcing gang hierarchies and contributing numerous loaded terms to the "hidden transcripts" that prisoner discourse creates. Although Carr recalls sustaining a brutal beating at the hands of older prisoners as part of his "initiation" into a center for "juvies," nowhere does he admit to having been the victim of sexual assault. Similarly, while he recounts a savage beating administered by George Jackson to an older, larger prisoner who attempts to put George in his place, as well as Jackson's beating at the hands of a similarly overwhelming opponent, nowhere does he acknowledge the likelihood that both he and Jackson, sent as teenagers to detention centers housing adults, were primary targets for rapists.

If Carr was never a victim of rape himself, his dissociative relationship to the suffering caused by sexual assault nonetheless calls attention to itself, a vivid, most peculiar silence in his narrative. Although Carr never names George Jackson as a rape victim or as a rapist when describing his own exploits, Carr makes clear the violence required of Jackson in order for him to gain the deference and respect of other prisoners. The George Jackson portrayed by Carr is a ruthlessly intelligent gang leader constantly angling and scheming to gain power over others. The questions raised by Carr's depictions of sexual assault become all the more pregnant in light of the eviscerated ego George Jackson's letters present. The point is not to diagnose Jackson's suffering, but to voice the manifold silences at the heart of public and private discourses. A former inmate

who knew George Jackson while he was in Soledad Prison tells Gregory Armstrong of Jackson's relationship with another prisoner. "Sweetpea, as his name might suggest, was a homosexual," Armstrong writes:

Sometimes George would visit him in his cell. At one time, George had given him his typewriter. He also used to give Sweetpea food and money. The man who was telling me the story had once stood guard outside Sweetpea's cell to make sure that George and Sweetpea weren't discovered together making love.... George paid Sweetpea and... seemed to be concerned about him as a human being. I got the feeling that this man would have had more respect for George if he had been raping young boys.... The fact that George gave Sweetpea his typewriter says so much. In a way, I think that is as revolutionary as anything George ever did.

(236)

Some time after the 1962 race riot at Soledad, George Jackson and James Carr were transferred to San Quentin, where Jackson served most of his time until 1969. In the intervening years—years that included the passage of the Civil Rights Amendment, the Watts Riots, the assassinations of John F. Kennedy and Malcolm X, and the continuing expansion of the war in Vietnam—Carr earned a brief release. Charged with a parole violation in the late 1960s, Carr returned to San Quentin to find that George Jackson had begun educating himself on liberation movements in the midst of the prison's mounting racial tensions: "When I got there, we had a full-blown race war on our hands, and things were heading toward a showdown... Since his time in the Hole at Soledad, George had been deepening his political philosophy... According to George, the

new black man was being formed in the struggles for national liberation going on in the Portuguese colonies of Angola, Guinea and Mozambique” (Carr, 123). In the course of his education, however, George Jackson’s political analysis appears to have exceeded the now familiar and more narrow forms of rhetoric associated with the American Black Power movement, reflecting an identification with the struggles of colonized peoples throughout the world, as well as an awareness of the racist concepts of identity ingested by and reiterated in nascent forms of Black Nationalism. This more nuanced analysis is consistent with the international outlook favored by Malcolm X near the end of his life, as well as writers whose works will be discussed in subsequent chapters, including Angela Davis and some members of the Black Panthers and Black Liberation Army. Such analyses have repeatedly attracted sharp and often violent responses from the domestic surveillance apparatuses of the U.S. government. Through agencies such as the FBI, in concert with local police departments, such responses appear to have domesticated the deep political processes and techniques described by Peter Dale Scott. These practices involve intricate webs of deception that spread distrust and that endanger or discredit legitimate political activists; such repressive actions simultaneously assert government power and hide the conduits through which these powers are exercised.

Specific features of George Jackson’s prison record seem to reflect longstanding concerns over his potential as a political organizer, activist, and dissident. As soon as he is identified as a revolutionary by prison officials, disciplinary infractions begin appearing with increasing regularity in his file, thus justifying the extension of his prison sentence. Violations of prison rules thus reflect not only in his own evolving political

awareness, but also an increasing concern within the prison administration over Jackson's expanding power as a political prisoner:

In March 1962, after a black was stabbed in a racial fight, Jackson and several other brothers tried to "punish the assailant." They were stopped by guards, who shot at them, then gassed and chained them and transferred them to San Quentin. In December 1962, he was released from maximum and sent back to the San Quentin general population, where he quickly saw that black inmates were being "misused, abused, assaulted, and murdered." He and five other inmates formed a general staff for the defense of black inmates. A year later, he was again sent to maximum security... Between 1962 and 1970, Jackson was cited forty-seven times for disciplinary infractions. He was denied parole ten times, even though his crime partner in the gas station robbery had been released ten years before. Prison officials say his first disciplinaries were for minor matters... [and] they claim that the infractions became more serious... In April 1965, he was accused of stabbing a white prisoner. In September 1966, a white inmate claimed that Jackson had tried to stab him. In January 1967, he was involved in a prison work strike which turned into a "riot." Some white strikebreakers, taking matters into their own hands, tried to lynch one of the striking blacks. Jackson and his friends jumped in and broke it up. He was charged with assault. A month later, Jackson said he attacked a Mexican inmate "for race talk on the tier." In June 1967, a San Quentin guard nearly broke Jackson's kneecap when Jackson

tried to protect a white prisoner from a beating. The white con had testified on behalf of some blacks in a court case, and he was being worked over by other white prisoners. In January 1969, [Jackson] was transferred back to Soledad. Within a month he had started another Marxist study group and had taken over leadership of the martial arts class. In October of the year, he was sent to isolation for possession of a “simulated weapon.” (Yee, 126-7)

James Carr claims that Jackson was thoroughly educated in the improvisatory crafts inspired by the deprivations of prison life. These crafts extend beyond the linguistic adaptations employed when prisoners “play the opposites,” as described by Victor Hassine. They involve adapting or transforming various materials or goods in order to profit on the prison’s black market. While Jackson is detained in one of Soledad’s most carefully-controlled wings, he lays plans for creating a distillery, and Carr supplies him with the necessary goods:

George got to work: made a furnace out of the [five-gallon] can, then cut the air nozzle out of the inner tube, and stuck one end of the hose in the inner tube and one end in the toilet. “Now you see,” George said, “we can get all kinds of wine in this thing.” So he and his cellmate got it cooking and coming out with all this wine, and the fumes went right down the toilet. They never got caught. With the sediment from the wine they boiled up white-lightnin’ moonshine and sold it by the Jergens Lotion bottle. (134)

As Jackson and Carr read Marx and Lenin, Mao and Fanon, Malcolm X and Che Guavara, and as they follow various revolutionary movements throughout formerly colonized territories of the developing world, they begin to recognize that the technologies of resistance they design to confound prison authorities bear a distinct resemblance to the resourceful tactics employed by revolutionary guerilla fighters. “After reading Fanon, the Watts rebellion took on a different significance,” Carr writes. Rather than “dudes fucking off,” Carr sees the events in Watts as “a beautiful expression of a community that could rise up only on the ashes of the old world” (166). “I began to have deep fantasies about organizing a band of guerillas,” Carr writes. “In my visions, the comrades and I would redirect the violence of the lumpen proletariat—dudes who came from the same background as me—by providing them with a positive example: acts of sabotage directed against the white ruling class” (167).

The adaptation of various materials for the production of contraband thus dovetails with principled attempts at political organizing. “George had started giving political education classes to the Pack,” Carr explains. “Each dude had to read a certain amount of material by Garvey and other nationalists and different things from Pan-African magazines George had collected” (123). As heroically as Carr frames these efforts at political organizing, his depiction of George Jackson’s rise as a gang leader includes aspects of Jackson’s life that otherwise remain largely censored from favorable biographical imaginings supplied by liberal supporters. Indeed, the events that Carr describes do not appear in the prison file cited above. Considering Jackson’s frequent employment of Marxist rhetoric, his black market business success seems particularly ironic. According to Carr, Jackson developed a makeshift banking system in San

Quentin, a cigarette-and-cash exchange through which portions of almost all prisoner-to-prisoner transactions flowed. When shipments of heroin arrived, prisoners rushed to cash in their cigarettes for the cash they needed to buy dope; when the dope was gone, they used what cash they had left over to get back their cigarettes. Others borrowed cash or cigarettes to fuel their gambling habits, running up huge debts that had to be paid through acts of prostitution, acts of violence, or both. Carr recalls that a prisoner named Jack Fox fell hopelessly into debt and refused to pay:

Jack Fox was taking his shower in the facilities above the kitchen, and we were downstairs. George pulled a tiny knife about five inches long and started talking about how he was gonna go upstairs and carve up Jack Fox. I'm telling him I wouldn't ever stick something like that in anybody, much less do it in the shower with twenty people standing around. I didn't like this carving bit; I wanted to kill him quick.... But George was a romantic—he had read too many pirate stories, and the Arabian Nights, and Shakespeare. He had a romantic idea of killing someone right.... George ran down and grabbed the dude from behind, reached around and cut his throat—but he didn't cut deep enough. Jack started to run. George grabbed him by the coat and kept on sticking him. Jack was yelling his head off and everybody in the kitchen was looking up, everybody in the shower was looking down. By the time George finally downed him, Jack had tumbled down the stairs and out the door, covered with blood. There must have been thirty people looking at Jack and no one seeing a thing.... I thought for sure he was dead. They even put a sheet over his head. But

they got him into the hospital and they saved Jack Fox from the chill.

(137-8)

Whatever truths or fictions lie buried amidst the stories that prisoners tell Gregory Armstrong following Jackson's murder, or that Carr relates as part of his own autobiography, such tales suggest a drastic divide between the identity of George Jackson as represented in his letters and championed by members of the New Left, and the George Jackson forced to build his reputation amidst the systemic violence and exploitation of California's prisons. "Marxism," Jackson confesses to Gregory Armstrong, "was my hustle" (237). Whatever transformations his prison existence may have necessitated, multiple sources confirm that, by the time he was transferred back to Soledad in January, 1969, Jackson's philosophy had evolved from a stance of "defensive nationalism" to an anti-racist revolutionary position directed against the prison structure itself (Carr, 182; Yee, 127).

Hidden Under an Afro: *Soledad Brother* in the Historical Archive

Like the suggestive anecdotes James Carr tells regarding the prison life he shared with George Jackson, the confirmed facts that surround the case leave many unanswered questions. Mysteries abound, obscuring the details of Jackson's sudden rise as an iconic figure on the New Left, casting the relationships and circumstances that define his imprisonment into shadow, and contributing to theories of his assassination. Among the many violent episodes sprouted by the United States government's campaigns against political activists, Jackson's death remains a memorable, seemingly overdetermined event, one that links a surprisingly expansive network of counterintelligence plots and

subplots. In *The COINTELPRO Papers*, Ward Churchill and Jim Vander Wall note that FBI director J. Edgar Hoover “recommended [a] campaign of deliberate false arrest as being the sort of ‘neutralizing’ method he had in mind for black activists.”¹⁴ Although Jackson’s personal history did not qualify him for this particular indignity, the ease with which his activities, friendships, and communications could be monitored made him a prime target for the government’s domestic spies charged with fulfilling Hoover’s directives.

Aside from outright violence, the epistolary form that *Soledad Brother* captures also served as one of the FBI’s most treasured weapons in its campaign against black radicals. A barrage of false correspondence continually confused and confounded party leaders and disrupted the Black Panther Party’s attempts to forge solidarity with other activist groups. In southern California, FBI subterfuge contributed to retributive killings involving Black Panthers and Maulana Karenga’s US organization. In a 1969 memorandum commending the area office for its successful use of false correspondence and related “interventions,” the Bureau reports that “Shootings, beatings, and a high degree of unrest continues to prevail in the ghetto area of southeast San Diego. Although no specific counterintelligence action can be credited... it is felt that a substantial amount of unrest is directly attributable to this program.”¹⁵ Numerous related FBI documents trace the role that correspondence plays in the work of instigators and infiltrators; in Southern California, bogus letters and postcards were designed to provoke shoot-outs between the US organization and the Panthers, thus negating these groups’ shared

¹⁴ *The COINTELPRO Papers*, 112.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 133.

Marxist leanings and revolutionary aspirations. Several months earlier in Chicago, where Black Panther Fred Hampton had been working to establish community partnerships between the Party and diverse organizations (including Students for a Democratic Society, as well as various street gangs and other black radical organizations), the FBI composed letters intended to provoke Jeff Fort, leader of the Black Rangers, into murdering Hampton. Ostensibly this murder would come as a defensive measure; the FBI's bogus letters warned that Hampton had put a hit out on Fort. When this tactic failed, the FBI paid an informant, William O'Neal, for a floor plan of Hampton's apartment. The floor plan was passed on to the local police, who scheduled a raid for the early morning hours of December 4, 1969. Autopsies later suggested that someone (perhaps O'Neal, then serving as Hampton's bodyguard) slipped Hampton a heavy dose of secobarbital the preceding evening. A fourteen-person police team descended on the Panther headquarters at around 4 a.m. Hampton was shot three times, twice in the head from point-blank range. Another Panther, Mark Clark, was killed; three others were wounded.¹⁶

In a letter dated the day after Fred Hampton's assassination—December 5, 1969—George Jackson writes to his mother of his little brother Jonathan, "I hope he can avoid the many traps they have set up for him" (200). Three days later, FBI operatives, having obtained a floor plan of the Black Panthers' Southern California office through a paid infiltrator, helped brief 140 officers from the LAPD, 40 of them SWAT-trained officers, along with 100 regular officers, who then launched an assault on the facility. Six Panthers were wounded. Elmer "Geronimo" Pratt, the target of the raid, was sleeping

¹⁶ Ibid., 136-142.

on the floor instead of his bed, thereby escaping death during the initial police gunfire. The thirteen Panthers inside the facility were able to mount a four-hour resistance, and in the meantime alerted community members and the press, thereby avoiding the fate of the Chicago group.

Given their shared epistolary forms, the divulgence of FBI correspondences in COINTELPRO documents serves as a fitting counterpart to George Jackson's letters, in which Jackson repeatedly asserts the violent function of juridical apparatuses. Circumspect statements subtly sanction forms of violence made explicit to Jackson in the beatings he receives at the hands of prison guards. In a letter dated May 27, 1969, J. Edgar Hoover rebukes the San Francisco office of the FBI, citing its lackluster efforts to infiltrate, discredit, and dismantle black activist organizations—in short, its failure to mount assaults as effectively as the agents operating in Chicago and Southern California. “For your information,” Hoover states, “the San Diego Office has waged an effective CIP [counter-intelligence program] against the BPP [Black Panther Party] which has measurably resulted in declining activities and considerable disruption” (144). While Jackson frames his imprisonment as an emblem of the state's injustice, “the state” remains anonymous, amorphous, an always absent but ultimate authority, transcendent overseer of the prison's indomitable authority. The letters contained in COINTELPRO documents, dated and stamped with the alienating fingerprints of government bureaucracies, lend a disturbing specificity and authenticity to Jackson's shapeless claims. Three weeks after Hoover's criticism of the San Francisco office's ineffective subterfuge, George Jackson writes to his mother, “Final results: Denied, one year, go back to board next June 1970” (188). It seems likely that the letters missing from his

correspondence, letters he assumes to have been confiscated by prison officials, have in fact found their way into the hands of FBI agents. In Jackson's letters, the state is marked by its silence and absence; in Hoover's letters and related FBI memoranda that provide a preliminary sketch of the agency's counterintelligence programs, the same state that imprisons George Jackson plans, plots, and chronicles obliquely, maintaining a guise of plausible deniability while asserting its potential to be everywhere, however camouflaged or invisible. These documents offer blueprints for shadowy interventions capitalizing on exemptions from the law granted to the state's secret agents; operating beyond laws of propriety and strictures of identity that criminalize the individuals they target, the carefully-edited and redacted COINTELPRO papers nonetheless demonstrate the government's ability to foment coded, secret forms of violence.

Records regarding the system of California prisons that cage George Jackson offer more direct examples of the state's dehumanizing practices. James Carr's willingness to dismiss questions of morality or ethics in his dealings with other prisoners becomes more legible in light of the actions sanctioned by prison officials. However violent or unsavory, the behavior of Carr and Jackson as leaders of the Wolf Pack constitutes a rather pragmatic response to the choices they face as prisoners. As Carr describes his experiences in juvenile detention centers and California prisons until his final release in 1970, he takes care to document the provocation and enforcement of racial violence by Department of Corrections officials. Prison authorities appear to recognize in such strategies useful means with which to manipulate and control prisoners. By setting groups against one another, guards prevent interracial alliances from organizing against prison authorities themselves.

Carr's accounts are corroborated in Min S. Yee's book, *The Melancholy History of Soledad Prison* (1973). In a thorough analysis of the disintegration of this particular prison in the years before and after Jackson's murder, Yee suggests that Soledad's problems emblemize system-wide failures. Inmate transfers constitute a primary means with which prison officials maintain order and induce violence in the larger system; officials shuffle inmates between institutions according to personal whims or carefully-organized strategies, offering or revoking guarantees of transfer to certain prisoners in order to provoke violence between prison gangs. These strategies mimic those employed by prison guards, who bribe prisoners to commit assaults (or even murders) by guaranteeing or revoking basic rights, or by promising transfers between prison tiers or different wings of the same prison. Yee investigates the 1962 race riot at Soledad, corroborating James Carr's claim that prison officials instigated the violence by their repeated uses of racial tensions to set groups or gangs against one another. These provocations would play a central role in the events leading to Jackson's death. Following the 1962 riot at Soledad, Jackson and Carr spent large stretches of time in the Hole, always an inhuman environment, but positively draconian in Soledad Prison. In 1966, a California court ruled that the Soledad "strip cells" that housed Carr, Jackson, and countless others constituted cruel and unusual punishment (Yee, 26).

Yee reports that black prisoners bore the brunt of the racist attacks engineered by guards. Nonetheless, prison officials sought to ensure that both whites and blacks lived with the constant fear of violence at the hands of their enemies, a form of mutual fear that they believed would allow the guards to maintain a greater semblance of control. "By the summer of 1969, mutual fears and racial animosities between blacks and whites [in

Soledad Prison] had increased to such intensity that five O-wing black prisoners tried to take their complaints and fears to court” (Yee, 34). The prisoners who filed the lawsuit included W.L. Nolen, a close friend of George Jackson and James Carr. Nolen was “a prison boxing champion who was quickly becoming politicized,” and who was named as a plaintiff in the lawsuits. According to court documents, Nolen repeatedly faced set-ups and assassination attempts. Other prisoners—even his white, Nazi-affiliated enemies—confirm that guards repeatedly trapped Nolen on the tier and forced him to defend himself against white prisoners whom guards bribed to assassinate him.

These court actions seem to have set into motion the events that led to Jackson’s own death. After a series of racially-motivated murders, Soledad officials closed the yard; memos announcing its imminent reopening as an integrated exercise space led white and black prisoners to prepare for the race riots they were sure would occur when the yard was re-opened, especially as the last two murders of black inmates by whites had gone unavenged (Yee, 42-3). On January 13th, 1970, fifteen prisoners, classified as eight “Whites” and seven “Blacks” by a prison guard’s entries in the yard ledger—including W.L. Nolen and his chief antagonist amongst the Aryan Brotherhood, Billie D. Harris—were let out onto the yard. An eighth black prisoner was being strip-searched when a fight broke out between Nolen and a white inmate. Opie G. Miller was the guard in the observation tower. Miller, a retired Army officer with “a reputation among prisoners and staff of being sullen and severe,” had performed well in a test of his shooting abilities just two days earlier. He fired four shots from the nearby guard tower. Miller and prison officials claim that a warning shot was fired, a claim unsubstantiated by the prisoners.¹⁷

The first bullet to contact flesh struck W.L. Nolen squarely in the chest. Two more black prisoners, Alvin Miller and Cleveland Edwards, were killed; Billie D. Harris was wounded, partially castrated, perhaps by a bullet that ricocheted off the concrete. Black prisoners began a hunger strike in protest. Just two days later, the district attorney of Monterey County ruled the killing justifiable homicide, and a grand jury returned the same finding.

The following day, January 16th, 1969, John V. Mills, a white guard, was found murdered. Days later, unbeknownst to the outside world, secret hearings at Soledad Prison charged George Jackson, Fleeta Drumgo, and John Clutchette with the guard's murder. John Clutchette managed to slip a note to his mother expressing his desperation. Gradually, word of the case began to spread, eventually spurring investigations into the conditions at Soledad and other California prisons and galvanizing prison activists, including Angela Davis, then a graduate student at the same University of California, San Diego campus that employed Frederic Jameson. As Chapter 4 will discuss in greater detail, Angela Davis was already becoming an international figure thanks to the diligence of the United States government's secret police. When the University of California, Los Angeles had offered her a position in the philosophy department, the Board of Regents, almost certainly alerted by government spies to Davis's political affiliations, sent her a letter asking her to state her position on Communism. In the midst of the U.S. government's war against Communism in Vietnam, Davis's public declaration of her membership in the Communist Party drew the attention of the international media, as

¹⁷ The following articles provide examples of early accounts given by prison officials and thoroughly discredited by Min S. Yee's *The Melancholy History of Soledad Prison*: "Courthouse Shooting Linked With Radical Movement and Killing of Black Inmates" (Earl Caldwell, *New York Times*, August 24, 1970), and "The Price of Repression" (*The Nation*. Vol. 2, No. 5, August 31, 1971, 130).

well as the support of a broad coalition of students, academics, activists, and foreign leaders. Along with the publication of Jackson's prison letters, Davis's efforts on behalf of the Soledad Brothers helped publicize the case, even as it added to her growing international celebrity.

If the news of prison violence fueled by Soledad's squalid and abusive conditions caught the public by surprise, the events that followed would impact the New Left in ways for which no one could have fully prepared. Indeed, as noted in the chapters that follow, 1970 and 1971 would prove to be crucial years in the government's campaign against the New Left. The case against the Soledad Brothers threatened to become an emblem for the government's employment of political police; it threatened to expose prisons as sites of homegrown guerilla warfare; and it pointed to an unpleasant and potentially explosive reality: pervasive discriminatory practices enacted through the so-called criminal justice system, an enduring public secret that has effectively cemented radically inequitable social and economic policies while effectively quarantining potentially revolutionary portions of the populace.

White elites and activists from diverse resistance movements began to organize coalitions to combat political imprisonment; they turned to the Soledad Brothers, and in particular George Jackson, for narratives that might provide individual horrors grave enough to inspire the necessary public outrage. Such fast-forming coalitions of the New Left seem to have offered convenient and devastatingly vulnerable targets for the covert operations of the government's political police. Though the events that followed remain confusing, complex, and unresolved, there can be little doubt that George Jackson and the case of the Soledad Brothers provided an essential link in the chain of campaigns against

such targets. While Jackson and his co-defendants languished in prison, now facing charges for crimes far more serious than the seventy-one-dollar robbery for which Jackson was convicted when he was eighteen, seventeen year-old Jonathan Jackson, George's younger brother, considered radical interventions into the case of the Soledad Brothers. A teacher described Jonathan as "obsessed" with the case (Caldwell, 41). As the Soledad Brothers continued to draw attention, George Jackson was transferred to San Quentin. Soon thereafter, Jonathan acted on a plan that he likely believed might grant his brother freedom. Government informant and Black Panther Party infiltrator Louis Tackwood, brother-in-law of George Jackson's close friend James Carr, would later suggest that the FBI and various police departments were prepared for Jonathan's actions thanks to Tackwood's surveillance efforts. Others suspect that Jonathan was led by infiltrators or agents provocateurs into believing that members of the Black Panther Party were prepared to assist him in the acts he initiated. There is some evidence that Jonathan hoped to use hostages to win safe passage to a San Francisco radio station; from there, he planned to demand that the Soledad Brothers be freed. An escort to the airport would allow Jonathan and the Soledad Brothers to fly to some sympathetic country in order to seek political asylum (Liberatore, 80; Churchill and Vander Wall, *COINTELPRO*, 364; Yee, 164).

On August 7, 1970, Jonathan entered a courtroom minutes away from San Quentin, in nearby San Rafael, dressed in a raincoat and carrying "a small flight bag and a paper bundle" (Yee, 158). A hearing was being held in the case of San Quentin inmate James D. McClain, accused of stabbing a white guard. McClain was serving as his own attorney; Ruchell Magee, another San Quentin prisoner, was on the witness stand.

Jonathan stood up, brandished a pistol and a carbine, and announced, “Gentlemen, we’re taking over now.”¹⁸ Jonathan produced a sawed-off shotgun in addition to the pistol and carbine and armed McClain and Magee. Magee went into the hallway where he ordered a guard release William Arthur Christmas, another prisoner waiting to testify. Jonathan Jackson and James D. McClain began taking hostages. McClain duct-taped the sawed-off shotgun around Superior Court Judge Harold J. Haley’s neck. Assistant District Attorney Gary Thomas and three female jurors were rounded up as hostages in addition to Judge Haley. Jim Kean, a journalist with the *San Rafael Independent Journal*, alerted by his police scanner to an emergency at the courthouse, arrived in time to snap photographs that would forever memorialize the event. Kean photographed the scene with the hostage-takers’ consent; they likely hoped that the resulting media spectacle might further illuminate the rampant injustices engulfing the prison system. As they moved into the elevator that would take them down to the lobby, McClain shouted, “We want the Soledad Brothers freed by twelve today.”

Outside the courthouse another *Independent Journal* reporter, Roger Bockrath, took more photographs of the prisoners and their hostages as they entered a van. They drove a short distance before encountering a hastily-constructed roadblock consisting of sheriff’s deputies, local police, and a group of San Quentin guards. The presence of the San Quentin guards was ostensibly coincidental; they would later claim to have happened upon the hostage situation while returning from target shooting (Yee, 164-5). Whether or not they had received a tip regarding Jonathan Jackson’s plans, their presence ensured a

¹⁸ In *Soledad Brother*, George Jackson quotes Jonathan as saying, “All right, gentlemen, I’m taking over now” (330). In Paul Liberatore’s book *The Road to Hell: The True Story of George Jackson, Stephen Bingham, and the San Quentin Massacre* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1996), Jonathan says, “Okay, gentlemen, freeze. We’re taking over.” My version combines these two slightly different quotations.

violent conclusion to the episode. The San Quentin guards were trained to fire upon any escapees, with or without hostages. The prevailing perception amongst the twenty-two witnesses was that the guards ignored a sheriff's order to allow the van to exit the area, and that John Matthews, a guard who had taken a position in front of the roadblock, well off the road itself and to the driver's side, fired first. From his angle Matthews could have gained a clear view of the van driver, Jonathan Jackson; forensics scientists determined that Jackson was the first person shot. The bullets that murdered Jonathan struck him with such force that his body flipped up and over the driver's seat, into the back of the van. Subsequently Judge Haley was killed, apparently by McClain, who held the shotgun taped to his neck; Assistant D.A. Thomas grabbed a gun from Jonathan, fired additional shots into Jonathan's body, and shot McClain, Christmas, and Magee. These three may have also been hit by shots fired from outside the van. Magee was the only prisoner to survive; Assistant D.A. Thomas crumpled under a bullet fired by law enforcement officers, paralyzing him from the waste down. A female juror was also wounded.

As the Jackson family mourned the death of their youngest son, the violent outcome of Jonathan Jackson's failed plot to free the Soledad Brothers further catalyzed George Jackson's rise to fame. After years of hard time behind bars, events in the last months of his life passed with unfortunate speed. George Jackson and the Soledad Brothers became an international story; Jackson's cause was taken up by the outlaw French writer, former prisoner, Black Panther supporter, and avant-garde icon Jean Genet. Genet produced the introduction to the volume of prison letters being prepared for publication by Random House, in addition to various articles and opinion pieces about

Jackson's prison-bound life. *Soledad Brother: The Prison Letters of George Jackson* appeared with significant fanfare in the fall of 1970. Articles announcing the book's publication, a book review, and a letter from George Jackson to Angela Davis appeared in the *New York Times*. Davis had by this time gone into hiding, wanted for her supposed participation in Jonathan Jackson's courthouse killings, and a fugitive on the FBI's ten most-wanted list. Angela Davis was apprehended in October. As her trial proceeded and the trial date for the Soledad Brothers (August of 1971) approached, Jackson remained in the news.

Days before his trial was to begin, on August 21st, 1971, Jackson was shot to death in the yard at San Quentin. Not surprisingly, accounts vary. Minutes before his shooting, three white guards were murdered, along with two white inmates. A gun lay near Jackson's body. According to prosecutors, the weapon had been smuggled inside the prison and passed to George Jackson by a lawyer named Stephen Bingham, a recent addition to Jackson's defense team. Bingham and a legal assistant named Vanita Anderson had visited Jackson earlier that day. In an imaginative leap that would not play well before the jury in Stephen Bingham's case, authorities speculated that Jackson hid the gun in his hair during the body search required after meetings with visitors. After leaving the visiting area, Jackson supposedly brandished the weapon and attempted to lead a prisoner rebellion. As the revolt faltered, guards claimed that Jackson fled across the yard toward one of the fences that lined its perimeter. Prison officials claim that Jackson was shot by a tower guard; autopsies indicated two wounds, one from a bullet entering at the calf, the other bullet entering at the back and exiting through the top of the

skull: “The top of the second bullet indicates that George was bent forward on his hands and knees when the fatal shot was fired” (Armstrong, 226-7).

For years before his murder in his private conversations, and in the months leading up to his murder, in his more public letters (including one published in the *New York Times*), Jackson had spoken of attempting an escape. The concept of his catching prison officials off guard seems unlikely. After a cursory investigation, a warrant was issued for Stephen Bingham. That authorities named Bingham as the only suspect remains puzzling. Bingham was accompanied during his visit by Vanita Anderson, a young legal assistant who had also recently begun working on the case. Anderson carried a tape recorder, the only equipment either visitor possessed that was large enough to have contained the weapon found near Jackson’s body, into the visiting room where she and Bingham met with Jackson. Nonetheless, Vanita Anderson was largely excluded from suspicion during the investigation. Stephen Bingham went into hiding, reappearing to turn himself in after spending over twenty years as a fugitive abroad.

A former *San Francisco Chronicle* reporter named Paul Liberatore who covered the Jackson trial would follow the Bingham trial some twenty-five years later. In Liberatore’s book about the Bingham trial, *The Road to Hell: The True Story of George Jackson, Stephen Bingham, and the San Quentin Massacre* (1996), the author attempts to understand Vanita Anderson’s exclusion from the investigations surrounding Jackson’s murder. Liberatore’s sources state that although the FBI claimed to have interviewed Vanita Anderson repeatedly, these efforts failed to produce any significant information whatsoever. Remarkably, the primary concern during these interviews seems to have been the whereabouts of Stephen Bingham, rather than Anderson’s possible role in

supplying Jackson with his weapon. No less puzzling to Liberatore is the fact that Ed Montgomery, a reporter for the *San Francisco Examiner* with close ties to the FBI, secured an interview with Vanita Anderson in 1972 that revealed more than the FBI reports themselves. In her interview with Montgomery, Liberatore writes, “Vanita didn’t blame George’s death on prison officials.” Instead, Anderson blames George’s death on his fellow revolutionaries; in an uncanny replication of the FBI tactics in which accusations serve to drive a wedge between members of a given political organization, Liberatore explains that Vanita Anderson “said George had been murdered all right, but implied that he had been set up by traitorous elements in the Black Panther Party. Whatever happened... it soured Vanita on radical politics. She said she was ‘fed up’ with the Panthers,” Liberatore writes. Liberatore’s investigations into Anderson’s subsequent activities raise additional suspicions. In the midst of the Bingham trial, Liberatore claims that an unnamed source slipped him an address for Vanita Nicholas. Anderson, now known as Dr. Nicholas, had become a professor in the law department of Los Angeles City College. “I nearly fell over when I found Dr. Nicholas’s office and saw a big poster over her door advertising careers with the California Department of Corrections,” Liberatore writes. “She was also the faculty sponsor of a group of law enforcement students called the Vice Club. ‘Don’t waste your time doing hard time when you can join us on the right side,’ a flyer for the organization said” (243-47).

How did Vanita Anderson avoid scrutiny, despite having visited Jackson at the moment when authorities claim he was given a gun? What caused her transformation from a Black Panther supporter and legal assistant working on George Jackson’s case, to a recruiter for the Department of Corrections? Or does this supposed transformation

indicate her longstanding allegiance to (or even her employment for) the government itself? Was Vanita Anderson a spy involved in a plot to assassinate George Jackson? Or is it possible that Jackson was, as Vanita Anderson claims, set up by the Panthers themselves? Who paid the two murderers convicted in the 1972 assassination of Jackson's friend James Carr? What part did Carr's purported role in the murder of Fred Bennett, a Black Panther "badjacketed" (accused by infiltrators of being a snitch) play in Carr's own eventual murder? Was Carr himself badjacketed? What of Fred Rundle, the Soledad psychiatrist whom prison guards and state investigators attempted to frame in 1972, months after Rundle blew the whistle on Soledad's cruel and unusual conditions while investigating the murder of W.L. Nolen, whose death led to the Soledad Brothers case? (Yee, 185). How might the success of *Soledad Brother* have allowed infiltrators or undercover operatives to foster suspicions and resentments amongst members of the Committee to Free the Soledad Brothers, the Black Panther Party, and George Jackson's family, constituencies that fought constantly over profits and contributions generated by Jackson's fame? (Armstrong, 206). Did government infiltration into the defense committee and the Black Panthers prepare law officers for Jonathan Jackson's courthouse rebellion, or did infiltrators help to plan the rebellion itself, perhaps misleading Jonathan into believing that others would be prepared to aid him after he emerged from the courthouse? Why did the California Department of Corrections and its prisons become the focus for such highly complex and potentially costly counterintelligence operations? As these questions suggest, the deep political intrigue surrounding these events cannot be resolved through an examination of the documents stored in any official archive. Subsequent developments have offered little in the way of resolutions; the release of

Jackson's heavily redacted FBI files merely confirm that the agency maintained significant interest in his affairs, and that its agents closely monitored all activities within the prison. What remains are shards of evidence that cannot be completely reassembled, but that nonetheless make manifest clandestine mechanizations designed to manipulate and deceive the principal figures involved in Jackson's life as well as the events surrounding the case against the Soledad Brothers.

Genealogies of Violence and Captivity: Families, Prisons, Ideologies

The overt role government agents play in censoring Jackson's correspondences calls attention to the less visible role that a vast array of social forces, influences, and relationships play in policing and sanitizing discourse. Because Jackson's letters most often address his parents and family members, *Soledad Brother* begs its readers to question the connection between the family and the ideologies of discipline and punishment manifested in the prison. The interrelated functions of such ideologies are described by Louis Althusser in "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses: Notes Towards an Investigation" (1971). Althusser's essay is in many ways the academic counterpart to the critique that Jackson compiles as part of his effort to make sense of his prison experiences. Althusser's analysis of "the educational apparatus, the religious apparatus, the family apparatus, the political apparatus, the trade-union apparatus, the family apparatus, the communications apparatus, etc.," the socio-cultural formations that produce ways of seeing and modes of self-understanding integral to the ideological foundations of the state, provides a useful means of grappling with Jackson's relationship to his family. Like the prison-house of language and the language of the prison-house

that shape his communiqués, a doubly-imprisoned dynamic informs Jackson's analysis of family as an ideological structure. The filtering of his familial relationships through the institution of the prison, the prison's willingness to expose his otherwise private, familial relationships in order to punish him, his family's blindness to the dehumanizing function of the prison, his parents' stubborn, almost instinctual complicity with prison methodologies and procedures—for Jackson, these factors compound the ideological power wielded by the seemingly independent apparatuses of family and prison.

Jackson's personal history diminishes the distance separating these entities. His family is the source of his disciplinary training; his mother confesses to Jackson's editor, Gregory Armstrong, that George's father Robert ruthlessly criticized George: "I remember one day when his father found him [George] in the house reading. He accused him of 'sitting up in your mother's dresses.' He made him go out in the alley and play ball with the boys" (114). At other times, Georgia tells Armstrong, Robert's discipline transcended language: "I would say to him, 'Why don't you talk to the kids more? Why don't you try to know them? If George has done anything wrong, you just have to talk to him.' Instead of talking to him, he'd beat him up" (Armstrong, 115). "I have no ego, no name, no face.... There can be no ties of blood or kinship strong enough to move me," Jackson writes to his father in 1967 (122). The letter that contains these lines marks Jackson's growing awareness of the ideological webs woven by kinship, the state, and personal identity. This awareness has its basis in a particularly painful incident. After visiting him in San Quentin in 1965, Jackson's father Robert wrote to prison officials, claiming that his son posed a safety risk to himself and others and should not be paroled.

Gregory Armstrong chronicles this incident in his memoir, *The Dragon Has Come* (1974). Armstrong claims that George Jackson joked with his father, Robert, of his desire to murder a prison guard who had been harassing him. His father's subsequent letter became a new source of trouble for George: "The bulls [prison guards] were passing the letter around, laughing at me.... This is what they're saying to themselves, here's this guy who's talking all this power to the people, people, power to the proletariat. And his father is a coward and is on our side... They were laughing about it all over the joint" (Armstrong, 85). Robert's mistrust of his son runs deep; in his letter to prison officials warning of the dangers his son poses, Robert writes, "He may not be released in his present state of mind.... don't let him fool you with the many faces he is capable of showing" (226). Robert's allegations of duplicity demonstrate his remarkable ignorance of the deceitfulness that Victor Hassine and James C. Scott describe as a vital survival tool for those living under oppression, as well as the imprisoned. As Gregory Armstrong notes, prison life inevitably places Jackson in an infuriating, infantilizing relationship of dependency. Jackson, like all prisoners, must rely upon outsiders to supply him with a host of basic necessities. His imprisonment as a teenager leaves him no option but to call upon his parents even as he grows into a man, establishing what Armstrong describes as "a kind of perpetual never-ending childhood," one that becomes "intolerable" (31).

For his part, George accuses his father Robert of being a fool and a coward. "He pretends or he may earnestly not feel the effects of the circumstances I attempt to explain," Jackson writes; "I can overlook him... because of his almost complete lack of mental training... Robert has never held an opinion of his own" (45). Robert's allegiance to the institution of the prison suggests that the beatings he administers during George's

childhood are but domestic variations of societal violence to which George is subjected as a prisoner. Armstrong reports that at the age of sixteen, George ran away from a reform school. Upon being recaptured, “the guards chained him naked to a bed and beat him steadily for two days and nights” (226). “The lash affects me for sure,” Jackson writes in February of 1970, contradicting his earlier claims to have transcended emotions. “If it failed to affect me at all” he continues, “I would be guilty of using the tortured logic of my father’s twisted mind, i.e., that this is the best of all possible worlds, or that this is the only country that provides flush toilets for all” (208).

In a footnote to one of the earliest letters included in *Soledad Brother*, Jackson mentions his failed attempt to evade the police as a teenager: “I ended up in Harrisburg to await the return of my mother’s half-brother... While I was waiting for him, my aunt discovered... that I was on the run from the law. She turned in my name and I was recaptured” (41). Jackson’s letters repeatedly mark the ways in which ideologies of the prison regime have become deeply embedded in the fabric of the American family. There seems to be no other explanation for the pattern according to which his family members expose him to law enforcement authorities. The confounding difficulties imposed upon Jackson by his relationships with family members regularly appear alongside his musings over prison regulations and policies. “I’ll be out of here soon,” he writes to his mother in June of 1968. A few sentences later, the paragraph ends: “You know that I have my time in. That’s what they want, time and clean conduct” (180). A new paragraph begins: “It is always a job getting along with our friends and relatives. Establishing lasting and mutually rewarding relationships always calls for delicacy, sensitivity... One simply cannot say the first thing that comes to mind with no regard for

the next person's ego problem" (180-1). Juxtaposed in this manner, the supposedly common-sensical expectation of "clean conduct" with which the prison regime measures its prisoners seems an embellishment of the "job" that "getting along with... friends and relatives" requires. Successfully administering to such tasks require self-censorship, not saying "the first thing that comes to mind."

In his efforts to challenge his family's uncanny tendencies to replicate, elaborate, or acquiesce to the prison regime's logic, Jackson attempts to dig into the deeper historical forces and social pressures that shape their thinking, influences they refuse to acknowledge. "For you there is only one standard of beauty," he writes to his mother, "the Western standard. I revolt against this absurdity. I understand that this is all you have ever known, I allow for this, but you must be able to see by now that this model of perfection you have subscribed to in the past is no longer the fad.... Reality is the key. In order for you to be intelligent, as you state it, you must like Western music, clothes, food, architecture, Western education, religious superstition, pseudophilosophy... We are totally disenfranchised, the whipping boy, the scapegoat, the floor mat of the nation. I am not so foolish that I cannot detect the fact that I am hated" (184). His parents' socio-political views force Jackson to confront the vast gulf that separates the revolutionary stances of Marx, Mao, and Fanon, from the well-meaning, generic, middle-class "American" values that influence his parents, and that also shelter histories of captivity and violence.

As his letters suggest, the elaboration of the prison regime's formative ideologies *beyond the literal spaces and territories of incarceration* suggests that texts otherwise far-removed from the experiences documented in *Soledad Brother* should nonetheless be

read with an eye for the ways they participate in the prison regime's elaboration. Thus, Robert Creeley's autobiographical journal *A Day Book*, comprised of thirty single-typewritten pages, each composed over the course of a single day between 1968 and 1969, might be read as an extension of Jackson's inquiries. Like Jackson, Creeley's work experiments with subjectivity, sorting through the author's textual identities as well as the identities of his family members. Although Creeley's experiences are not in any way parallel, *Soledad Brother's* painful evocation of the family as the site of struggle against the ideologies of the prison regime recasts the domestic concerns of the relatively well-off white family that *A Day Book* documents as part and parcel of Jackson's struggle against such ideologies. Creeley's book might be viewed, in its own way, as part of the re-education project that Jackson begins in his own family correspondences, the massive pedagogical intervention that must precede any significant revolutionary movement.

Creeley's entries in *A Day Book* provide a loosely-knit chronicle of his life in New Mexico with his wife Bobbie and their two daughters. These entries rarely mention the prison regime or the state's law enforcement organizations; and yet, as we shall see, this scarcity makes those instances in which the text directly comments upon such juridical apparatuses especially notable. What more commonly emerges concerns violations and expectations of marital and family norms. The roles that family life dictates for Creeley, his wife, and their daughters remain unstable; the act of writing, the record keeping that Creeley's project requires, introduces slippages and confusions. The roles and identities that family members might be expected to occupy are transformed as the narrator moves between seemingly direct, autobiographical descriptions,

philosophical ruminations, sexual fantasies, fragments of fiction, and meditations on language:

There are experiences, suppose them, of oneself, or whatever it is does manage the containment, at least so experienced, and nothing falls in or out of it but fluids, effluvia, spit, shit, little flakes of dried skin, and occasional ‘parts’ lost for a variety of reasons, and also the whole bulk of words constituting, also, actions, as if one hit the future, saw the stone skip a myriad number of times, light dazzle, on the water’s surface, and then, as the boat continues, looks back, as they say, to see the stone disappear. Words. Such a lovely particular abstraction, torn out of whatever else can be felt as coincident. ‘I can’t find the right words....’ Or, in possession of them, but now insistently possessed of them, choked, stuffed, spills out all the possibilities of there being... one can suppose them then to enter the room, probably the bedroom (bathroom?), him screaming hers, her’s, substance, in him. A curious twist on all occasions. So that—there is a curious mirror, when one reflects the other, and in that, sees not one, but other as one. ‘Be neat, speak courteously, make a good impression’—and hence the false face carried so persistently front of what might be seen, and must be. What else to look at. But surely there is relief in that intention, if any has any possibility. Oh, so sorry. Here, take this chair. Yes, it will probably rain. (292)

The disintegrating subject Creeley depicts, from which “nothing falls in or out of it but fluids, effluvia, spit, shit... and also the whole bulk of words,” returns to the questions of

language and constraint with which this chapter began. Creeley's commitment to language as the exploratory material out of which some semblance of identity takes shape connects his work to the elaboration of what might be called the "Language Regime" in American literary and intellectual culture, the obsession with the prison-house of language that also courts a blindness to expansions of prison-houses themselves. Here, Creeley's vision of words as the excrement upon which one either chokes or exudes in the attempt to survive, speaks to anxieties over the systematic and alienating function of language. These concerns are typical of the Language Regime's influence. The overarching structure of a *langue* that constrains and controls the expression of thought according to de-personalized, ahistorical, seemingly tyrannical semiotic systems, repeatedly emerges as *the* defining principle and problem facing the Language Regime's writers and intellectuals.

On the other hand, the anxieties of the prison regime and its related apparatuses maintain a noticeable presence in Creeley's text. The prison regime's influence and importance in *A Day Book* represents a textual quality that Jackson's letters, unlike Jameson's *The Prison-House of Language*, immediately make legible. Upon returning home from a visit with another family and some mutual friends, Creeley writes, "Then back here—again sexual insistence I feel... of Bobbie being fucked by others, an orgy in my own head—till she falls off to sleep, myself too" (317). These wayward fantasies involving Bobbie and another man (or men) repeat throughout *A Day Book*, alternatively objectifying Bobbie as the property of the narrator's sexual fantasies, and the ravaged revolutionary body through which the strictures of conventional marriage might be dismantled.

In this case, fear of police persecution follows the fantasy, manifesting itself in the unconscious. Creeley dreams: “We are talking about impending bust, there’s been word of it—waiting, in half-sense, for arrival of police.... We expect them to come in one or two cars, probably black, to get out and ‘look around’. We anticipate being object of their curiosity, like they say [sic]” (317). As he and Bobbie await their impending drug bust, the imagination becomes the product of collective expectations, as if a television crime drama supplies its fantasies: “We expect... one or two [police] cars, probably black.” The language of police inquiry arrives similarly pre-packaged, demarcated by quotation marks or by phrases that demonstrate the narrator’s function in reproducing common languages, statements, assumptions, “like they say.” The focus on the criminal creeps into, crosses over, the intellectual imagination. Creeley’s journal emerges from under the shadow of the prison; at any moment, one fears police scrutiny; meanwhile, within the family, structures of fear and systems of policing persist, exerting control over the very devices and processes through which identity becomes operative.

On the surface, comparing *A Day Book* to *Soledad Brother* appears random, or at best, the attempt to make something of the coincidental fact these contemporaneous works share a remarkably similar (one sheet of paper) constraint. This superficial similarity may soon be dwarfed by apparent differences: Creeley, the White New Englander, versus Jackson, the displaced African American; or perceived cultural importance: Creeley, the famous white poet, versus Jackson, the prison-bound Black radical. And yet, working through the ideological obstructions Jackson faces as he struggles to convince his parents of the radical structural changes necessary to correct America’s inequities, one begins to recognize that the system of values he challenges has

been imprinted or embedded far below the surface of the language in which he writes, as if such institutions supply its very words and sentences, construct its rhetorical tools, and ultimately disable any oppositional arguments. Indeed, the American prison regime has been erected alongside the nation itself, its foundation set in the bedrock of American identity, anchored amidst layers of cultural and historical substrata; in order to understand how its structure is maintained, one must seek out evidence in the most unlikely places for the supports and scaffolds that have allowed for its construction.

As coincidental and insignificant as the one-page constraint may be, the space of the page that delimits Jackson and Creeley's respective texts, the literal measurement and territory that permits a record of speech, demands that each writer consider the reiterations of territories and boundaries that carve up their surroundings. Each writer understands that the historical moment calls for change, posits a repositioning of values and identities, promises some possibility of transcendence or transformation. For Jackson, the utterly dehumanizing space of the prison suggests a narrative of revolution yet unwritten; for Creeley, American myths privileging the march of progress open onto old graves, uninhabited houses, human failure. The house—the space of the American domestic—is Creeley's cell; as both Creeley and Jackson begin to recognize, what expectations of punishment, what senses of ownership or entitlement, what fantasies of possession or domination exist as violent abstractions in the bombing of Vietnam or the beating of prisoners, what the sum of these actions and events reflect is the unbroken grip of ideologies that begin in the seemingly banal spaces of America's single-family dwellings, that overwhelm or occlude any clear sense of what should be done:

Going by motels—would there be any use in knowing the specific lives have been lived in them. Or suburbs. Or any such generalization. As against the abandoned cellar holes in woods in New Hampshire, up roads themselves no longer in use. One had sense of lives that had been there. Or sites of Indian pueblos—a specific locus... Two senses, really—the so-called ‘individual’ and the species group.... Bigger than both of us.... Back and forth, in some endless interchange, apparently (but of no actual?) necessity. The consciousness *thinks* it has experience of this or that. (319)

As the ideology of the individual versus the group envelops the first-person prose works these authors create, each author struggles to find the means with which to puncture or purge the conceptual formations that give birth to their compositions. For Creeley, the body is its own self-alienating organism, a fact of living that does not organize experience so much as prefigure its irreconcilable contradictions.

While musing on the effects of strokes in one of *A Day Book*'s first entries, Creeley is reminded of “a note in the paper of a few days ago... a doctor’s report of what he considers the fact of a biological information of death in the system previous to its consciousness—roughly a year previous” (275). These ruminations conjure George Jackson’s repeated insistences to his editor and others during the last year of his life that he would soon leave prison, a corpse: “I feel old... in the sense that a paper target is old after about an hour on the Police Academy practice range. Used” (313). After relating this curious theory of bodily systems and the foreknowledge of death, Creeley’s prose merges into a series of speculations that nominate language, despite (or perhaps because

of) its constraints and limitations, as a technology that inevitably violates the discipline demanded by social intercourse in one instance, only to become the disciplinary tool with which social norms are reinforced in the next. The site of this paradoxical struggle is the body, as constituted in and through language. The subject of Creeley's speculations is an unstable "one" (one body? one system?) that "we" inhabit: "We seem to live in one," he writes, "scattered by the particular occasion, and spend so-called life attempting to recover coherence. The parts of a body, the chapters of a book" (275). Creeley's attention to the ease with which language violates and replicates the dynamics of power that influences notions of selfhood, as well as human interactions in general, provides a consistent theme for the diverse sensations, thoughts, and experiences collected in *A Day Book*. "Wondering if one's response, to the younger man, is possibly just a way to experience this state, so lovely, fresh, renewing, in its possibility," Creeley writes of an encounter with a stranger. "And not," he continues, "or then again perhaps, some unrecognized edge of homosexual content in oneself. But that too, acknowledged" (293). Rather than pursue a "so-called life" of attempted "coherence," *A Day Book* lingers in the non-specific "one" in which "we seem to live," a place of profound uncertainty that lingers on language as a reflection of social limitations, shortcomings, legacies of violence and forgetting.

The clearly delimited spaces of domestic and family life, spaces where cultural and historical forces would seem to prove most powerful, thus appear no less uncertain, slipping into and through language toward a curious playground of potential deeds, thoughts, identities. Similarly, however constrained Jackson may be by prison regulations and censors, his letters indicate an appreciation for the uncertainties language

produces. These uncertainties allow Jackson's texts to occupy spaces or territories of meaning that the state's criminalizing apparatuses cannot fully identify, define, or regulate. However censored, writing remains a space for play, one in which the government's juridical apparatuses that dominate other aspects of Jackson's existence reach the limits of their power. The textual identity Jackson creates and extinguishes in *Soledad Brother*, an identity he insists arises as the product of historical developments beyond his reach, nonetheless conveys a vision of American individualism as the lynchpin of the prison regime and prison ideologies. " 'Myself' am system of an endlessly proliferating consequence," Creeley writes. "At least I won't live to see the end of it" (321).

Conclusion: The Language Regime / The Prison Regime

By refusing to become the image of rehabilitation the prison system demands, Jackson activates language, lives out the dead letter others call law by writing his body into dust. His letters relinquish little in terms of personal knowledge, refuse to acquiesce, in the manner of Rousseau's *Confessions*, to an exhibitionist baring of shameful acts. In the midst of this family unrest, the letters unfold in fragments, possible trajectories half-mapped to time's seepage: "The time slips away from me," Jackson writes in October of 1967. "I'm surrounded here by fools, degenerates, and phonies. I suffer a constant bombardment of nonsense from all sides" (139). The letters compile time in ink, measure days by sheets of paper, investigate holes in the prison regime by inviting censorship, eschew his family's "Uncle George" while pursuing the impersonal Comrade George. In a letter to his mother in January, 1967, Jackson anticipates his own death thusly:

I am going into my seventh year here. I have learned as much as I possibly could in this time; I have studied myself closely, I have studied people, human and inhuman, wanting to know and understand. [...] What is happening to me here, what has happened, what will happen, can never surprise or upset me. My nerves have been fractured, my sensibilities outraged, for the last time. It's all a matter of course to me now. My outlook is clear and the future holds no more terrors for me. Just existing, life without joy, without real meaning does not appeal to me at all. I am very tired of waking up each morning wondering if I will be worked for nothing again today, or wondering if I will be insulted, humiliated, injured, or even done to death today. [...] We must destroy the malefactor and root out all of his ideals, moralities, and institutions. It is to this end that I have long since dedicated myself, to extinguish forever the lights of a perverted science in any way that I can, by any and all means. To accomplish this we can no longer woo false gods or invoke half measures. Please understand that though I would miss you and all the others, though I love you dearly, I do not want to live in this world as it is.

(99-100)

Here Hassine's notion of playing the opposites makes any easy consumption of Jackson's sentiment impossible; are these words addressed to his mother, or do they serve to provoke a response in the censors who will read them before passing the letter on to her? Inviting state repression, Jackson refigures subjectivity as the process through which power expends its energies surveying the activities of a single, compromised individual.

Jackson thus makes of his subjectivity a chronicle of the American state's determination to punish, silence, and ultimately, to kill. He understands his identity as yet another methodology of control, one that circumscribes his movements and disallows change. Ultimately, identity represents a confrontation with state authority. From his perspective, the notion of an autobiography in which self-revelation climaxes in freedom confounds its purported purpose; the very concept of the individual serves as a mechanism for state repression. In his letters, American history results in a new and darker version of the individual, one not present in Frederick Douglass's narrative. For Jackson, there is no viable, visible possibility of freedom within the United States. The notion of individuality is already bankrupt, linked to a history of capitalism and democracy that has failed to live up to its own ideals. Because the notion of the individual marks the state's methodology for identifying criminality—a criminality which is assigned according to racist, dehumanizing principles—capitulation to the rhetoric of individuality only reinforces state logic.

The Prison-House of Language: however unwittingly, Jameson's title connects the burgeoning academic interest in language as the material of study with the contemporaneous expansion of the prison-industrial complex. In the closing lines of his preface, Jameson speculates about the lessons to be gleaned from a thorough working-through of structuralism's ahistorical models: "We have tended to take temporality for granted," he writes. "Where everything is historical, the idea of history itself has seemed to empty of content. Perhaps that is, indeed, the ultimate propaedeutic value of the linguistic model: to renew our fascination with the seeds of time" (xi). Considering the prominence the prison plays in the years surrounding the publication of *The Prison-*

House of Language, not to mention the widespread protests and sometimes violent resistance movements that engulfed the United States and other parts of the globe at that time, it is striking that Fredric Jameson employs Nietzsche's phrase without reflecting in any significant way on the historical moment in which he writes. Readers deprived of the book's front matter might only be able to conclude that *The Prison-House of Language* must have been composed somewhere in the western hemisphere at some point in the latter half of the twentieth century.

Without hypothesizing a direct relationship between George Jackson's relative obscurity amongst academicians, as compared to the wealth of interest in "language-based" theoretical frameworks championed by the Language Regime, it is nonetheless worth noting that the study of critical theory in the last decades of the twentieth century mirrors the growth of the prison regime. Jackson's letters have left a political legacy unmatched by the work of Humanities scholars dealing in theory. Brian Conniff convincingly argues that Jackson's assassination led to the rebellion at New York's Attica Prison in September of 1971, perhaps the most significant prison rebellion in U.S. history.¹⁹ In addition, by attracting the attention of Angela Davis and other prison activists, Jackson's resistance and writing has helped to establish many of the prison reform and, more recently, the prison abolitionist movements of the past forty years.

Even without Jameson's *Prison-House of Language*, the fact that America's massive acceleration in its rates of incarceration follows virtually the same time historical timeline as in the expanding interest related modes of critical inquiry poses serious questions regarding the political implications of theory's rise. In an updated "Afterword"

¹⁹ Conniff, 161-171.

to his *Literary Theory* (1996; 1983), Terry Eagleton notes the historical relationship between critical theory's inceptive years and the mass political movements of the late 1960s and early 1970s, the years when Jameson wrote his own *Prison-House*. This was, Eagleton writes, "a period in which new social forces were consolidating, certain global struggles (such as revolutionary nationalism) were intensifying, and a new, more heterogeneous body of students and teachers was flooding into academia" (191). Unfortunately, the engagements that followed this promising beginning failed to bring about the political changes desired by many of theory's earliest practitioners: "What happened... was not a defeat for this project, which has indeed been gathering institutional strength ever since, but a defeat for the political forces which originally underpinned the new evolutions in literary theory" (Eagleton, 192). Safely sequestered within the familiar (though perhaps slightly less phallogocentric, and in select cases not quite as lily-white) ivory towers it once aspired to dismantle, consumed by debates over theoretical politics (rather than the real-world political implications theory might bring to bear on life outside academia), the historical significance of critical theory's rise remains unclear. Theory, Eagleton notes, "has too often acted as a modish substitute for political activity, in an age when such activity has been on the whole hard to come by; and having started life as an ambitious critique of our current ways of life, it now threatens to end up as a complacent consecration of them" (206).

In the decades that have passed since the publication of *The Prison-House of Language*, some practitioners of theory have thus wondered whether energies spent debating various theoretical points might be better directed toward the organization of social movements designed to effect change. During critical theory's rise to prominence,

the American prison system “relocated” vast proportions of largely urban, historically underprivileged minority groups. “From 1974 to 2002,” writes David Matlin, bracketing years that might as readily chart critical theory’s ascendancy from academia’s margins to its privileged disciplinary status in the Humanities, “the number of inmates in state and federal prisons increased six-fold” (Matlin, xxix). Read alongside George Jackson’s letters, the aspirations that drive Frederic Jameson’s critiques in *The Prison-House of Language* thus shoulder bitter ironies. Jameson prefaces his investigation by noting that his “guiding thread and permanent preoccupation... has been to clarify the relationships possible between synchronic methods of Saussurean linguistics and the realities of time and history itself” (x). In his reference to the “synchronic methods of Saussurean linguistics,” Jameson refers to the imaginative leap that begins Ferdinand de Saussure’s investigations: Saussure freezes the solitary speech act in time, extracting and investigating its linguistic components as static objects, immune to the time-bound constraints that influence those who speak. Given Jameson’s sensitivity to the risks posed by methodologies that bleach history’s stains and blemishes from their preferred objects of study, the lack of historical references in his own text is puzzling. Nowhere does Jameson comment on the tumultuous national and international events occurring at the same time that his book reaches print.

Despite the political concerns that drive *The Prison-House of Language*, Jameson’s text thus presages critical theory’s drift toward irrelevance, its migration away from mass movements of national and international scale to self-contained, cannibalizing disputes. In contrast, Jackson’s letters arrive steeped in chronological mysteries, stamped with dates that reinforce time’s absolute rule over prison-bound compositions. Barry

Conniff claims that Jackson's first book, *Soledad Brother: The Prison Letters of George Jackson* (1971), contains "more than four years" of letters that Conniff describes as "largely uneventful" (158). Though this assessment appears to dismiss crucial textual elements explored in the pages that follow, Conniff's chronological measurement of Jackson's correspondence points, perhaps unwittingly, to the fact that *Soledad Brother* remains stubbornly rooted to the mysteries of time's passage. The dates that mark each letter signal the critical, undeniable, insurmountable force of history, a paradoxically clear *and* opaque presence whose mysteries Jackson's writings pursue relentlessly and obsessively.

This obsession with history and chronology is not unique to Jackson's prison letters, but commonly found in texts generated by imprisoned intellectuals. In no other context does time appear so crucial to composition as in the prison itself, wherein a "sentence" cannot refer to a linguistic unit alone, but must also inevitably conjure chronological measures, a *Life Without Parole*. Within the time-bound passages of Jackson's letters, language games and hidden transcripts rest upon immediate fears and threats of violence. These features arise before or beyond structuralism's "synchronic," ahistorical concerns, the confounding features of which Jameson attempts to unravel in *The Prison-House of Language*. Even as they frequently fail to comment upon his immediate surroundings or the sequence of events that have unfolded, Jackson's letters make manifest the historical forces that mold experience.

Such pressures compound or distort the relative importance of the most minute decisions and details, words and images, speakers and identities. Jackson's letters thus condense with startling clarity the conflict between history and language, that convoluted

instrument by which humans rend meaning as if endeavoring to steal time from time itself. Attempting to communicate in and through the violence of the prison regime, Jackson's texts posit the prison as incinerator. Fueled by America's longstanding faith in self-reliance, its autobiographical tradition, its perpetual vulnerability to cons capitalizing on notions of personal responsibility, the prison sets flame to America's prized mythologies. Sifting through the ash and cinders, forging conclusions from the prison's kiln, the letters of *Soledad Brother* locate in the cancerous cells of the American penal colony the political concerns that consume critical theory's most ardent converts and self-righteous critics.

Into this same kiln is cast the life stories of the writers who contribute to *Look for Me in the Whirlwind*, the collective autobiography investigated in the chapter that follows. If George Jackson "worked the butcher shop to death," the authors of *Whirlwind* place identity on the butcher block. Their text carves revolutionary possibilities from the body of thought that has preferred to place the individual on trial at the expense of her peers and her society.

2 *On the Narrative Prosthetics of Dismembered Subjects* Butcher Shop Tactics and Radical Aesthetics in the Collective Autobiography of the New York 21

The virtual disappearance of *Look For Me in the Whirlwind: The Collective Autobiography of the New York 21* (1971) hardly registers in the list of bitter ironies that emerge from the government's persecution of the Black Panther Party.²⁰ *Whirlwind's* publication served as a curious addendum to an infamous trial. Nearly two years after their arrest, 21 Black Panthers, members of the party's New York offices, were acquitted of a laundry list of charges, including alleged conspiracies to assassinate police officers, bomb department stores and city parks, and command legions of revolutionary guerilla fighters trained in urban warfare. The book appears to have been rushed to press by publishers eager to capitalize on the defendants' quickly vanishing fame. Only sixteen of the 21 named in the indictment contribute to the volume's 11 parts. Editing errors abound, identities are confused, and the book's 11 parts do not follow a clear structure. These shortcomings may in part account for the fact that today, *Whirlwind* seems to have been nearly laid to rest in the graveyard American history reserves for documents of its pogroms and purges against political dissidents, its acts of racial violence and genocidal terror.

On the other hand, *Whirlwind* is clearly designed by its authors as a political instrument to resist these attempts to erase history. Facing narratives and rhetorical frameworks that whitewash the role played by the state's surveillance and

²⁰ I am thinking of the many unjust arrests, endless trials, imprisoned innocents, victims of violence, and lives wasted as a result of the government's campaign against the Panthers; in truth, the examples are too numerous to list briefly.

counterintelligence apparatuses in order to condemn the defendants' efforts to provoke real and lasting political change, the New York 21 search for alternative modes. Despite the publisher's apparent disinterest in the literary aspirations of its authors, *Whirlwind* serves as an experimental text, the culmination of an attempt to construct a dissident literature from inside the state's oppressive juridical and prison regimes. Its collective autobiographical structure constitutes a literary, poetic response to the government's own storytelling, undermining the prosecution's attempts to control the narrators' life histories and identities. Like the guilt-ridden, criminalized identity assigned by the state and challenged through the textual maneuvers of George Jackson's prison letters, the collective text created in *Whirlwind* confronts the hypostatized language the state uses to describe so-called legal forms of free speech, political protest, and community action. Composed as the authors await the conclusion of their trial, enriched by the historical circumstances of a nation reacting to widespread civic unrest, thoroughly marked by the constraints captivity forces, *Whirlwind* is a work of considerable complexity and subtlety, an innovative text marked by both political and writerly disobedience. Harlem Hospital, known as the "butcher shop" by the *Whirlwind* contributors who have grown up in its shadow, provides a common point of reference in their narratives; this edifice also provides a useful metaphor that captures the experimental forms of representation their autobiographical project employs. Its unconventional structure takes on an apparitional subjectivity²¹: the parts and prosthesis donated by individual contributors cannot be severed from the newly-formed composite textual body, a deceptive entity that

²¹ Though the phrase "apparitional subjectivity" shares the adjective "apparitional" with Terry Castle's "apparitional lesbian" (*The Apparitional Lesbian: Female Homosexuality and Modern Culture*, Columbia UP, 1995), I intend this term to refer specifically to phenomena that emerge through forms of collective authorship practiced in *Whirlwind* and explored in the chapter that follows.

counteracts government intervention by projecting a myth of organizational unity while simultaneously shielding its contributors from further persecution at the hands of the state.

Collective Identity as Repression, Collective Identity as Resistance

In his book-length exploration of the radical notions of freedom that emerge through prison experiences and spaces of captivity (*Fugitive Thought: Prison Movements, Race, and the Meaning of Justice*, 2004), Michael Hames-Garcia notes that *Whirlwind* embodies, “a collectivist conception of the self,” one that it is “committed to complex solidarity” (194-5). As envisioned in *Whirlwind*, the construction of this “collectivist self” involves a careful erosion of the seemingly natural boundaries between those who speak and those who remain silent. Gathering strength through its simultaneous unification and dispersal of such fundamental storytelling components as narrator and narrative, *Whirlwind* asks us to question upon whose authority one speaks, and who the purported authorities speak for. This structure reproduces the strategies pursued by the police and the prosecuting attorneys in the case itself. In *Perversions of Justice*, Peter L. Zimroth’s study of the trial, the author observes that, “Even before the proof was in all the [New York 21] defendants were lumped together, the fact that they were alleged Black Panther terrorists obliterating the differences among them” (33). Although the prosecution would on numerous occasions single out particular defendants as leaders or key organizers behind specific conspiracies, the “complex solidarity” displayed in *Whirlwind* ultimately coincides with the prosecution’s legal strategy of collective criminality. This prosecutorial strategy marks a departure from the government’s

preceding campaigns against the Panthers. Previous arrests had targeted high-profile individuals in an effort to neutralize the most visible members of the party leadership; in the arrest and prosecution of the New York 21, government officials hoped to destroy the New York branch and the Black Panther Party itself by defining it as an inherently criminal organization.

This effort began as a secret project within the New York City Police Department a fact that further distinguishes the case of the New York 21 from more notorious counterintelligence campaigns conducted by the FBI. Whereas FBI agents appear to have been well-versed in the surveillance of particular individuals, the NYPD had a little interest in maintaining distinctions between the defendants. And while the FBI may have found that the activities of the New York Panthers constituted no substantial national security threats, the NYPD had a great stake in penetrating local political organizations to ensure its own positions of power and influence. As evidenced by the corruption scandals that emerged alongside the trial of the New York 21, NYPD undercover officers were more familiar with techniques of participation and entrapment that blurred the line between infiltrators and suspects, activists and provocateurs, participants and police informants, than with surveillance as such; in many cases, the police and their criminal targets became virtually indistinguishable. As early as November of 1968, stories of widespread corruption within the department began appearing regularly in the newspaper. In the years that followed, the rivalry between local and state officials would be reflected in the state's repeated attempts to intervene in (and extend its oversight of) the city's law enforcement operations. Most famously, the divulgements of NYPD undercover officer Frank Serpico (subsequently shot in the face during a heroin bust in an apparent setup by

fellow officers) would lead to the creation of the Knapp Commission to investigate corruption within the NYPD. Police efforts to control gambling syndicates and the drug trade proved most susceptible to corruption. Interestingly, this fact may have motivated unscrupulous officers in the undercover bureau to repress the Black Panther Party; these same vices were targeted by the Panthers, including members of the New York 21, who (as discussed later in this chapter) recognized that drugs in particular contributed to the social and economic devastation of Black neighborhoods, and who took dramatic measures to suppress their influence.

The extensive operations the NYPD staged from within the New York branches of the Black Panthers followed the protocols established in related campaigns to infiltrate gambling and drug syndicates. Department officers vigilantly pursued personal rewards and advancements by modeling illegal activities where none had previously occurred, and by provoking, exaggerating, or hyperbolizing whatever hints of illegality could be found. In the process, the NYPD's methods seriously damaged the credibility of the criminal legal system and produced what was at that time the longest, most expensive trial in state history; nonetheless, the NYPD also helped craft narratives of Black radicalism and leftist extremism while overseeing the debilitation of the Black Panther Party. Crucial to these efforts was a relatively new strategy of collective criminality, one that claimed to uncover violent Panther conspiracies at the heart of the party itself, but that was little more than a repackaging of racist fears and stereotypes in order to butcher the reputation of Black activists, broadly speaking. This strategy would define the prosecution's case and the police department's investigations of the Panthers. In the defendants' appropriation of collective criminality as a textual device, this concept also frames the

collective strategies *Whirlwind* pursues as a text, modes of resistance and subterfuge founded upon de-individuated radical action, casting shadows and concealing independent actions.

Murray Kempton's study of the trial, *The Briar Patch* (1973), outlines the role collective criminality plays in the case. In one particularly startling example of the government's tendency to view the defendants through the lens of collectivity, the prosecuting attorneys cannot keep the defendants straight; after Dharuba Moore interrupts the court proceedings and accuses the judge of racism, Mr. Phillips, attorney for the prosecution, attempts to identify him as the offending party:

THE DEFENDANT MOORE: This is a farce. You're a racist judge—a racist pig judge.

JUSTICE MURTAGH: What is the name of the defendant who spoke out there?

MR. PHILLIPS: Your Honor, Lumumba Shakur and the gentleman standing next to him.

JUSTICE MURTAGH: This gentleman who is number two, what is his name?

MR. PHILLIPS: Tabor, I believe, Michael Tabor.

And Moore, defendant number two, confused at this sign that Mr. Phillips, otherwise master of their intimacies, could not tell any one of them from any other, could only shout back, "You can include me," at which there was applause and Justice Murtagh cleared the courtroom. (Kempton, 39-40)

Ironically, the confusion of identities that typifies the prosecution's efforts to criminalize "the Panthers *as an organization*" thus provides the defendants with the means of establishing their own textual defenses. *Whirlwind* constitutes a similarly collective, associative strategy as a subversive position from which to organize and represent resistance.²²

The original dust jacket explains the book's content as follows: "Sixteen of the original New York Panther 21 defendants, indicted in April of 1969 for allegedly 'plotting to bomb public places,' collectively tell us their story."²³ The curious difference between the number of autobiographies announced in the book's title and the number of authors listed on the dust jacket may leave readers wondering at collective autobiography as a textual equation capable of multiplying the contributions of 16 narrators into 21 life stories. Haywood Burns' introduction to *Whirlwind* fails to mention the calculations necessary to make this odd equation functional. "In these pages the defendants in the New York Panther trial reclaim their personalities and we get to see them as individual people," Burns writes. "In their own voices they trace in poignant detail their lives," he continues, "and we come to feel we know the defendants as people" (vii). The apprehension echoing in his promises to allow readers to "see [the defendants] as individual people" and "know the defendants as people" underscores the fundamental

²² As Kuwasi Balagoon notes in his opening statement during the Brinks trial, Sekou Odinga, Bilal Sunni-Ali, Cecilio Ferguson, Jamal Joseph, Silvia Baraldini, and Iliana Robinson were tried under the RICO act for their supposed participation in the robbery of a Brinks armored vehicle (*a soldier's story*, 33).

²³ The original 21 included Lumumba Shakur, Afeni Shakur, Dhoruba Bin Wahad, Kwando Kinshasa, Cetewayo, Ali Bey Hassan, Abayama Katara, Sundiata Acoli, Curtis Powell, Robert Collier, Baba Odinga, Shaba Om, Joan Bird, Jamal, Lonnie Epps, Lee Berry, Mshina, Sekou Odinga, Larry Mack, Kuwasi Balagoon, and Richard Harris. The sixteen included in *Whirlwind* were Balagoon, Bird, Cetewayo, Collier, Bin Wahad, Harris, Hassan, Jamal, Katara, Kinshasa, Odinga, Om, Powell, Afeni Shakur, Lumumba Shakur, and Acoli; thirteen would go through the entire trial and be acquitted.

crisis of subject formation central to the text's construction. *Whirlwind* asserts that the body—of the individual, as well as the body of the text that attempts to account for the individual—is the site of violence, its features marked by dismemberment, severance, amputation. What kind of subject formation can include the excluded narrators, the members of the New York 21 not included in *Whirlwind*, whose apparitions nonetheless haunt its pages? What textual prostheses or forms of ventriloquy can produce, from the same fragments, personalized, de-personalized life stories?

These questions receive little attention in the few book reviews *Whirlwind* received upon publication. The *New York Times* states that the book contains “not so much the moving individual story as... a cacophony of voices chorusing their protest so loudly that one is deafened,” an effect contributing, in the reviewer's mind, to the book's so-called “clamorous disharmony” (Carew 1971). And yet, consider again the curious mathematics involved in the discrepancy between the subtitle of the book, *The Collective Autobiography of the New York 21*, and the book's sixteen contributors; what the *Times* dismisses with the phrase “clamorous disharmony” fails to account for qualities of the text that cannot be subsumed or integrated into already familiar models of the autobiography. *Whirlwind* practices resistance through the dispersal of individual identities: sixteen individual contributors accept responsibility for the life stories of their five missing compatriots, sprinkling their own recollections throughout eleven numbered sections so that only the most dedicated readers can connect one person's memory with a previous memory attributed to the very same person.

Although some sections seem to have been arranged according to a loosely-defined theme, they begin and end without clear purpose or reason. “Part 1” would

appear to be the most cohesive section. It contains brief autobiographical sketches; speakers talk at vastly differing lengths while rarely deviating from the autobiographical theme, although one defendant, Joan Bird, doesn't talk at all, and isn't introduced until "Part 2." Other defendants speak twice in "Part 1." The use of aliases further complicates readers' efforts to account for the ownership of the book's narrative fragments; contributors with chosen names are first listed with their chosen names and their given (or what some of the narrators would call their slave) names, and subsequently referred to by their chosen names; but this pattern does not hold for *all* contributors. As discrete identities become lost or confused in the midst of the cross-hatched narratives that give them life, the collective contributions of the sixteen seem to multiply exponentially, as if the book represents not one, two, or sixteen narrators, but a virtual army of revolutionaries, not a single one of whom can be fully disentangled from the collective, revolutionary, textual body he or she seems to occupy.

Such details regarding the book's construction raise crucial questions that venerable, influential cultural gatekeepers such as the *New York Times* fail to consider. Of particular interest is the fact that the interpenetrating, multiplying, de-individuating author-collective found in *Whirlwind* represents a textual illusion quite distinct from the history of the defendants and the case itself. The refusal of the *Times* to take the notion of collective autobiography seriously, and the apparent readiness to assume that the book's confounding structure represents a failure rather than a self-conscious, carefully deployed rhetorical structure, indicates the deeply-rooted cultural biases facing its authors. Perhaps the notion that a successfully-constructed collective autobiography may by definition demand the surrendering of selfhood to a "cacophonous disharmony"

disrupts notions of authorship that remain fundamental to the marketing and publishing of literature as such.

Whatever literary ideologies contribute to this reception, the work of government agents in framing the Black Panthers as a criminal organization may also contribute to the damning review produced by the *Times*. By playing into and off of the prosecution's claims of collective guilt without commenting on the crimes of which its contributors have been accused, *Whirlwind's* textually-forged harmony conceals its own artifice, disguising the misrepresentations or elisions required in order for the contributors to present themselves as a unified group. In its refusal to answer the government's various accusations while presenting a composite body unified in its resistance to the state, the challenges and provocations made in and by this text bear a direct relationship to the circumstances surrounding its creation: *Whirlwind* refuses to distinguish between "authentic" Panther activities and those faked, provoked, or otherwise manipulated by government agents. Its innovative features are not borne of a purely avant-garde enthusiasm for the new or the difficult, but of necessity, fear, oppression, and revolutionary resistance. The performance of unity that *Whirlwind* exhibits confounds and conflicts with the government's ultimately successful efforts to fracture and disable the Panthers as an organization.

As the following sections will discuss in greater detail, *Whirlwind* severs certain historical truths as readily as it disposes with traditional forms of self-representation. Despite the supposed "disharmony" reviewers may claim to discover in its fragmented sections, what remains most striking about the text is its effective performance of unity. The emergence of collective authorship in *Whirlwind* defies the history of its protagonists

and contributors. In the process, this “collective autobiography” represents a remarkable response to government persecution. Its disparate sections suture the government’s covert attempts at destroying the Black Panthers and the Black Liberation Movement to the transformative concepts of selfhood emerging in and through disintegrating literary conventions. Despite the crucial textual, historical labor performed by this text, no known genealogies with which literary historians trace the legacies of innovative American writing in the wake of the Civil Rights Movement include *Whirlwind*. If this near-disappearance mimics the elision of the prison regime’s expansion from most accounts of recent American literary history, perhaps a re-imagining of this history, beginning with *Whirlwind* as a foundational text, can begin the corrective work necessary for an understanding of the crucial function the prison plays in the preservation and proliferation of the economic, racial, and gendered divides that define power dynamics, both within the United States, and in its interventions abroad.

Shadowed by the State / The State’s Shadow

If the text of *Whirlwind* evokes a sense of “disharmony” for some readers, the history of the government’s effort to infiltrate and destroy the Black Panther Party’s New York branches should elicit a more distinct sense of disquiet. Though its primary actors remain low-level officers charged with infiltrating the party, the powerful political interests involved in the events surrounding the case have grave implications for the organization of dissident political groups in the United States. Needless to say, the existent archive fails to document in any comprehensive way the role played by various high-powered individuals in the case of the New York 21. Like the covert operations

discussed with regard to the prison letters of George Jackson in Chapter 1, the events that lead to the publication of *Whirlwind* remain cloaked in mystery.

Nonetheless, the intricate, largely unmapped web of alliances and betrayals through which *Whirlwind* emerges provides a crucial foundation from which to begin constructing this document's relationship to contemporary American history and literature. The butchered forms of identity and subjectivity that lie behind its publication anticipate the textual dismemberment that *Whirlwind* embodies. The book's origins can be located in the effort to repress the New York Black Panthers, an effort that began with the founding of the city's first branches in April of 1968. The case against the New York 21 became public just a year later, on April 2, 1969, when squadrons of NYPD officers conducted predawn raids to arrest fifteen Black Panthers on a laundry list of charges, including the conspiracy to commit bombings, assassinations, and other "terrorist" acts. Other Panthers charged in the case were already in custody or would be captured in the months that followed; a few whose names appeared on arrest warrants remained in hiding. The trial dragged on for over two years; on May 13, 1971, the defendants were acquitted. *Whirlwind* was published a few months later.

Although the operation leading to the arrest of the New York 21 coincided and eventually overlapped with nation-wide FBI COINTELPROs (counter-intelligence programs) initiated by FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover against Black revolutionaries, the New York Panthers owe their particular misfortune to the NYPD's long history and experience in the "neutralization" of political dissidents. At a time when the department was beset by allegations of corruption, the case of the New York 21 redirected media

attention away from the NYPD's own crimes.²⁴ Accusations of gambling and drug smuggling within the department centered on the Bureau of Special Services (or BOSS), the same secretive unit assigned to spy on the Panthers. Once known as the "Radical Bureau" for its efforts in taking down political activists, this division had well-established contacts that specialized in the surveillance of black political organizations, whose experiences predated the Black Panther Party itself. Previous exploits included a thorough infiltration of the Nation of Islam. Eugene Roberts, a BOSS operative and Panther infiltrator who would testify against the New York 21, was a veteran in the disassembling of Black political organizations. Roberts claimed not only to have witnessed Malcolm X's assassination, but to have attempted to resuscitate Malcolm X himself (Zimroth 1974, 170).

Many of the helping hands involved in establishing the Panthers' New York offices were experienced police operatives like Roberts. "The police own all that is official in the history of the New York Branch of the Black Panther Party," Murray Kempton writes. "Its character was painted by district attorneys; what records it has were compiled by policemen; even the strongest bond its protagonists would share was finally owing to their prosecutors [and] the Department of Corrections" (Kempton, 42-3). In *The COINTELPRO Papers* (1990, 2002), Ward Churchill and Jim Vander Wall note that "at least five police infiltrators—Eugene Roberts, Ralph White, Carlos Ashwood, Roland Hayes, and Wilbert Thomas—had moved into the New York BPP from almost the moment it was established... in April 1968" (361). As police plots against the Panthers

²⁴ Robert Daley's book *Target Blue: An Insider's View of the NYPD* (Delacorte, 1973) covers these scandals in some detail, including corruptions investigations involving gambling and narcotics, while providing a glimpse into the department's use of the press (Daley, a writer and journalist, was hired by the NYPD to serve as media liaison) to shape public opinion.

intensified leading up to (and following) the arrest of the New York 21, the division between Panther-initiated plans and those initiated by infiltrators became increasingly muddled. The entanglements between infiltrators and the suspects they scrutinized make it difficult to separate provocations from supposedly authentic, Panther-initiated activities: “The obvious danger in police methods like [those used against the New York Black Panthers] is that the police are... promoting the very activities they say they are trying to prevent,” writes Peter Zimroth. As an example, he cites an operation initiated by BOSS operative Wilbert Thomas in August of 1969, while members of the New York 21 already languished in jail and party members struggled to raise the funds necessary for their defense. Zimroth explains that Thomas “supplied a map of [a] hotel and a car” that could be used to rob the hotel. Several Panthers were then arrested for planning a hotel robbery (62). If the ethical standards in such an example appear suspect, the political stance taken in the Panthers’ party platform sounds, in comparison, like standard ethics: “We believe that this racist government has robbed us and now we are demanding the overdue debt of forty acres and two mules... We will accept payment in currency which will be distributed to our many communities” (Jones 1998, 473).

The Panthers’ engagement with the logic of reparations began to unravel as the impact of police infiltration and provocation forced members underground and consumed the Party’s energy in endless legal battles. Although such battles provided brief opportunities for political performances and theatrical protests that exposed the gross imbalances and prejudices built into the justice establishment (the infamous binding and gagging of Bobby Seale during the trial of the Chicago 8 in November of 1969, for example), they also mired Party members in layers of legalistic doublespeak. In the case

of the New York 21, the defendants were forced to downplay notions that they advocated an “over-all plan to harass and destroy the power structure,” despite the fact that this plan was integral to the image the Black Panther Party held for its supporters as much as its detractors (Zimroth 1974, 238). Confronted with a court system based on a code of morals and a system of self-representation inimical to their collective and individual identities, the Panthers faced fundamental challenges to their carefully-wrought claims of authenticity. “The defendants could not have it both ways,” Zimroth writes. “They could not... present themselves as serious, committed, idealist revolutionaries at the same time that their lawyers were emphasizing their disorganization, confusion, lack of competence, and seeming lack of purpose” (172). Thus did the prosecution and the defense contribute to the butchering of reputations, both the reputations of the individual defendants, and the reputation of the Black Panther Party. Aside from the existential questions of authenticity and identification raised inside the courtroom, the mere fact that so many Panthers were placed under arrest proved devastating to their political aims. The high bail set for Panther defendants (most of whom would be acquitted in cases that repeatedly exposed government attempts to manipulate justice) eviscerated Panther leadership and redirected its organizing efforts toward fundraising for bail or for legal defense, effectively decimating the community programs that had been the party’s most important organizing tools (Zimroth, 172).

Even before the arrests in the case of the New York 21, just months after the founding of the city’s first party offices, numerous New York Panthers languished behind bars. The Harlem branch became the center of activity, in part thanks to the recruitment efforts of the BOSS undercover agents that staffed its office. These efforts resulted in the

recruitment of Kwando Kinshasa, known to prosecutors as William King. Kinshasa would become a central target of police surveillance; his training as a U.S. Marine alarmed police officers, as it had prepared him for the authorship of a manual on urban guerilla warfare submitted as evidence for the prosecution during the trial. As a defender and emissary of the United States during his years in the Marines, Kinshasa gained a surprisingly thorough education in the use of overt and clandestine force to spread U.S. influence abroad. First in Panama, and then in Guatemala, he had witnessed at close range the American effort to suppress revolutionary movements that threatened to overthrow regimes supported by the United States; in addition, Kinshasa recognized that his political and ideological leanings shared more with the indigenous revolutionary movements shaking Central America than with the mythical promises of the American republic he represented while in uniform (*Whirlwind*, 217-222).

Kempton writes that Kinshasa was “at first so distrusted that only [undercover police officer Eugene] Roberts’ recommendation finally won him admittance” (68). The ironic fact that an undercover officer had vouched for a new Panther recruit subsequently charged with conspiring to commit various violent crimes epitomizes the police actions leading to the trial of the New York 21. Peter Zimroth concludes that the case of the Panther 21 was part of a plan to “emphasize the criminality of the Panthers *as an organization*” (46). Though certain individuals such as Kwando Kinshasa drew special attention from investigators, the prosecution hoped to use the presence of such individuals within the party to emphasize its collective criminality. Indeed, from the government’s perspective, this criminality was indisputable; its own agents had been pushing, provoking, advocating, and initiating illegal activities from within the Party

itself. While explaining government strategies employed during the trial, a federal agent interviewed by Zimroth claims that media coverage of earlier cases against various Black Panther leaders too frequently focused on the individuals themselves. When Panther leaders successfully fought off the charges against them, their popularity and the popularity of the party was merely enhanced (46). The case of the New York 21 was designed to counteract such outcomes by thoroughly dissecting the organization, from the rank-and-file members of the New York branches to the lead organizers themselves, in order to criminalize the party as a whole. When New York District Attorney Frank Hogan announced the 156 charges filed against the New York 21 defendants, he presented accusations the government hoped to ratify as facts chronicled in future histories of the Black Panthers and the resistance movements for which they served as vanguard. To further this cause, Hogan had hand-picked Supreme Court Justice John M. Murtagh to handle the case. Hogan believed that Justice Murtagh would be most capable of upholding a façade of impartiality while remaining faithful to the police department and its witnesses. Early in his career, the NYPD was Murtagh's own place of employ; in fact, he faced indictment during his tenure there for his failure, while serving as commissioner of investigation, to scrutinize a gambling scandal that occurred under his watch. As Murray Kempton explains, the police had once spared Judge Murtagh the humiliation of an arrest; thereafter he was known for treating police testimony as though he possessed an "undamaged faith in the word of anyone in uniform," a characteristic that prosecutors believed might lend itself most generously to the collective biography they wished to write for the accused. (28).

Such complicated, overdetermined efforts to control the outcome of the case provide further support for the importance of *Whirlwind* as a counter-narrative. Evidence of the supposed criminality of the New York Panthers rested to a large extent upon the testimony of police infiltrators. Despite the eventual acquittal of the defendants, dominant narratives frequently associated with the BPP can be traced to the evidence these agents presented during the trial. For example, police agent Ralph White presented a view of the divisions within the Party frequently repeated in subsequent histories when he testified that, “There were those... on the political side of the party... and then you had the people who were more or less like the military part of the party” (Kempton, 238).²⁵

Though widely accepted as an accurate description of the Panthers’ disintegration, White’s simplistic analysis masks the roles he and other provocateurs played in engineering this division and in bolstering the image of the Panthers as a violent organization. White attempted to prove himself to other members of the Party by championing militancy: “‘If someone said, ‘What we got to do is start icing more pigs,’ I’m going to say, ‘Right on, yeah’” (Kempton, 225). Nonetheless, Afeni Shakur believed he was a policeman; she shared this belief with her husband and head of the Harlem branch, Lumumba Shakur. After learning of her accusations, White illustrated his anger by firing his gun into tabletops at the Ellsmere Tenants Council where he and Lumumba had been working for tenants’ rights, a show of bravado intended to demonstrate beyond question the authenticity of his revolutionary fervor. Nonetheless,

²⁵ A useful chronicle of the disagreements between supposedly “militant” and “political” factions can be found in Ollie A. Johnson’s article, “Explaining the Demise of the Black Panther Party: The Role of Internal Factors,” in *The Black Panther Party Reconsidered*, edited by Charles E. Jones (Black Classics Press, 1998), 391-409.

Lumumba Shakur seems to have suspected White as well, incorporating in his interactions with the undercover officer a tactic commonly utilized by party leaders who suspected an infiltrator (and a tactic that may have exacerbated police perceptions of the Panthers' violent tendencies): Shakur offered him access to dynamite and suggested he make use of it. His assumption was that, if White were indeed an informer, arrests or raids would soon follow (Kempton, 222-225).

White performed most convincingly for his fellow law enforcement officers. According to the principles governing the NYPD's undercover methods, Eugene Roberts remained unaware that White worked for the same department he did. This mutual ignorance allowed department superiors to solicit surveillance from one officer that would indicate the performance of his fellow undercover peer. In their efforts to authenticate themselves, it appears that the violence these "performers" advocated (or, in an incident discussed later in this chapter, enacted) not only influenced one another's behaviors and perceptions, but likely influenced the Party itself. BOSS undercover officer Eugene Roberts classified his fellow BOSS undercover officer Ralph White as "a bad mother" in his reports to superiors. For his part, White said to his superiors of Roberts, "If you blow in his ear, he'd kill someone" (Zimroth, 67). The notion that a division between militancy and politics divided the Panthers thus cannot be extricated from the role played by government infiltrators and provocateurs such as Roberts and White, who advocated violence and fostered disputes over appropriate forms of action.

At the same time that the Black Panthers presented the NYPD with an opportunity to deflect attention away from the department's own scandals, additional controversies rattling the New York City and New York state political landscapes presented covert

operatives and agencies with unique opportunities to influence longstanding political rivalries. The most visible rivalry came from within the Republican Party; Mayor John Lindsay had frequently sparred with his fellow Republican, New York Governor Nelson Rockefeller. Though it may be impossible to pinpoint from precisely what lofty heights of power's upper-reaches plots were incubated and hatched, it is hard to dismiss the likelihood that political actors with diverse interests attempted to influence the city's affairs. Indeed, the machinations surrounding the arrest of *Whirlwind*'s contributors suggest that there was far more at stake for New York's political elite than the ensuing spectacle of the trial itself or the destruction of the Black Panthers as an organization.

For his part, Rockefeller's transition from foreign policy advisor to domestic politician traces the simultaneous transfer of the counterrevolutionary tactics of the Cold War into the domestic sphere. As the Co-ordinator for Inter-American Affairs from 1940-1944, Rockefeller was responsible for extending American influence throughout South America; from 1954-55, Rockefeller served the Eisenhower Administration on the Operations Coordinating Board of the National Security Council, whose duties included oversight of the Central Intelligence Agency. In his book *The Phoenix Program* (1990), Douglas Valentine dates 1954 as a crucial year in the expansion and elaboration of covert American operations in Vietnam. That year Edward Lansdale, "a confidential agent of Director of Central Intelligence Allen Dulles," began directing a comprehensive program designed to terrorize enemies of the Vietnamese leader the United States supported, Ngo Dinh Diem. In 1954, Lansdale "defeated [Vietnamese revolutionary forces opposed to Diem] by either killing or buying off its leaders" (Valentine, 25). The programs Lansdale initiated laid the groundwork for the Phoenix Program, "a concerted effort to

‘neutralize’... to kill, capture, or make to defect... those civilians suspected of supporting North Vietnamese and Vietcong [Vietnamese Communist, or VC] soldiers” (Valentine, 13). At the behest of CIA operatives, groups of Vietnamese soldiers were organized and trained as “propaganda teams” sent into villages known to support North Vietnam: “If possible, the team returned with defectors, left informers behind, and stuck a VC head on a pole as they left” (Valentine, 45). Though the murder and dismemberment employed as part of the Phoenix Program’s tactics of psychological warfare sound far more extreme than most known activities of domestic spies, J. Edgar Hoover would uncannily echo the CIA’s use of language in stating almost a decade later that his goal was to “neutralize” domestic political organizations such as the Black Panthers (Churchill and Vander Wall, 92). Also uncanny is the fact that Rockefeller likely not only knew of such programs, but may have helped to design them. In 1956, Rockefeller selected his friend Henry Kissinger to lead the Special Studies Project, a wide-ranging investigation that helped map American foreign policy during the Cold War. The project resulted in the publication of *Prospect for America: The Rockefeller Panel Reports* (1961). The Rockefeller family’s wealth, originally founded on Standard Oil, included worldwide interests and investments linked to and interwoven with American interventions abroad, including the American war in Vietnam: “Nelson Rockefeller helped sound the alarm about scarce raw materials [and because of this scarcity, the strategic importance of Vietnam] in 1951... the Rockefellers and [the corporate descendant of Standard Oil] Socony Mobil hosted [the American-supported President of South Vietnam, Ngo Dinh] Diem and Thai officials in America in the 1950s” (Scott, *Drugs, Oil, and War*, 115).

Considering his background, the fact that Nelson Rockefeller served as the governor of New York during the arrest and trial of the New York 21 provides rich material for those given to conspiracy theories. Rockefeller's repeated failures to secure the Republican nomination for president (in 1960, 1964, and again in 1968) resulted in his political evolution from moderate to conservative. His right-wing legacy remains secure thanks in part to the draconian sentencing laws for drug crimes enacted during his governorship, as well as his disastrous mismanagement of the Attica Rebellion in 1971 (see the introduction and last chapter's discussion of Attica in relation to George Jackson's murder). If Rockefeller wanted to intervene in the affairs of New York City and the political prospects of his rival, Mayor John Lindsay (who coveted his own prospective nomination as the Republican candidate for president), he could have hoped for no better opportunity than the convergence of events during 1968-69. In addition to the establishment of Black Panther Party branches and the increasingly visible presence of the Black Power movement, these years marked the eruption of the Ocean Hill-Bronxville teachers' strike, an inflammatory controversy that would envelop the Black Panthers and the city's Puerto Rican and African American communities, driving a wedge between these constituencies and their potential allies on the Left, while humiliating members of the Lindsay administration.

The strike thus marked the deterioration of coalitions largely responsible for Mayor Lindsay's election victories in 1965 and 1969. Indeed, some historians consider the strike the beginning of a longstanding shift in New York City politics, fomenting distrust between Puerto Rican and African American voters and Jewish voters, who thereafter regularly identified (or were identified by others) with the white power

structure at the heart of the Teachers' Union and city government. These historically marginalized voting populations whose common interests had, in previous elections, provided the foundation for powerful coalitions, would hereafter view one another with considerable suspicion and mistrust, if not as outright enemies (Lizzi, 43-80). What role devotees to Governor Rockefeller may have played in provoking these tensions remains unknown. However, it appears certain that BOSS operatives offered significant, if not disruptive and provocative, voices to the Black Panthers, and likely influenced members of the United Federation of Teachers in the process. Officers facing the prospect of state corruptions investigations would have made easy targets for Albany officials seeking to influence city politics.

In the earliest days of the strike the Black Panthers were particularly active, offering protection for demonstrators against police brutality while drawing publicity to the causes of local communities whose support they hoped to garner. As politically-engaged members of economically underprivileged urban minority populations actively fighting largely white union leaders, the political work undertaken by members of the New York 21 provided an opportunity for "law and order" Republicans to further spread distrust and skepticism amongst the white elite of such Black radicals and their revolutionary causes. Rumors of anti-Semitic slogans directed at members of the teachers' union supposedly overheard at rallies led by the Panthers further exacerbated smoldering tensions. The teachers' strike thus provided various players in the struggle for New York City and state power with tremendous opportunities to infiltrate, manipulate, and divide marginalized, liberal minorities, even as it provided a rallying point for the city's recently-formed, police-monitored Black Panther Party. Meanwhile,

the government pursued cases against Black Panther leaders throughout the country. These cases—Huey Newton’s appeal, the legal defense of David Hilliard (accused of threatening President Nixon’s life), and Bobby Seale’s trial for the murder of a fellow Black Panther in New Haven—involved the Party’s most powerful representatives.²⁶ Although members of the New York 21 did not possess the notoriety of Newton, Hilliard, or Seale, New York City proved a profitable place for Party fundraising. This fact would soon be undermined by repeated attacks on the alliances between the Panthers and the liberal white elite, especially Jewish liberals (a development more fully explored in the next chapter’s discussion of Assata Shakur, the Black Liberation Movement, and Tom Wolfe’s patronizing treatment of Leonard Bernstein’s fundraiser for the New York 21, entitled “Radical Chic,” and published in *New York* magazine in 1970).

Instead of becoming a rallying point for Panther community involvement and social change, Ocean Hill-Brownsville thus provided yet another opportunity for government interests to manipulate events for the public eye by tearing the party apart from inside-out, spreading distrust and paranoia through police operatives, advocating through infiltrators ruinous acts of violence. Such efforts included the sensational arrest of Joudan Ford, a former organizer for the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. Ford, founder of the city’s first Panther branch, was arrested on charges that he sought to arrange for the assassination of Albert Shanker, president of the United Federation of Teachers. This arrest came as the result of testimony contributed by Shaun Dubonnet, a borderline schizophrenic with a criminal history who was enlisted by the NYPD as a

²⁶ Churchill and Vander Wall’s chapter on “COINTELPRO—Black Panther Party” contains a concise chronicle of the major covert operations against the Panthers during this time (*Agents of Repression* 2002, 63-99); for Hilliard’s arrest and indictment, see Caldwell, “Panther Charged in Nixon Threat” (*New York Times*, Dec. 4, 1969).

party infiltrator and provocateur. Dubonnet's lengthy police file and his history of residencies at various mental institutions did not make him a convincing witness in the courtroom, and the charges went nowhere. Nonetheless, occurring after the inception of the New York 21 trial and as the Panthers struggled to raise money for their legal defense fund, the charges against Ford aided in the effort to eliminate support for the Panthers amongst white liberals.²⁷

Meanwhile, some members of the New York 21 argued that a disproportionate amount of financial support was being allocated to pay the legal expenses of the more well-known Panthers facing trials elsewhere, a concept likely enhanced by the suggestive postcards and correspondences contributed to the Panthers' mailboxes by informants or undercover operatives. By intercepting and altering Panther correspondences and communiqués between its West and East Coast branches, FBI agents were able to exacerbate arguments over violence that infiltrators such as Ralph White had helped initiate. Fear spread throughout the party. During the trial itself, the notorious and ultimately fatal split emerged, pitting those loyal to Huey P. Newton and the West Coast Panthers, ostensibly the "political side of the party," against those loyal to the exiled Eldridge Cleaver and the "the militant part of the party." Some members of the New York branch, perhaps influenced by government stooges, advocated robberies and other methods of expropriation as a means of raising money (Kempton, 180-181). The militaristic split envisioned by police infiltrator Ralph White thus took on a life of its own as the trial dragged on and the party faced impossible financial demands. Meanwhile, FBI agents, covert mail couriers for Panther correspondence traveling between various

²⁷ Kempton devotes significant attention to these complex developments in the first few chapters of *The Briar Patch*.

offices, intercepted letters and inserted counterfeit missives, thus spreading additional confusion, dissent, and suspicion amongst party members.

Textual Masks, Immaterial Identities: Whirlwind's Misleading Features

Given the history that surrounds its composition, one of the most striking and curious characteristics of *Whirlwind* is the fact that even as the New York 21 defendants increasingly found themselves at odds with one another, their collective autobiography masks this escalating tension. In her book-length, biographical interview with Afeni Shakur (*Afeni Shakur: Evolution of a Revolutionary*, 2004), Jasmine Guy reports that Afeni was disgruntled from the trial's inception. Lumumba Shakur and other higher ranking Panthers decided that she and Joan Bird would be represented by the only female lawyer made available to the defendants (97). Rather than accepting the lawyer the men had rejected for themselves, Afeni Shakur defended herself, a decision she stood by after Lumumba attempted to ban her from doing so. As bail money accumulated, the group decided that the women—Afeni Shakur and Joan Bird—would be released first. Next, Cetewayo and Dharuba made bail; they had been chosen for their speaking abilities, and were expected to campaign for bail money to free the rest of the defendants.

From the beginning, Cetewayo and Dharuba struggled to raise the necessary funds. An FBI Airtel dated February 2, 1971 suggests ways in which this development might provide opportunities for covert actions. The Airtel notes that the “dissent [stemming from the New York 21 trial] coupled with financial difficulties offers an exceptional opportunity to further disrupt, aggravate and possibly neutralize this organization [the Black Panther Party] through counterintelligence” (Churchill and

Vander Wall, 161). Cetewayo and Dharuba failed to appear in court on February 8, 1971, six days after the above Airtel, and several months before the verdict; as a result, Afeni Shakur, now five months pregnant, was forced to return to jail, along with Joan Bird. One can thus infer that the failure of Cetewayo and Dharuba to appear in court days after FBI director J. Edgar Hoover issued this particular Airtel may have had as much to do with the activities of covert FBI operatives as the defendants' disenchantment with the law and its courts. Dharuba apparently believed that someone had ordered his assassination as part of the fallout from the split within the Party, although accounts differ over whether it was Newton or the New York 21 themselves that he feared (Churchill and Vander Wall, *COINTELPRO*, 157; Guy, 107-08).²⁸ Cetewayo fled to Algeria, where he joined Eldridge Cleaver in exile.

Dharuba planned to go into exile as well, and after failing to appear in trial it was widely reported that he *had* gone to Algeria, as the book jacket of *Whirlwind* states. However, according to Murray Kempton, when the time came to enact this plan, distrust had reached an unprecedented level of intensity; Cetewayo and his traveling partner, Connie Matthews, decided that Dharuba was not reliable enough to travel with them (183). Dharuba went into hiding and began raiding neighborhood drug dens, destroying contraband and confiscating cash from dealers as part of a process that combined his concern over the influence of the drug trade in Black communities with his determination to raise money for the party.²⁹ If he was once misidentified in court as either Lumumba

²⁸ Churchill and Vander Wall cite Kenneth O'Reilly's "*Racial Matters*": *The FBI's Secret Files on Black America, 1960-1972*, as their source for this claim (The Free Press, New York, 1989).

²⁹ See the documentary *Passin' It On* (Docurama, 1993), directed by John Valadez and produced following Dharuba Bin Wahad's release from prison, for a first-hand account of his experiences before, during, and after his arrest.

Shakur or Cetewayo (Michael Tabor), the state made a careful study of Dharuba after the New York 21 trial. He was arrested soon after the completion of the New York 21 trial along with his fellow defendant Jamal and charged with the robbery of a Bronx social club. His subsequent fate provides an instructive lesson regarding the government's treatment of the Panthers acquitted by the jury in the trial of the New York 21.

After his arrest for robbery, Dharuba was charged with the shooting of two officers guarding the home of D.A. Frank Hogan, an event ostensibly leading to a series of confrontations between the NYPD and the Black Liberation Army (see the *Assata* chapter that follows). Subjected to yet another trial, Dharuba was convicted. When finally released for public review, documents sought by his defense team and withheld by the FBI would reveal his conviction to be part of a COINTELPRO operation. Specific evidence that would have led to his acquittal had been hidden; one letter in the FBI files states that President Nixon himself called for the investigation that led to Dharuba's conviction, part of an operation called "Newkill" (Churchill and Vander Wall, 158; Grady-Willis, 380). Despite these revelations, the state repeatedly refused to grant Dharuba his freedom, citing a New York State legal technicality that ostensibly prohibited his release. After nearly twenty years in prison, the courts finally acknowledged that Dharuba Bin Wahad's conviction was obtained through the government's manipulation and withholding of key evidence. In 1990, he was released (Churchill and Vander Wall, 408). *Whirlwind's* formal idiosyncrasies explored in the sections that follow cannot erase the suffering its authors undergo, but nonetheless they offer vital examples of the means by which radical politics create and may be preserved by radical forms of literature. With the notable exception of Jamal Joseph (who, after

earning two degrees while in prison, has enjoyed a varied career as an activist, artist, and writer, and is currently a professor at Columbia University's School of the Arts), Dharuba's struggles are part of a larger pattern; Churchill and Vander Wall note that, "as of this writing [2002], all but a handful [of the New York 21] are either dead or serving lengthy sentences in maximum security institutions" (361).

Perhaps because of this common fate, the disagreements, betrayals, and suspicions that damaged the relationships between members of the New York 21, and that *Whirlwind* helps to conceal through its unusual structure, have largely dissipated through time. The feelings of intimacy members share for one another are clearly evidenced in Shaba Om's recollection of the group, captured in a videotaped greeting to political prisoner and fellow *Whirlwind* author Sundiata Acoli and posted on the internet in 2007: "Actually, I'm speechless," Shaba Om says as he tries to articulate his feelings. "There was a bond that we shared... that to my knowledge has never, ever been duplicated, it was a bond that is beyond words... no matter what the circumstances may be, no matter what the physical barriers may be... there was a bond of companionship, a bond of unadulterated trust for one another, to the extent of putting... our hands in each other's lives and our lives in each other's hands. So you know, you just don't find that. You know. You just don't find that."³⁰ In light of the ongoing persecution faced by many of *Whirlwind*'s contributors, Shaba Om's reference to a connection that exists outside of language and that permeates physical barriers, that allows for the transference of one's hands and life into the hands and life of another, provides a useful perspective

³⁰ "Shaba Om Greets Sundiata Acoli," <http://youtube.com/watch?v=5T5KwxMUtWU&feature=related>, posted July 9, 2007.

from which to view the dissolving boundaries between textual identities crafted by the contributors.

Shaba Om's reflections recast *Whirlwind's* collage-like, collaborative, and sometimes confusing text, in which an anecdote from one person's life provides a window through which one reads the life story of another, amidst a larger process of resistance that relies upon constantly transforming identities, provisional selves that can be disassembled and exchanged among one's closest compatriots. Sundiata Acoli's memory of the writing process involved in constructing *Whirlwind*, captured in an address entitled "On Marcus Garvey's Birthday Celebration," grounds the transposition of hands and lives facilitated by the fragmented body of the narrative in the collective acts leading to the book's composition: "We passed around the mike [Acoli says], spoke into a tape recorder and the publishers, Vintage Press or somebody [Random House] transcribed the tape into a book" (3). The dialogical process Acoli describes—the tape recorder exchanged between the narrators' hands before reaching the editor's desk—remains legible in the text itself. The authors build off the preceding narrator's words, sometimes taking up where the previous speaker left off or commenting obliquely on a single element of the previous monologue.

On the other hand, the flatness of some sections, the relaying of details that seem almost formulaic, provokes readers to wonder who stands to benefit from this process, and whose curiosities or commands authorize its progression. Portions of the text suffer from what might be called *clinical* neglect. The editors seem to have taken a holiday. Rudimentary errors go uncorrected. When Sundiata Acoli speaks of his college years, "colege" appears in full irony with a single "l." Most puzzling is the misidentification of

Kuwasi Balagoon, known to the state as Donald Weems. When he first speaks, his given name is listed as Walter Johnson, another defendant in the case who also contributes to the book, but who only appears under his chosen name of Baba Odinga (33, 27). This error sows confusion and enables further misidentifications, an outcome diametrically opposed to the book's purported purpose, as described in the introduction, "to allow readers to know the defendants as [individual] people." I would like to suggest that such confusions form part of a provisional strategy adopted by the narrators to disable the autobiographical tradition of guilt-ridden confession and personal disclosure leading to self-revelation. What the *Times* reads as "clamorous disharmony" can be seen as imperfect craftsmanship, the imprint of the amateur; on the other hand, the same qualities call attention to the uncertain relationships between the contributors and the over-arching government and cultural institutions—the jail and prison systems, the collection of lawyers and judges, policemen and government agents, the corporate publishing house—that allow their work to be published.

"Clamorous disharmony" in *Whirlwind* may just as well mark an innovative, subversive discourse of narratological seduction and deception, a performance of disembodiment that trades in phantom limbs and donated textual organs in an attempt to liberate its contributors from the narrated bodies their labors seem to inscribe. Considering the level of police infiltration revealed during the early days of their trial, before the authors began composing their collective autobiography, it seems likely that members of the New York 21 viewed their editors with suspicion. The contributors must have wondered how their editors managed to gain access not only to the jail itself, but to meeting rooms capable of accommodating the defendants as a group, without serving the

interests of the government itself. Many of the guarded yet personal narratives suggest a level of wariness on the part of the contributors, a willingness to talk but in talking to say nothing that stands out too distinctly as a personal revelation, provokes suspicion, or provides too-private an insight. No less curious is the fact that the book's editor or editors go unlisted; it remains unclear who oversaw the process of recording and transcription leading to publication.

Nonetheless, cultural critiques woven throughout the narrative remnants provide ample room for further analysis. For example, Cetewayo follows the autobiographical sketches provided by Shaba Om and Robert Collier, each of which begin with reflections on the hospitals in which they were born, with a joke about the hierarchy of New York City hospitals. In so doing he threads his narrative together with their preceding narratives, mentioning that Harlem Hospital, the site of Shaba Om's birth, was known in the neighborhood as "the butcher shop" (7,3). The repeated invocation of "the butcher shop," or hospital, as a deeply embedded sign within the early lives of *Whirlwind's* first three narrators, conjures failed attempts at the elimination of death's presence in the midst of the living. Sharon Holland notes that the hospital itself, the structure meant to both contain death and define its limits, recalls modernity's ongoing struggle to banish death, at the same time that death's inevitability motivates so-called scientific experimentation on black bodies. In her book *Raising the Dead*, Holland notes that "To achieve the separation between the happy (living) and the miserable (the dying / almost dead), the hospital was created as the perfect institutional replacement for this uncomfortable meeting" (33). Black bodies, she notes, become the primary site for the

investigation of the “dying/almost dead.” “The death of black subjects... serves to ward off a nation’s collective dread of the inevitable,” Holland writes.

The hospital, and in particular, the understaffed, under-funded Harlem Hospital known as “the butcher shop” thus gives birth to the collective autobiography of the New York 21 amidst death’s resonance. Afeni Shakur recalls the death of her girlfriend after a mishandled operation: “She had had a tube removed. She was supposed to have a complete hysterectomy, but they didn’t do that, they just removed one tube and didn’t tell her that they had only removed one tube... and she got pregnant. And her body wasn’t well... We don’t go to doctors, we don’t go to doctors till we’re dead” (85). The theme of the hospital as an institution for the industrialization of (black) death thus connects the seemingly haphazard narratives that begin *Whirlwind* to Afeni Shakur’s subsequent recollections; in light of Holland’s remarks, these narrative threads appear as prophetic insights steeped in a modern signage that makes from urban legend cold, hard, historical facts. Harlem Hospital’s suggestive nickname, “the butcher shop,” also provides a fitting image for various narrative organs in the text that serve as prostheses for different individuals. As Shaba Om suggests, a sharing or exchange of organs and limbs between bodies of narrative as well as the bodies that narrate distinguishes the New York 21’s literary, historical, and political project.

The effect of these transposed hands, lives, and words is a kind of composite body, partially grafted, elsewhere amputated, the parts of which drift alongside the real-life identities of the contributors, their words their own *and* someone else’s all at once. *Whirlwind* attempts to embody text as a connective tissue capable of transcending individuals, transplanting stories from one living subject onto the living textual body of

another. Its disorderly narratives strategically refocus the case history on the concept of the collective. Such efforts also obscure the roles different defendants played in the trial itself. The two female defendants, the aforementioned Joan Bird and Afeni Shakur, were important figures in the trial, but their contributions recede into the background of the autobiographical fragments *Whirlwind* collects, along with the dispute over which lawyers would represent them. In Bird's case, a supposed confession to the attempted assassination of police officers played a key part in the prosecution's representation of the Party's activities. Bird and her lawyers argued that her confession had been extracted through torture. (Soon after the acquittal of the New York 21, events related to Bird's controversial "confession" would result in the only conviction for a crime named in the original indictment. Kuwasi Balagoon was convicted of attempting to assassinate NYPD officers as part of the same incident for which the New York 21 jury had cleared the other defendants.)

Afeni Shakur does, however, contribute a document that hints of the group's internal difficulties. Squeezed between the "Publisher's Note" (a timeline of the trial's essential dates and events) and a transcript of a letter from the defendants to Justice Murtagh written during the recess from the pretrial hearings (imposed by the judge after repeated interruptions by the defendants), Afeni Shakur's letter seems an afterthought. To Shakur, however, it was essential. "I wasn't very cooperative," Shakur tells Jasmine Guy of her contributions to *Whirlwind*. "They had to print this letter if I was to participate" (89-90). The letter is addressed "to Jamala, Lil Afeni, Sekyiwa, and the unborn baby (babies) within my womb," and in some sections it threatens the tranquility of the collective structure *Whirlwind* otherwise maintains:

Joan and I, and all the brothers in jail, are caught up in this funny situation where everyone seems to be attacking everyone else and we're sort of in the middle looking dumb....

I've discovered what I should have known a long time ago—that change has to begin within ourselves—whether there is a revolution today or tomorrow—we still must face the problems of purging ourselves of the larceny that we have all inherited. I hope we do not pass it on to you because you are our only hope. You must weigh our actions and decide for yourselves what was good and what was bad. It is obvious that somewhere we failed but I know it will not—it cannot end here. There is too much evilness left. I cannot get rid of my dream of peace and harmony. It is for that dream that most of us have fought—some bravely, some as cowards, some as heroes, and some as plain old crooks. Forgive us our mistakes because mostly they were mistakes which were made out of blind ignorance (sometimes arrogance). Judge us with empathy for we were (are) idealists and sometimes we're young and foolish....

Help me to continue to learn—only this time with a bit more grace for I am a poor example for everyone to follow because I have deviated from the revolutionary principles which I know to be correct. I wish you love.

Afeni Shakur (360-361)

For all practical purposes a footnote to the volume itself, this poignant address serves as a subtle yet powerful signal of the grand illusion the rest of the text embodies. “Joan and I, and all the brothers in jail” includes just thirteen of the original New York 21 for whom

the volume claims to speak. Afeni Shakur thus hints at the frustration of the imprisoned defendants whose bail has not been raised—as well as implying her own frustration after having been forced back to jail along with Joan Bird after the disappearance of Cetewayo and Dharuba. The word “larceny” leaps out from under the otherwise predictable language of the letter; “we still must face the problems of purging ourselves of the larceny that we have all inherited,” Shakur writes. Larceny refers to the theft of personal property, thus conjuring the history of chattel slavery. On the other hand, to understand larceny as a crime, one must acquiesce to the notion of personal property as a right, a concept many of the defendants—students of Mao and Lenin, Marx and Engels—would likely disavow. The statement thus points to the defendants as both the victims and perpetrators of larceny: committed to an alternative set of values, but also tempted by the values their professed political stance would require them to reject; hence her confession to have “deviated from the revolutionary principles” to which she had committed herself.

Afeni Shakur’s own experiences as a Black Panther attest to the obstacles that threaten to disrupt lifestyles built upon alternative values. Lumumba Shakur was a Muslim before and after joining the Panthers; as Lumumba Shakur’s second wife, Afeni entered his home and lived with his first wife, Sayeeda, and their two children. “In the fall of 1968,” Lumumba explains in *Whirlwind*, “I got married again. My second wife, Afeni Shakur, possesses some qualities that I never saw in other women. Her political consciousness combined with pure candidness, directness and lots of fire... Polygamy was no problem in my home because revolutionary principles and Islamic law govern my home” (246). The unabashed misogyny that rings through these statements proves telling; as Afeni Shakur explains to Jasmine Guy, the matrimonial image Lumumba

presents in *Whirlwind* is a fantasy. According to Afeni, Sayeeda had an extended affair with previously quoted police informant Ralph White (known as Yehwah to his Panther brothers and sisters) long before their arrests. Meanwhile, as the defendants met for pre-trial meetings with their lawyers, Lumumba constantly pressured Afeni Shakur to have sex with him; she refused. “There is no freedom having sex in those terms,” she tells Jasmine. “Two prisoners! Two incarcerated Negroes waiting for a chance to sneak behind Massa’s back for a few minutes of fucking” (104). Although they had an “agreement” to have an open relationship, Afeni tells Guy that her impregnation via another partner while out on bail infuriated Lumumba (110).

Even without these supplementary details, Afeni’s letter derives power from its oscillation between the personal and the generic, suggesting that what she wants to say has been carefully replaced with what she thinks she can say. This oscillation between the personal and the generic, the specific and the vague, is most evident in the apostrophe that begins the letter. This apostrophe includes names of children barely familiar to her readers. It appeals for forgiveness, but the “mistakes” to which it refers go unnamed and unexplained. The uncertainty surrounding these “mistakes” becomes all the more curious given the letter’s appearance in a text that makes no effort to illuminate the contributors’ abbreviated, dialogical, autobiographical fragments. Nor does the text account for its own fragmented structure, not to mention the relationship between these textual features and the court case itself. In its understated generalities, Afeni Shakur’s personal letter thus speaks for the defendants at large, even as it allows her to record her own displeasure with actions of the group into whose illusory image her words fade: it stamps the text with the shame and anger of the accused who would like to confess certain deeds,

not only because they feel these deeds have been justified, but because they also feel that they have failed. Afeni Shakur's letter thus records the despair of the unsaid in a text full of words that speak not for the defendants so much as to the illusion of their camaraderie in the face of jailhouse and courtroom humiliations, for the collective spirit that *Whirlwind* captures is that which never existed; in its reconstituted unity, it traces a dream of the Black Panther Party that never materializes.

Apparition of an Apparition: Cetewayo's Unfinished Autobiography

The fact that the image of unity presented in the collective autobiography of the New York 21 cannot be found in any other literature or documents from the era—that all other documents point instead to the dissolution of the group—raises essential questions concerning the intangible legacy of the Black Panther Party itself. Many of the most visible Panthers become memories before the very eyes of their comrades. Nowhere is this intangible essence more legible than the half-written autobiography contributed by Cetewayo. The sketch of his life story emerges in a written contribution that departs from the dialogical, tape-recorded sessions described by Sundiata Acoli. It does not appear until almost seventy pages into the text, far removed from the rest of the autobiographical sketches, and continues for almost fifteen pages, making it one of the longest continuous entries included in *Whirlwind*. Italicized transitions added by the editors lead the reader across gaps in the unfinished narrative. Cetewayo's former heroin habit is his primary subject; an editor's note explains that the entry has been "Excerpted from Cetewayo's autobiography to be published by Bantam Books" (69). Between the italicized transitions—"...he went with a man named Spike that night for some 'real

stuff...” (76); “*Eventually he got some heroin...*” (82)—Cetewayo’s story recalls classics of the addiction narrative, such as William Burroughs’ early novel, *Junkie* (Ace, 1953): “It was a victory that I was on my feet again. I was in my coat, going out the door. That was a victory. But it was a perverted victory and a negative victory in that I was going out the door to resume my quest for death. I was going out the door to search for a fix” (82).

Aside from Cetewayo’s first comment on Harlem Hospital as “the butcher shop,” the story of his addiction constitutes his only contribution to the text. In both entries, subjectivity names the slide toward death. The above-board, official institution of the hospital facilitates mortality’s arrival as much as the underground, unofficial social network of dealers and addicts that map his neighborhood. In describing the contagious spread of the prison regime’s impenetrable logic, Dylan Rodríguez notes that, “structures of human captivity and bodily punishment, though perhaps most spectacularly actualized at the locality of the jail or prison, necessarily elaborate into other, at times counterintuitive, sites of targeting: the school, the workplace, the targeted neighborhood or community” (58). Like George Jackson’s recollection of his childhood home in Chicago, in which the rigid boundaries of the domestic space anticipate the prison’s strategies of captivity, Cetewayo’s hospitals and Harlem street corners become appendages to the prison’s sanctioning of social death and enforced, profound, immobilizing alienation. Rodríguez’s comments situate Cetewayo’s writing amidst a growing awareness of the ways the criminal legal system ensures the sedimentation of racial and socio-economic differences.

A companion pamphlet to Cetewayo's *Whirlwind* entries published to educate and raise money for the bail fund,³¹ "Capitalism Plus Dope Equals Genocide," presents an analysis of law enforcement policies and forms of institutionalized racism influencing the heroin epidemic in Black communities. This pamphlet anticipates the prison regime's rapid expansion in the years that follow: "The demagogic politicians of Capital Hill have now passed a law which gives narcotics agents the right to crash into a home without knocking," Cetewayo writes, noting the same incursions against privacy rights that Christian Parenti cites almost thirty years later as crucial shifts in the growth of the prison-industrial complex (Cetewayo, 9; Parenti, 10). In addition, Cetewayo notes that the selective enforcement of drug laws and the in-fighting between street gangs over control of the drug trade lead to increased rates of incarceration and a widely disenfranchised Black community, thus anticipating the arguments made by critics of the so-called war on drugs during the crack epidemic of the 1980s. Such insights serve as reminders of the political critiques and programs for social change that the Panthers' legal problems ultimately eclipse. Even the free breakfast program, one of the Panthers' best known efforts at community outreach, dissipates into the fog of the Party's legal problems. The perceptive analytical mind behind Cetewayo's pamphlet turns up missing. His disappearance after making bail signifies the gradual evanescence of the Panthers from consideration as serious socio-political actors in and on history.

In fact, Cetewayo's interest in combating drug addiction has its own legacy, one that suggests the ways in which *Whirlwind* functions as a cipher into which lost histories

³¹ No date appears on the pamphlet itself, but a one-page ad included in the pamphlet asks readers to "Free the New York 21" and provides an address to which contributions for bail money can be sent. A pdf of the pamphlet is available through Michigan State University's online archive: <http://archive.lib.msu.edu/DMC/AmRad/capitalismplusdope.pdf>.

and possibilities have been written. Soon after the case of the New York 21 was decided, several members of the New York Black Panthers helped to start the Lincoln Detox Center, a place “dedicated to combating the plague of heroin addiction afflicting black inner cities.” The Lincoln Detox Center “pursued the Black Panther Party’s agenda of developing programs leading to increased community self-control and self-sufficiency” (Churchill and Vander Wall, 309, 411). The Center also marks an attempt to heal the wounded communal body whose rending *Whirlwind* both conceals and documents. Despite maintaining a low rate of recidivism among the addicts it treated, funding for the Lincoln Detox Center was withdrawn by New York state in 1973; police ousted the group and its supporters when the city rescinded its financial support in 1978. After its forced closure, former Black Panther and Revolutionary New Afrikanist Mutulu Shakur opened an acupuncture-based treatment center. Subsequently he and a number of supporters, all supposedly members of a group called the Revolutionary Armed Task Force (ostensibly comprised of former radical new leftists from a variety of movements, including former Weathermen and Puerto Rican *independentistas*) were arrested as accomplices in the 1981 robbery of a Brinks armored car in West Nyack, New York. The group would be charged with a number of other armed robberies, the money supposedly going to support the treatment center. The “Brinks Case,” as it became known, led to the arrest of numerous activists, including the former New York 21 defendants and *Whirlwind* contributors Kuwasi Balagoon, Jamal (Edward Joseph), and Sekou Odinga. Many of the individuals implicated in the Brinks Case would be convicted under the RICO act; among other things, the accusations against them included orchestrating Assata Shakur’s escape from prison in 1979 (Churchill and Vander Wall, 310-11, 411).

These complex events appear uncanny in light of the corruptions allegations included in Cetewayo's analysis of the New York City drug trade. Cetewayo claims that the police themselves oversee the drug trade and related criminal syndicates, ensuring that its devastating social effects target communities of color, especially African American communities. "It is a tragedy that in New York the greatest gains in the realm of the Black community control have been made by Black racketeers, numbers-game bankers and dope dealers" (7), he writes in his pamphlet:

The plague could never flourish in the Black colonies if it were not for the active support of the occupation forces, the police. That narcotics arrests have increased in no way mitigates the fact that the police give dope peddlers immunity from arrest in exchange for money pay-offs.... narcotics agents... seize a quantity of drugs from one dealer, arrest him, but only turn in a portion of the confiscated drugs for evidence. The rest is given to another dealer who sells it and gives a percentage of the profits to the narcotics agents. (9)

Former Deputy Police Commissioner Robert Daley cites the same activities in his book published soon after Cetewayo's pamphlet, *Target Blue: An Insider's View of the NYPD* (1973). Such transgressions would become the primary focus of the corruptions investigations that rattled the department as the trial of the New York 21 unfolded. Daley reports that the "Commission's chief council... announced that the Police Department had 'no appreciable effect on the flow of heroin in New York City and that one reason for this was police corruption'" (135). As part of the state's inquiry, a "former cop...

claimed that he had forced a man that he had arrested for possession of narcotics to sell a hundred bags of heroin for him on the street” (133).

The department’s nascent efforts to crack down on corruption provided ample motivation for its officers to scapegoat the Black Panthers and the Black Liberation Army as terrorist organizations threatening the security of the city. Then Police Commissioner Patrick V. Murphy responded to the state’s corruption inquiries by pressuring high-ranking precinct officers to eliminate, as much as possible, dishonest cops within their divisions. Daley suggests that Murphy’s efforts were motivated in part by his desire to intervene and expose corruption before it was exposed by the FBI, which had also begun investigating corruption within the NYPD, and which may have been the next law enforcement agency he hoped to direct (169). “It was often said,” Daley writes, “that Murphy was after [J. Edgar] Hoover’s job, and perhaps he was” (167). Although the war on drugs constituted a crucial element of the Republican power structure’s “law and order” political strategy, feeding racist fears of lawless inner city ghettos, criminalizing communities of color and the urban underclass, providing the logic for revocations of privacy rights, and undermining democratic reforms advocating racial, social, and economic justice as reflected in Johnson’s Great Society programs, members of Murphy’s department were not the most skilled executors of such a war, as Serpico’s attempted assassination had demonstrated. In the Black Panthers, the NYPD was provided with an organization that its officers could effectively target and criminalize while deflecting media interest in its own deeply-ingrained culture of graft and corruption. The fact that such an effort would also weaken alliances between Black revolutionary organizations, local minority neighborhoods, and white liberals while

enhancing the NYPD's own influence could only make such an opportunity more desirable.

These overlapping, interlocking histories go largely unmentioned in the brief autobiography that constitutes Cetewayo's main contribution to *Whirlwind*. This absence speaks to the curiously de-contextualized flatness of the information the text presents. For all its supposed efforts to present the "individual" defendants, the contents of *Whirlwind* repeatedly fail to provide a distinctive portrait of any single individual. Cetewayo's extended sketch appears to provide the realistic, illustrative details other sketches lack—partially transcribed conversations, descriptions of his neighborhood in Harlem and some of his neighbors, attempts to capture the sensations he remembers feeling while getting high. And yet, these impressionistic features also remind readers of the many facts left absent from his chronicle. Cetewayo discusses a very brief segment of his life, from his first taste of heroin as an eleven or twelve year-old, to his full-fledged daily habit a few years later. The unanswered question that lies behind Cetewayo's narrative, and that lies behind each of the contributors' entries, concerns the very possibility of telling one's story; at every turn, *Whirlwind* reminds its readers that the fragment structures all discourse, that the fragment is, if nothing else, history's imprint, the stamp *of* and *in* language that time leaves. As an excerpt from an unwritten autobiography about a political dissident whose political organizing efforts remain largely unknown, but whose words anticipate the growth of the prison regime that banishes him, Cetewayo's abbreviated life story maps the trajectory of the Black Panther Party itself. Missing is his political activism and his analysis of the society that surrounds him, just as the party's own political interventions become lost in the covert police

activities and trials that claim its members. The party becomes its own apparition, unwittingly pursuing the path Cetewayo follows as an addict, “out the door to resume [a] quest for death” (*Whirlwind*, 82).

Concealment as Exposure: Kuwasi Balagoon and the Threshold of the Left

This “quest for death” signals a political commitment of which the American left takes note, to which the vast majority of its members can never agree. Just as the pundits and politicians on the right publicly condemn their own collections of extremists—the KKK, for example—in order to claim broader segments of the controversy-averse middle that defines the American political terrain, the left abandons its most radical voices. One such voice amidst the New York 21 belongs to Kuwasi Balagoon, whose writings and activities are usefully prefaced by Murray Kempton’s observation regarding “declared extremes” and the destruction of the Panthers, made as an aside to his account the trail of the New York 21:

American liberalism has never been comfortable unless provided with some pariah to its left for good men to repudiate and thus allow liberalism its claim to a place somewhere in that center between declared extremes. The Panthers had become as essential to liberals as objects of scorn and evidence of sound discrimination as the Communists had been when Senator Joe McCarthy’s mace still had its weight. (171-172)

As much as Kuwasi Balagoon seems acutely aware of the phenomenon Kempton describes, and as much as he seems to become increasingly dedicated to embodying the

“declared extremes” against which others recoil, his writings nonetheless mask fundamental aspects of his identity.

As previously noted, *Whirlwind* erroneously lists Balagoon’s given name as Walter Johnson instead of Donald Weems. This apparently innocent error nonetheless serves as a useful emblem for Balagoon’s distinctive narrative contributions, in which substitutions and replacements pepper passages that offer personal disclosures. This pattern of elusiveness appears to have had very practical purpose. Balagoon’s activities as an underground revolutionary would continue long after the conclusion of the case against the New York 21. Despite the notoriety of the trial itself, and despite the fact that he remained a high-profile target of law enforcement officials as a self-declared member of a variety of underground revolutionary groups, Balagoon managed to escape from prison on two separate occasions. After he was charged and convicted as an accomplice in the famous 1981 robbery of a Brinks armored car (known as the “Brinks Case”), he spent the rest of his life behind bars, working to organize his fellow prisoners until his death in prison in 1987.

In *Whirlwind*, Balagoon’s entries master those acts of exposure that also conceal. While subsequent writings by Balagoon generally continue in this vein, other texts appear to alter this strategy in deliberate and meaningful ways. In his political and literary explorations of concealment and exposure, Balagoon thus provides further insight into the structure of apparitional subjectivity that informs *Whirlwind*. His most memorable contribution to *Whirlwind* appears as part of a reminiscence about school:

The third grade was a very memorable year. The teacher was one of the most beautiful women on the face of the planet. Memory brings her right

into focus: she was thin down to her hips, which flowered and tapered down to ample legs. And although at school I waded into my dreams, my attention came to her and daydreams included her. I remember her saying, “Donald, stop looking at my—feet.” I sang songs to her in my dreams. She, being concerned, kept me from going to recess and kept me after school, drilling the lessons to me—but I wasn’t very receptive, too stunned by her beauty to understand anything else. My mother, concerned as ever, pressured me to my studies after going to parent-teacher meetings but—zonk.

I remember one day she wore a red dress to school with no bra. I came out of a daydream just long enough to see one of her small but ample, succulent breasts fall from the dress. Good God Almighty—it sprang up and stared out into my eyes. Embarrassed, she was caught off guard. She whipped it right back behind the bright red barrier, then followed my straight line of vision until our eyes met, then nixed it and me off. One could tell that she didn’t feel like working that day, but in time it passed. Let it be understood, the value of the whole experience, especially at such a young age. (104-105).

The transformation of the teacher’s disassembled body echoes the text’s own structure: the uncovered, animated nipple that stares back at Balagoon mirrors the prosthetic function of narrative throughout the text. In its absence, narrative reduces the body to its parts: the body of the collective to its members, its members to pieces of narrative that constitute, in turn, their collective narrative. In Balagoon’s paragraphs, memory projects

the process through which parts of the body are replaced by their narrated substitutes onto the teacher's body. As parts of her disassembled female form, her hips, her "ample legs," and her "succulent breasts," become a single surveying eye, Balagoon conjures the seemingly taboo topic of surveillance that shadows *Whirlwind's* amputated narratives. Like the nipple that "stare[s] out into [Balagoon's] eyes," *Whirlwind* confronts the government's gaze, freely exposing details of the contributors' lives that covert agents have been seeking in the years leading up to the trial. And yet, like the supposed revelations contained in other entries, the blatant eroticism of this encounter, emblemized by the literally and figuratively colorful detail of the teacher's red dress, conceals as much as it reveals.

In this act of revealing-concealing, the red dress episode reproduces a pattern that repeats throughout much of the text, in which the declared purpose or intention of a given cultural institution masks its actual function (thus the previously noted role of Harlem Hospital as the neighborhood "butcher shop"). This pattern also holds for many of those sections dedicated to pedagogical experiences. School educates the authors in realities, histories, and socio-cultural facts entirely different from its intended lessons or the purported purpose of those lessons. Many of the authors' anecdotes describe schools as primers for racism's inevitability. "The school in my hometown in rural Texas was like thousands of others, a monument to the way of keeping blacks, Mexicans, or any oppressed minority ignorant, uneducated, unskilled, and, in fact, miseducated," writes Sundiata Acoli (110). Arriving in New York City after spending her earliest years shuttling between family homes in North Carolina and Virginia, Afeni Shakur finds herself for the first time surrounded by white students: "A kid named Myron Cohen said

that I looked like something from outer space and I kicked his ass.... I was really scared of all those white people around me. I wasn't used to that." (103). "Every day going to and from school we had to pass the white school... Every day some cracker kids would be waiting by their school, calling us and our mothers every derogatory name under the sun," recalls Lumumba Shakur (109). The disappointments, humiliations, and violent episodes recalled in these anecdotes establish a consistency. As a result of the similarity between such recollections, Balagoon's narrative of sexual awakening—if it *is* a narrative of sexual awakening—becomes all the more distinctive.

The oddity of this purported recollection concerns the language in which it is retold. What *is* "the value of the whole experience"? Balagoon's language furnishes mysteries through its disorderly divulgences. It ties itself into logical knots with short, declarative sentences that betray themselves before reaching their conclusions. The use of what rhetoricians call anacoluthon (the lack of grammatical sequence, employed in sentences such as, "Embarrassed, she was caught off guard") and anastrophe (the transposition of normal word order, exemplified by the sentence that reads, "Let it be understood, the value of the whole experience") dislodge the recollection's clarity from the sanctuary of sense perception and nudge it toward the incoherence of the unconscious. This movement underscores the way that linguistic play allows the contributors to reformulate the introduction's claims regarding *Whirlwind's* function as the purveyor of individual identities: the text is, on the contrary, an exploration of the political possibilities contained in identity's mysteries, a testament to the deceptiveness of individuality as a concept, and a vehicle for personal expression through collectivity, all captured as a result of bearing witness to personal destruction. Such priorities may

partially make amends for the anti-feminist leanings of the passage in question; Balagoon's recollection appears to stage the incidental self-exposure by an authority figure as if to channel the mechanics by which the establishment accidentally reveals the power vested in its covert operatives.

As much as the confounding, disassembling linguistic features that “stare out” from Balagoon's anecdote deserve thorough examination, his subsequent activities require careful scrutiny. His *Whirlwind* contributions preface a career equally dedicated to leadership in revolutionary struggle, self-sacrifice, and deception. In April of 1969, when the NYPD began its predawn raids to arrest the Black Panthers who would become known as the New York 21, Kuwasi Balagoon awaited trial in a Newark jail on robbery charges along with Richard Harris, another defendant in the case. Balagoon's status as a prisoner in a bordering state resulted in his absence from pretrial hearings. Over the course of the trial, his lawyers would successfully argue that this absence made him deserving of a separate trial altogether (Zimroth 1974, 13; Maitland 1981). Eventually, the court would grant this request; remarkably, less than five months after the other members of the New York 21 had been acquitted of all charges, Balagoon would plead guilty to assisting an unnamed sniper who supposedly fired on police on January 17, 1969. A *Times* article reporting Balagoon's conviction notes that “The allegation that a shootout had taken place... was an important event at the trial of the 13 defendants who were acquitted. It consumed several weeks of testimony from the patrolmen who were fired upon” (Vasquez 1971). The shootout was one the few accusations that included physical evidence, as opposed to statements regarding possible future acts of resistance

supposedly made by the defendants in the presence of police informants; as such, it formed an essential part of the prosecution's more general charges of conspiracy.

Balagoon's narrative presence as a member of the New York 21 thus masks the legal efforts to separate him from the group during the trial itself. His guilty plea and subsequent writings also distance him from the defense strategy of proclaimed innocence; Balagoon is one of a handful of revolutionaries from this era who freely admit to having engaged in many of the activities of which the government accuses them. Others, such as Marilyn Buck and David Gilbert, would become colleagues of Balagoon's, sharing his understanding of the American government as a criminal, colonizer, and terrorist. For Balagoon, such an understanding suggests that many forms of resistance, including strategic "appropriations" such as bank robberies, might be justified (Hudson 1983).

In the context of his life's work, Balagoon's memory of his teacher's self-exposure becomes more curious. In the recollection itself, his perception of his teacher's innocence vanishes alongside her pupil's; Balagoon's identity as a member of the acquitted New York 21 similarly vanishes from almost all documents besides the text of *Whirlwind* itself, in which his presence suggests his own acquittal. By pleading guilty, Balagoon steps out from the shadow of the group and of *Whirlwind* as a text, even as he enters prison. In subsequent statements and writings, Balagoon pushes the act of exposure ever-further. After his arrest in 1981 for his part in the "Brinks Case," Balagoon refused to participate in the trial proceedings. Instead, he declared himself a prisoner of war and tried to explain his position to the court in his opening and closing statements. His words reverse the standard claims of innocence so often heard in cases of

leftist radicals, openly embracing the “declared extremes” Kempton’s American liberalism disavows by attempting to explain the logic behind “expropriation raids”:

i believe that the people... deserve an explanation of the event, the expropriation and related actions that took place on October 20th, 1981. Not a mere criminal defense in relation to it, that type of legal mumbo jumbo could have matters more confused than ever... it is not the people but the United States Government and its oppressive apparatus that we are at war against.... Expropriation raids are a method used in every revolution by those who have got to get the resources from the haves to carry on armed struggle.... (*a soldier’s story*, 59)

These people who judge us should take a city bus or a cab through the South Bronx, the Central Ward of Newark, North Philadelphia... and see if they can note a robbery in progress. See if they recognize the murder of innocent people. (*a soldier’s story*, 66)

Balagoon died of AIDS in prison in 1987; in one of the dedications to him contained in the posthumous collection of his writings, *a soldier’s story*, an associate describes him as “closeted,” and mentions his transvestite lover. These facts of his life had remained unknown to many who knew him, even those within the movements he championed (Starr 2003, 18). The exposures that mark Balagoon’s writings thus disguise fundamental, yet closeted, parts of his identity.

Here one must once again note the fingerprints of the government’s covert operatives on the blockages that prevent more forthcoming personal writings: in the summer of 1970, Huey Newton’s call to unite with members of any and all oppressed

groups, and specifically the gay community, resulted in yet another FBI COINTELPRO operation. The FBI fabricated letters ostensibly written by Panthers critical of Newton's remarks and thus designed to alarm homophobic Party members, ideally isolating Newton and alienating his supporters (Grady-Willis, 374). The teacher's exposed breast that distinguishes Balagoon's schoolroom memory underscores the virtual absence of discussions concerning gender and sexuality throughout *Whirlwind*, a deficiency confirmed in Afeni Shakur's previously noted reflections. This deficiency points to the Black Panther Party's notoriously overdetermined masculine posturing and male chauvinism, its apparent blindness to the possible ways its discourse might be enriched through an engagement with the politics of gender and sexuality. The heterosexual dynamic the exposed breast operates within also gestures to the sexual identity of which Kuwasi Balagoon dares not speak while participating in the liberation movements that define his life story. The red dress episode presages his subsequent acts of textual self-sacrifice and self-exposure; yet even these acts mask, conceal, or closet vital aspects of his identity. Balagoon's texts assert the primacy of the butcher shop into which selfhood vanishes, out of which only pieces or prosthesis emerge. If Balagoon offers an unexpected glimpse of flesh as his preferred vision, this same fragment of personal narrative provides him with the cover to pass as yet another Panther, one part of the apparitional body politic *Whirlwind* constructs.

The Privilege of Preservation: Innovation and Collective Autobiography

In 1998, more than twenty-five years after the publication of *Look for Me in the Whirlwind*, a group of American poets published the first portion of a serial

autobiographical project. This project, known as *The Grand Piano*, announces itself as “an ongoing experiment in collective autobiography by ten writers originally identified with Language poetry in San Francisco” (*The Grand Piano I*, 70). Like *Whirlwind*, *The Grand Piano* is comprised of alternating autobiographical narratives contributed by individual writers to create a collective textual body. Unlike *Whirlwind*, however, the authors of *The Grand Piano* have mapped the order and frequency of their individual contributions in advance. Each volume reprints a passage explaining the calculations behind these contributions; in addition, each contribution is clearly marked with the initials of its author. Although *The Grand Piano* identifies itself as a “collective autobiography” just as *Whirlwind* does, its premeditated structure and typographical layout disallow the confusion of identities that *Whirlwind* courts.

Thus is the apparent desire to disrupt traditional modes of autobiographical writing contradicted by the great importance *The Grand Piano* places on preserving and reinforcing the particular, individual personas attached to its creators. The contributing writers—Bob Perelman, Barrett Watten, Steve Benson, Carla Harryman, Tom Mandel, Ron Silliman, Kit Robinson, Lyn Hijinian, Rae Armantrout, and Ted Pearson—hold venerable places as elite members of the predominately white, ostensibly left-leaning American avant-garde poetry scene. Lyn Hejinian is a professor in the English Department of the University of California, Berkeley; Bob Perelman, the University of Pennsylvania; Rae Armantrout, the University of California, San Diego; Barrett Watten, Wayne State University; Ron Silliman’s poetry blog has been described as “(arguably) the most influential English-language blog on the web that is devoted to contemporary

poetry and poetics.”³² Considering these accomplishments, it is not surprising that the so-called “Language school” of poetry to which these writers belong (and about which they write in *Piano*) remains a powerful if controversial force in the field of innovative American writing. Perhaps the writers’ respective public images represent investments too valuable and promise future returns too great to surrender to the fashions that more genuine forms of “collective autobiography” require. Perhaps the adaptation of *Whirlwind*’s dynamic form into a more regimented, systematic structure (thereby better preserving the myth of the author) would be less troubling were it not for the fact that *The Grand Piano*’s creators owe their considerable literary reputations to anti-establishment claims consistently made in and by their own works.

The emergence of *The Grand Piano* is important for readers of *Whirlwind* not only because *Piano* shares a superficial appreciation for collective autobiography, but because it threatens to carve from America’s limited cultural resources additional space for authors whose works already absorb tremendous critical energy. The outsider status they claim while doing so further calls into question their adaptation of “collective autobiography”; as *Whirlwind* languishes, out of print and disappearing from collections as library copies turn up for sale to the highest online bidders, *The Grand Piano*’s authors shore up their own literary reputations as foremost purveyors of revolutionary poetic forms. The ironies run deeper still. Not only does *The Grand Piano* not invent the form whose creative design it so carefully charts; in addition, its authors repeatedly invoke

³² Information regarding the purported influence of websites remains, as of this writing, difficult to procure from academically-recognized, reputable sources. This particular quotation is taken from the publicly reviewed and edited wikipedia entry on Silliman, as composed on January 21, 2008: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ron_Silliman.

“politics” as a motivating concern contributing to the innovative, experimental forms of poetry they have credited themselves with inventing.

Thus does Barrett Watten devote considerable attention to the emergence of the Language school in the aftermath of the American war in Vietnam and the Free Speech Movement. In *The Grand Piano II*, he announces the volume’s theme will be “Politics.” According to their own accounts, the writers represented in *The Grand Piano* came together in San Francisco in the late 1970s; the group’s members arrived in the city as refugees from various failed social, political, and personal agendas, migrating from whatever broken pieces of the New Left had held them elsewhere. Tom Mandel cites his visit to the room in which Fred Hampton was assassinated as the event that prompted his move out of Chicago and that led him, eventually, to San Francisco. In a statement that simultaneously reflects on his pilgrimage to the scene of the crime and on the poetry he and the other *Piano* authors create thereafter, Mandel writes, “We walked on boards the Panthers had laid across puddles of blood. We were there to witness and be part of what we witnessed” (48).

What does it mean to think of the Panthers as those who lay boards over puddles of blood across which white poets walk? After reflecting upon an encounter with Kathleen Cleaver during an “informal session” that never gets explained, but that seems to have some function related to political activism, Barrett Watten comments obliquely on the relationship between failed liberation politics and the gradual establishment of the poetry community in San Francisco: “In the ruins of liberation, the absent center of a destroyed downtown as equivalent to a historical disaster. Later, the migration of poets to the City, would-be site for their art” (17). Do these lines refer to San Francisco’s 1906

earthquake and its subsequent rebuilding around an “absent center,” or are they addressed to some other development in the history of San Francisco? Are “the ruins of liberation” the site for “the absent center of a destroyed downtown,” or does the perception of such a center as “a historical disaster” emerge amidst “the ruins of liberation”? Watten’s apparent mistrust of narrative—as if, by condensing and moderating experience, coherent storytelling necessarily constitutes a political threat—effectively undermines his attempts to re-write the Language school as a politically-driven movement.

If a clear relationship exists between radical politics and Language school poetics, one wonders at Watten’s difficulty in articulating it. This difficulty includes the attempt to correct whatever personal resistance to coherent narrative Watten may harbor, though this effort has proved no less problematic. For their part, other *Piano* contributors similarly hypothesize relationships between political concerns and poetic development. Steve Benson wonders, “How much the intensive problematization of social status and responsibility in that period subsequent to the Vietnam war, the black power movement, second-wave feminism, cybernetic modeling, and the burgeoning rot of consumerism may have contributed to” poetic experiments. At “The Opening of the Field: A Conference on North American Poetry in the 1960s,” Watten gave a presentation on the relationship between the Language school and the Free Speech Movement that resulted in a lengthy, contentious debate with Amiri Baraka.

In her analysis of these events, Kristin Prevallet writes, “Although these two poets were supposedly speaking the same language, there was an absolute breach on their ability to communicate with one another. Watten was prepared for a theoretical discussion that would clarify the points he was making in his paper. Baraka, on the other

hand, was prepared for a verbal confrontation that would assert his position as a political activist who had witnessed a very different counter-cultural movement than Watten had presented... and neither seemed willing to listen, or learn from the other.” Unfortunately, the eruption of this debate suggests that the poetry community has internalized government counterintelligence efforts aimed at destroying alliances between white liberal elites and Black revolutionary thinkers. This deeply disturbing development indicates the need for members of this community to seriously rethink their positions.

Such rethinking might set the stage for future studies that incorporate *Whirlwind*'s generally unfamiliar voices as vital addendums to the very different positions occupied by Baraka and Watten. The authors of *Whirlwind* seem to feel that writing *anything* is politically unsavory unless that writing bears a direct and indisputable relationship to a political movement. In a citation that measures the distance between Watten's version of history and the “declared extremes” of the American left whose ideas he cannot countenance, Kuwasi Balagoon attempts to define the kind of writing that might prove politically meaningful. The example he discovers appears in Amiri Baraka's (then LeRoi Jones') poem, “Black Magic”: ““The magic words are: Up against the wall motherfucker this is a stick up! Or: Smash the window at night...”” (quoted by Balagoon in *Whirlwind*, 333). For Balagoon, writing is not the answer to political dilemmas, it is a surrogate activity that prevents a descent into despair or utter incoherence, an undertaking of last resort or a means to an ends; writing is not, in and of itself, a worthy undertaking.

Whatever claims *The Grand Piano* contributors may make regarding the impersonal, systemically alienating functions of language that bring them together—not to mention the institutions, government and private, corporate and owner-operated, that

provide the resources for poetry to function as such—their project is built upon not only the perceived importance of poetry, but their own perceived importance of *their own* poetry. Considering the positions of authority held by these authors within the venerable cultural institutions that determine what texts really do matter, who can argue with them? As for Watten’s “attempt to situate a contextual history for language poetry,” Prevallet writes, such an attempt “neglects the totalizing impulses that necessitate the drive towards establishing such a history. And unwillingly, [this project] becomes a participant in the very authoritarian structures that [it] seeks to undermine.” Watten’s work, Prevallet notes, has repeatedly sought to “reveal the material power of language in order to expose very real divisions between oppressive structures and the language used to maintain them.”³³ His desire to prove that political concerns lead to the development of the Language school reaches an impasse when he presides over this history as an authoritative master whose prestige depends upon his disavowal of the cultural and institutional values that anoint him with the power to speak. If despair over the failure of the New Left leads the writers of *The Grand Piano* to poetry as a refuge and, if possible, a medium for some kind of movement, however select the community, it must be noted that the writers of *Whirlwind* have no such opportunity. The community their text re-imagines has already vanished; even as they try to trace its contours in narrative, phantoms their language recalls drift as glimmers against history’s darkness.

Although the *Piano* writers repeatedly invoke political motivations for the disruptions of literary convention that their reputation depends upon, such claims point to the disparity between the “radical forms” exhibited in their texts and the seemingly

³³ Prevallet’s comments appeared in the web journal *Jacket 12*, July 2000.

conventional, vaguely liberal political views their writings frequently reflect. In contrast, composing their collective autobiography is the only means the *Whirlwind* authors have to construct the community that the state has set out, with its overwhelming resources and virtual immunity to the rule of law, to dismantle. Theirs is a creative act without recourse to history, nor institutional, nor archival preservation, a composition that serves as the surrogate for the political movement the state has effectively destroyed before it fully began. If both groups of writers come into writing as refugees from the New Left, there remains nonetheless a difference over the relationship of writing to the political labor that organizing resistance movements requires.

The ghostly quality of the *Whirlwind* narrative, its apparitional effect, recalls Marcus Garvey's spectral presence in the text as the author of the quotation that provides the book's title and its epigraph. Like the New York 21, Garvey was arrested after a government counterintelligence operation. The Department of Justice's forerunner to the FBI, then known as the Bureau of Investigation and headed by future domestic surveillance and FBI czar J. Edgar Hoover, employed its first black agents in order to infiltrate Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA).³⁴ While caged for his supposed crimes, Garvey wrote the letter from which *Whirlwind* draws its epigraph: "Look for me in the whirlwind or the storm, look for me all around you, for, with God's grace, I shall come and bring with me countless millions of black slaves who have died in America and the West Indies and the millions in Africa to aid you in the fight for Liberty, Freedom and Life" (239). Not only does Garvey's arrest and prison

³⁴ Winston A. Grady-Willis discusses this operation in his contribution to *The Black Panther Party Reconsidered*, ed. by Charles E. Jones (Black Classic Press, 1998); more thorough treatments of the same incidents can be found in Theodore Kornweibel's *Federal Surveillance of Afro-Americans, 1917-1925* (University Publications of America, 1986).

sentence prefigure the infiltration and arrest of the New York Panthers by NYPD undercover officers almost fifty years later; when Garvey's own jailhouse letter introduces the text, a literary lineage connects *Whirlwind* to a nearly forgotten archive of resistance and revolutionary imaginings.

Thus recalled by the New York 21, Garvey's ghost unearths his imaginary army from underworlds in which legacies of genocide reside. The apparitional army Garvey envisions as reinforcements for the struggle waged by the living presages the invocation of what I call apparitional subjectivity in *Whirlwind*. As Sharon Holland reminds us in her meditations on the hospital and modernity, the definition of death changes with science and history; in *Whirlwind*, the assurance life brings of death's absence erodes. Apparitional subjectivity provides a provisional answer to Holland's question, if "the dead figure as the folk with no recourse to discourse... if they have no discourse of their own, no defense, whose discourse must they *borrow* in order to speak?" *Apparitional subjectivity* describes a textual strategy of countersigning, interleaving, and counterposing: in the lending of the autobiographical act to those who remain silent, personal narratives cross over and confound individual voices, claim collective origins, and construct a dialogical portrait both detailed *and* generic; apparitional subjectivity names a process that carefully de-composes autobiography as a genre, that lingers in the butcher shop of subjectivity, that nominates the very concept of individuality as a foundation myth helping to formulate America's legacy of racial injustice.

As a strategy for resistance, apparitional subjectivity offers collective shelter to individuals the state brands as enemies and attempts to neutralize; as revolutionary practice, apparitional subjectivity assumes the state's own stance toward the

criminalization of the group. By acquiescing to and facilitating the disassembling of individual identity, apparitional subjectivity attempts to establish a revolutionary potential. *Whirlwind* asserts that apparitional subjectivity articulates its discourse in the uncomfortable no-man's-land between the living and the dead, the speaking and the silent; its purpose is to tunnel under the confines of personal, autobiographical narrative, to reconvene as a collective political force fully alive, yet moving in the presence of the dead, those whose murders at the hands of the state make collective action imperative. In this way, the apparitional subjectivity in *Whirlwind* captures the collective identity George Jackson seeks in his effort to compose ego-less letters; in the chapter that follows, it defines the camouflaged characters Assata Shakur embodies while living underground with other former New York Panthers as the consequences of the trial against the New York 21 hit home. The methodology of disguise and artifice that defines Shakur's shape-shifting autobiographical text refigures apparitional subjectivity as a personal directive to refuse the static identity that the state relies upon in tracking its citizens. Narrating the disorderly unfolding of her manifold personas progresses toward the vanishing point at which fact merges into fiction and history becomes myth.

3 The Vanishing Subject Disappearing Acts and Revolutionary Masks in *Assata: An Autobiography*

The act of Uniformity

ejected her

and informers at her heels

Citations remain abbreviated

Often a shortcut

stands for Chapter

(Susan Howe, *The Nonconformist's Memorial*, 5)

The autobiographical project of Assata Shakur's book, *Assata: An Autobiography* (1987), is a function of history's deletion. The text this nonconforming narrator constructs takes shape amidst history's effacement, the untold or forgotten, the compromised or willfully distorted. Beginning with a dismembered historical narrative, Shakur's autobiography circles around a homeless subject, an uncanny subject, a subject lost in the mysteries of history's absences. "Historical imagination," Susan Howe writes, "gathers in the missing" (*Frame Structures*, 3). The missing defines Shakur herself: since her escape from prison on November 2, 1979, the author has disappeared, reportedly living in Cuba as she remains one of the FBI's most wanted fugitives, a fact that strangely matches the undocumented status of her birth. "The FBI cannot find any evidence that I was born," Shakur writes. "On my FBI Wanted poster, they list my birth date as July 16th, 1947, and, in parentheses, "not substantiated by birth records" (18).

The absence of an accurate historical record, “the fact, say, that Americans tend to have such a shabby and thin understanding of the basics of even our most recent history,” as Robert Reid-Pharr has written, becomes the essential private and public problem that drives Shakur’s anti-narrative. “If it is indeed true that depthless alienation is the sum of the American experience,” Reid-Pharr suggests, “it is also true that this alienation is, in a sense, our birthright, the only basis we have for the production of a national culture” (103). In *Assata*, alienation-as-birthright initiates a cycle through which the author loses herself over and over again. In its legalistic sense alienation refers to the transfer of property, and in Shakur’s autobiography her own identity becomes the article of transfer. Indeed, her autobiography might be read as an extended meditation on the possibilities of self-image, once the individual relinquishes her claim to that self-image, acknowledges the transfer of this now alien property to the society and culture that claims it, and begins to explore the political and social utility now vested in that self-image. In the process of Shakur’s investigation, the self as property of another emerges as a legacy of missing history. The practice of erasure that produces the foundation myths and fundamental narratives of American society also impinges upon the individual, silencing narratives that do not acquiesce to the sanitized storylines already provided. *Assata* thus proposes that to narrate history is also to participate in history’s absence, to practice factual seepage in order to maintain the purity of the fable. Shakur herself, exiled in Cuba, evidences this seepage, reminds us of the disappearance or escape of the very subjects that historical narrative offers to chronicle when it attempts to document human time.

If the foundational event of the history Shakur explores is her own birth, this undocumented event rests alongside other historical absences her text recalls or ignores

just as strategically. Shakur's autobiographical project challenges the public record, attempting to undo a series of narratives that eclipse her vision of history. Her effort recalls the textual poetics of Susan Howe, whose layered compositions include citations from mostly forgotten documents that challenge or contradict the foundation myths central to American history and identity. In the autobiographical introduction to *Frame Structures: Early Poems* (1974-1979), Howe writes of the link between her own family nickname and the slave-trading vessel owned by an ancestor known as "Captain Jim":

In 1791 the first federal grand jury in Rhode Island charged [...] James d'Wolf with throwing a female African slave overboard during the Middle Passage because she was sick with smallpox [...] "Captain Jim" already had a reputation for having slaves thrown over the side. He enjoyed cutting their hands off at the wrist personally, if they clung to the taffrails. So he lay low until 1795, when a more lenient district attorney nol-prossed the case. When this murderous ancestor could finally afford to buy his own slave ship he christened her *Sukey*. *Sukey* is my nickname. No one in the family [...] ever called me Susan. (20-21)

As Howe continues to investigate her family history, she discovers an etymology rich with references to long-forgotten incidents of colonialist violence. Her family farm, "Weetamoe," took its name from "Weetamoo," the wife of Metacomet. Known to European settlers as King Philip, Metacomet was the target of the first extensive British war on Native Americans. When Metacomet was killed, Howe reminds us, his "head was exhibited on a pole in Plymouth [...] for twenty-five years" (22). As Metacomet's severed head was being made into a town ornament displaying the savagery of its settlers,

Weeatamoo drowned while attempting to evade soldiers. “The tide washed her body up on land that eventually became the Howe farm,” Howe writes. These discoveries alert Howe to the wealth of violence and travesties vested in the names, places, and objects that surround her memories of childhood and that continue to populate her present. In the same text she describes a carved ivory pagoda her grandfather kept in his apartment:

It must have been acquired in China by a predatory d’Wolf or an entrepreneurial Quincy [another one of Howe’s ancestors] and brought back to Bristol or Boston as loot. I don’t know how or why it arrives [...] Each fantastically carved stage or floor of the pagoda consists of a miniature room with a door but even the walls are open as a sieve is. A tiny ivory bell hangs in each entrance. If there is a sudden vibration in the dining room on our side of being, if someone speaks to suddenly, even a draft from the window is enough, all the skeletal bells shake as if the present can coexist in thin paper dress.

This pagoda, family heirloom rich with historical encounters now lost, silent but certain keeper of some undisclosed evidence, witness to an anonymous or undocumented exploitative exchange, provides a fitting image for the chapter that follows, in which the autobiographical act shakes the “skeletal bells” of history. Howe’s antique curio animated by the energy of the present maps the pattern by which history repeatedly emerges in Assata Shakur’s autobiography. In the effort to situate her story, Shakur uncovers an American history as mysterious as the Howe family’s pagoda, vibrating with commotion from “our side of being.” For Shakur, the act of self-representation requires a return to the alien, unspoken history Howe’s anecdote brings to life. In the process of

return, history eviscerates the individual voice, sounding in its place a series of lapses and silences, absences and misrepresentations; indeed, one value of self-representation framed by history is the forfeiture of an isolated vision in the effort to reconstruct a collective experience. In the diminishing of the individual, Shakur locates a potential strategy for engagement that transforms untold histories into new politics of resistance; through a vanishing lyrical “I,” her politics reposition the autobiographical act as the collective enunciation of history’s forgotten.

A Brief History of JoAnne Chesimard as Told By the FBI

A Black Panther called to public attention through a series of newspaper and magazine articles, JoAnne Chesimard, Shakur’s doppelgänger, already claims Shakur’s identity before Shakur introduces herself. Ironically, this doppelgänger—the criminalized identity of JoAnne Chesimard—*already* risks disappearance. Although JoAnne Chesimard’s criminality at one time spurs a New York City-wide search, replete with shotgun-armed plainclothes policemen; results in her appearance on the FBI’s most wanted list and motivates her move underground; and ultimately leads to her shooting and arrest for the murder of a New Jersey State Trooper, most analyses of *Assata* ignore the facts surrounding her criminalization. This deletion would not be so troubling if Shakur’s own text were not so carefully constructed in the shadow of JoAnne Chesimard’s government-sanctioned narrative. In the careful encounter she arranges between her narrative and that of the government, Shakur questions the reliance upon narrative as history’s vehicle for truth. To understand *Assata*’s deployment and

disruption of narrative tactics thus requires an understanding of the history that surrounds JoAnne Chesimard's "authorized" biographical sketch.

The story of JoAnne Chesimard emerges through the apparent collusion of various government agencies, the police force and the criminal justice system, as well as the media. It contains a wealth of accusations with little evidentiary support. Nonetheless, it is this story to which the front matter of *Assata* gestures in a curious document entitled "Trial Chronology," which lists a series of crimes, the dates they occurred, the dates Shakur went to trial for those crimes, and the dates of the court decisions in the cases. Despite the straightforward chronological arrangement of this document, the seven crimes and court cases listed do not map the text of *Assata*, nor do they coincide with events chronicled in the author's self-history. The trial chronology is presumably presented as a register of prosecutorial zeal, intended to archive various attempts to convict Shakur of some crime. It also restages within the boundaries of the book her progression as a public figure: in her own book, just as in her life preceding its composition, an official record identifies Shakur as a criminal charged with various violent crimes. Only after this identity is established can her story be told. Still, this trial chronology barely scratches the surface of the extensive criminalized character sketches presented by the media before, during, and after her trials.

As a Black Panther and a member of the Black Liberation Army, JoAnne Chesimard's criminalization is intimately connected to the widespread criminalization of black revolutionaries in general. The enduring public image of black radicalism as solidified through law enforcement and media campaigns of the late Sixties and early Seventies remains a combination of sexual prowess, political incompetence, and outright

criminality. Shakur's autobiography both assumes this reductive identity and refuses it, narrating the experience of criminalization while also contributing to the iconic image of the Black revolutionary. Michael E. Staub has traced the emergence of the criminality linked to this image to media coverage of the Black Panther Party in particular, and to the year 1970, in which a series of articles in the *New York Times*, *New York* magazine, the *Atlantic*, *Harper's*, and elsewhere produced "a set of metaphoric images and associations that were both vigorously fearmongering *and* sniggeringly derisive" (59). Such an image—quite literally *the* image—is, as we will see, essential to Shakur's autobiography and to the court cases that envelop her, in which photographs are repeatedly used as evidence of her guilt. As Staub points out, iconic photographs of the Black Panther Party materialized in conjunction with the phenomenon of New Journalism, a developing form that allowed for the incorporation of "fictional techniques," including "the development of dramatic storylines, the elaborate descriptions of settings particularly through the accumulation of what [Tom] Wolfe called the 'details of status life' of the characters, the invitation for readers to identify with the characters and/or the narrator, the reconstruction of 'realistic' dialogue and [...] the liberty to speculate on the most intimate (and ultimately sexual) aspects of the characters' lives" (61).

As we shall see, at the same time that the "fictional techniques" Staub attributes to New Journalism provided the literary forms for denunciations of Black revolutionaries and their white supporters, police campaigns against the Black Panther Party became increasingly sophisticated. In New York City, an extraordinary collaboration between law enforcement and the media enveloped Shakur's first public biographer, Robert Daley. Daley, a novelist, former *New York Times* journalist, and, for one year, a police

official despite having had no previous law enforcement experience, Daley's news conferences and his subsequent writings about his year in the department would help define the Black Liberation Army for the media and police departments across the country. Indeed, it is his decision to proceed with a press conference accusing nine members of the Black Liberation Army of assassinating two policemen that he suggests may have contributed to his forced resignation (*Target Blue* 464-471). Overcoming the reservations of some high-ranking officers who do not believe in the conspiracy theory Daley has constructed, and who may not have been allowed access to the FBI documents he claims to have seen,³⁵ Daley dramatizes his diplomatic victory in convincing Police Commissioner Patrick V. Murphy to proceed with the press conference: "I began to argue that the Police Commissioner owed it to himself, to every cop in the city, and also to every cop in the country to give the widest possible dissemination to information about this conspiracy" (464). Throughout his articles he appropriates the techniques of New Journalism described by Staub, focusing on his own role as confidant and chronicler of the police officers he heroizes.

The most significant of Daley's articles appeared in *New York*, a magazine Staub nominates as one of the forerunners in New Journalism publishing, and was republished in *Target Blue*, Daley's popular retelling of his year in the police department. Daley named the book after his article for *New York* magazine on the Black Liberation Army subtitled "The Story Behind the Police Assassinations." In his book, as in the article, Daley names JoAnne Chesimard as the "soul of the gang [the Black Liberation Army is

³⁵ Daley's comments on his access to FBI files suggest that he had some special status not conferred on other members of the force, including the Police Commissioner himself. "We were both briefed by the same men," he writes in reference to the police assassination, "by [Chief of Detectives Albert] Seedman, and by Chief of Intelligence Arthur Grubert; though I, in addition, had by now studied police and FBI reports from other cities" (460).

the “gang” to which Daley refers], the mother hen who kept them together, kept them moving, kept them shooting” (467). The image of the Black radical that dogs Shakur thus emerged through ego-driven news reportage that disavowed hard-boiled fact in favor of fiction’s writerly techniques and craft-powered narratives. The complete scope of the media-driven indictment of JoAnne Chesimard as a Black radical is significant: there are hundreds of articles in the *New York Times* leading up to her trials, in addition to hundreds of articles printed in other popular newspapers in the New York metropolitan area. These articles take Daley’s accusations at face value, repeating accusations that Assata Shakur—otherwise known as Jo Ann, JoAnne, or Joanne Chesimard, depending on the article—committed a variety of violent crimes, including bank robberies and police assassinations. The articles occasionally include photographs of Chesimard that are not, as it turns out, photographs of the individual called JoAnne Chesimard or the individual calling herself Assata Shakur.

The use of the media as a tool for the disruption of political activities and an extension of American law enforcement and can be traced back at least as far as 1919, when J. Edgar Hoover engineered the Palmer Raids against left-wing thinkers and activists across the country.³⁶ By the time Hoover confronted the resistance movements of the Sixties and Seventies as head of the FBI, the agency’s ability to turn police actions into public spectacles and media events had advanced significantly. In the face of a rigorous and clandestine program of disruption, the Black Panther Party stood little chance of success; in retrospect, for many Black Panthers, survival might have been enough. As early as October 1969, Eric Caldwell reported in the *New York Times* that the

³⁶ See Theodore Kornweibel, Jr., “*Seeing Red*”: *Federal Campaigns Against Black Militancy, 1919-1925*, for an excellent account of Hoover’s earliest maneuvers against political activists.

conviction of Oakland Black Panther Party member William Wells, in conjunction with an array of arrests at numerous cities across the country, had “complicate[d] the Panthers’ leadership problems.” “Most of the Party’s leadership,” Caldwell helpfully pointed out, “is now in [police] custody” (Caldwell 39).³⁷ At the same time that the *Times* announced the conviction of William Wells, Bobby Seale was bound and gagged while on trial with the Chicago Eight (Lukass 38). These events coincided with the crackdown on the New York Black Panthers, as detailed in Chapter 3; in April of 1969, the New York Police Department issued arrest warrants for twenty-one members of the Black Panther Party’s New York City branch. By November, eighteen of the twenty-one Black Panthers sought by the NYPD were in custody (“FBI Seizes Two in Columbus,” 38). The three remaining “New York 21” who avoided capture went into exile and joined Eldridge Cleaver, who had already left the country to avoid arrest, in Algeria.

By the end of 1969, the Panthers had begun to suspect that these actions were part of a much wider campaign to ruin them. As suspicion of informants and agent provocateurs spread anxiety and distrust throughout the Party, court costs drained the Panther coffers and contributed to a wave of negative publicity. Extraordinary legal fees in the court case of the New York 21 resulted in a fundraiser given by Leonard and Felicia Bernstein on January 14, 1970. This fundraiser is ridiculed in Tom Wolfe’s famous piece of New Journalism satire for *New York* magazine, “Radical Chic: That Party at Lenny’s.” As Staub points out, in this article Wolfe ridicules the Panthers as well as their white supporters. Intentionally or not, Wolfe’s article furthered the FBI’s

³⁷ After two previous trials ended in hung juries, Wells was convicted of assault against a police officer in the gun battle leading to Eldridge Cleaver’s parole revocation and Algerian exile (see Caldwell, Eric. “Panther is Given 15 Year Sentence.” *New York Times* 30 Oct. 1969.)

agenda of dividing white and black activists.³⁸ The Black Panther Party's innovative social agendas—free breakfast programs, educational curricula, community outreach and organizing efforts—languished as Panther offices were consumed by their efforts to free members from jail. “Black Panther leaders have argued that the arrests are part of a systematic plot by the Government to destroy the party,” Caldwell reports in the *Times*, though he shows no interest in investigating this claim.

Of course, we now know that such a plot did indeed exist. In a letter dated August 25, 1967, J. Edgar Hoover announced his plan to “expose, disrupt, misdirect, discredit, or otherwise neutralize the activities of black nationalist[s]” to FBI field offices in every major American city. Included in Hoover's correspondence is the directive to utilize “established local news media contacts,” making certain that “the targeted group is disrupted, ridiculed, or discredited through the publicity” (Churchill and Vander Wall, 92-93). In New York City, the use of “established local news media contacts” was likely achieved through the office of the Deputy Police Commissioner for Public Affairs, a position with the specific duty to promote the department's interests through the local media. This was the position for which Robert Daley would be hired, a perfect candidate given his experience at the *Times* (where his father had also worked), not to mention his apparent preference, as evidenced by his publishing history, for fiction over non-fiction.³⁹ In addition, the Bureau of Special Services (BOSS)—the New York Police Department's secret branch charged with undercover operations and a close collaborator with the FBI—

³⁸ This strategy is well documented by Churchill and Vander Wall, who call attention to a series of COINTELPRO letters authored by FBI agents and made to look like correspondences from Panther members. The letters discredit Panther leaders or “alert” the organizations with which the Panthers were attempting to partner or risks in doing so by inventing allegations regarding the Black Panther Party and its members (*The COINTELPRO PAPERS*, 136-139).

³⁹ “New Press Official Named.” *New York Times* 14 May 1971, 38.

had numerous operatives with extensive experience infiltrating Black revolutionary organizations. In fact, some historians, including Manning Marable, believe that BOSS may have played a role in the assassination of Malcolm X.⁴⁰ Experts differ over whether or not the BOSS aided the assassination, but BOSS agents were certainly present.

Eugene Roberts, an undercover cop who would later testify against the defendants in the case of the New York 21, claimed to have witnessed the assassination, arrested one of the assailants, and attempted to resuscitate Malcolm X himself (Churchill and Vander Wall, 361; Goodman, 1; Zimroth, 170). Considering the significance of his role, how Roberts evaded notoriety and infiltrated the Black Panthers less than five years after Malcolm's murder remains a mystery that perhaps only the BOSS can explain.

Regardless, the founding of the New York branch of the Black Panther Party thus began as a police surveillance operation as much as a revolutionary one (Kempton 42). As noted in reference to *Whirlwind*, members of the Bureau of Special Services infiltrated the group from the beginning (Churchill and Vander Wall, 361; Kempton, 55). Assata Shakur's emergence as a suspected "domestic terrorist" provides an intriguing addendum to the story of the New York 21; exactly how many of the articles profiling the criminality of the individual formerly known as JoAnne Chesimard stem in whole or part from the police and FBI's effort to discredit the Black Panther Party remains a mystery. One of numerous follow-up directives from Hoover's office instructing agents in further efforts to Black Panther activities, dated December 24, 1969, asks FBI offices to mail

⁴⁰ In an interview with Amy Goodman broadcast on *Democracy Now: The War and Truth Report* on February 21, 2005, Marable attributes the assassination to a "convergence of interests with three different groups that had an interest in eliminating his voice and his vision": the FBI, the NYPD's Bureau of Special Services, and the Nation of Islam itself.

“seasons greetings” cards detailing the “violent propensities” of the party to “newspaper editors, public officials,” and others (Hinds, *Illusions of Justice*, 113).

Such injunctions cast a long shadow over the sizeable file of metropolitan-area newspaper articles implicating Shakur in violent activities. Almost immediately after the hiring of Robert Daley as Deputy Police Commissioner of Public Affairs in the winter of 1971, JoAnne Chesimard’s name begins to appear in the newspaper. Although Daley lasted just one year at this post, he continued to publish accusations concerning Chesimard’s role in the Black Liberation Army (BLA) for several years. In his writings, Daley completes a portrait of Joanne Chesimard (or JoAnn, or JoAnne, depending upon the article) that had been under construction since April 7, 1971, when a small headline, “Woman Shot in Struggle With Her Alleged Victim,” appeared in the *New York Times*. According to the *Times* article, JoAnne Chesimard had attempted to rob a hotel guest after knocking on his door, and was shot in the struggle that ensued. In the years between the *Times* article reporting JoAnne Chesimard’s involvement in the hotel shooting—for which, incidentally, no follow-up articles appeared—and the publication of Daley’s “Target Blue,” hundreds of articles in newspapers throughout the New York metropolitan area mention JoAnne Chesimard in conjunction with the Black Liberation Army.

For his part, Daley has shown little interest in the history of the FBI’s campaign against Black activists; his interest is in narrative, character, and drama; “Most times,” he muses in his book *Target Blue*, “one learns nothing whatever from history” (126). A later book of Daley’s, *The Innocents Within* (2001), has provoked outrage in French survivors of Nazi occupation from Le Chamon sur Lignon, a small village that helped several thousand Jews escape the Holocaust, and that serves as the setting for Daley’s

fictional account of the incident. Survivors complain that Daley’s account severely distorts history for the purposes of his own narrative, though Daley has claimed that his fictional account “may have more truth in it than the non-fiction accounts written so far.”⁴¹ Given his role in establishing the official history of the BLA, Daley’s dismissal of fact as a guiding principle for his books of “nonfiction” and “historical fiction” is striking. While serving as the public face of the NYPD, Daley freely hypothesized the development of the BLA as a violent offshoot of the Black Panther Party; in *Target Blue*, he writes, “what was this Black Liberation Army if not a collection of anarchists—modern anarchists, black anarchists, but anarchists nonetheless—haters of established order?” (126).

By 1971, even before Daley’s accusations became public, the Panthers were decimated. When most of the trials orchestrated by the FBI resulted in acquittals or dismissals, often exposing police misconduct, police departments faced tremendous pressure to convict the innocent “suspects” of some crime. In New York City, a humiliating court defeat for the NYPD arrived soon after the first appearance of the name JoAnne Chesimard in the *Times*: on May 13, 1971, after over two years of grand jury testimony and courtroom gymnastics, thirteen suspects charged as members of the “New York 21” were acquitted (*COINTELPRO*, 147). The next day’s *Times* reports their acquittal, as well as the appointment of Robert Daley as the new Deputy Police Commissioner for Public Affairs. Daley inherited a New York Police Department swamped by a series of scandals and failures. The allegations of Frank Serpico,

⁴¹ Letters of outrage from town residents were published on the website of Le Chambon foundation (http://www.chambon.org/lcsl_daley_en.htm) as of December 22, 2007. Rudy Appel, a Jewish refugee in Le Chambon during the period on which Daley bases his book, describes Daley’s claim that his book “may have more truth in it than the non-fiction accounts written so far” as Orwellian.

namesake of the title character played by Al Pacino in the movie *Serpico* (1973), engulfed the department in widespread corruptions and gambling investigations. Soon after Daley's appointment, several officers were shot in separate incidents while on patrol in different neighborhoods. One case involved two officers assigned to patrol the residence of District Attorney Frank Hogan, prosecutor in the trial of the New York 21. It was during this investigation that Daley insisted upon the press conference to announce that former Black Panthers who were now members of the Black Liberation Army were the prime suspects. Daley reports that Detective Albert Seedman was so certain the assailants were Black Panthers that he simplified the suspect identification process by only showing witnesses photographs of Black Panthers ("Target Blue," 42). As assaults against police officers continued, so too did Daley's accusations regarding the Black Liberation Army, whose members he blamed for a variety of crimes, including bank robberies and the use of a grenade against pursuing police officers during a car chase in Queens (*Target Blue*, 467).

Daley's accusations help to explain the "Trial Chronology" that appears in *Assata*, a document ostensibly added by editors as part of the preface to her autobiography (xiv). It is this laundry list of supposed crimes and dates here included, from April 1971 to May 1973, to which Shakur must answer when she is arrested, but of which her actual autobiography makes almost no mention. The trial chronology bookmarks the break her text makes with sequential order. After dramatizing her arrest, Shakur's writing zigzags between childhood memories and the events that follow her capture. In the process she produces a difficult and seductive text of incomplete narratives. Her text encounters history as an assemblage of memories and facts repressed or obscured in the present. For

Shakur, the site of this repression, the place in which its misrepresentative tendencies achieve their fullest expression, is language. The narrator she constructs stands at an axis where the autobiographical tradition, the semiotics of self-representative language, and the semiotics of American history intersect. Rather than assume the impossible task of unraveling these narrative traditions, *Assata* pursues the possibilities offered by their interrelatedness. In Shakur's text, the criminalized identity the state has already established for her becomes one of many aliases featured in anecdotes of disguise and dissembling that serve to interrogate systems of meaning and strategies of self-representation. Beginning with her criminalization at the hands of the state, *Assata* experiments with the alias as a screen for history's projection, a malleable space through which repressed histories and events might become visible.

Breaking Story: *Assata* Undone Through Narrative

For Shakur, discontinuity is the narrative rule. Her book quite literally begins with an arrest:

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

Suddenly, the door flew open and i felt myself being dragged out onto the pavement. Pushed and punched, a foot upside my head, a kick in the stomach. Police everywhere. One had a gun to my head. (3)

In recounting her arrest on May 2, 1973, Shakur's opening sentences establish modes of representation that will repeat throughout her volume. Perhaps most noticeable is the diminutive letter "i" in place of the first person "I," but this typographical tick has its correlation in the rupturing membrane that separates the physical body from its surroundings. "The air was like cold glass. Huge bubbles rose and burst. Each one felt like an explosion inside my chest." The slippage between the description of air "like cold glass" in which "huge bubbles rose and burst," and the description of breathing, in which "each one felt like an explosion inside my chest," cleaves the exterior scene of the crime to the interior, physical body of the narrator. Furthermore, the description of breathing can be read only through an inversion of word order; to understand how her breathing feels, we must go back and read the pronoun "one" as one of the "huge bubbles." We are witnessing what seems to be a near-death experience, but we are also witnessing a birth. Untethered from time's normative order, the story of Shakur's life begins again with the moment of her capture. This rebirth inaugurates the inversion of temporal order that defines her text, an inversion further signaled through the rhetorical deployment of language, most significantly the use of *hysteron proteron*, or latter-before. Notice again the inverted order of the phrases above: the sensations of explosions inside her chest follow after the sentence "Huge bubbles rose and burst," words that seem to describe these explosions.

Throughout her text, the present actions of her captors will contend with the act of recollection, recasting the past in the frame of her half-told captivity narrative. These interruptions are not only realistic, in that they represent the disorientation and trauma of the events in the eyes of the narrator; they are also rhetorical. They present a stance toward history, in which the past and the present continually disrupt one another, thus confounding the order and logic narrative imposes. According to Walter Benjamin, interruption has its role in revolutionary thinking: “Thinking involves not only the flow of thoughts,” Benjamin writes, “but their arrest as well. Where thinking stops in a configuration pregnant with tensions, it gives that configuration a shock [...] a Messianic cessation of happening, or, put differently, a revolutionary chance in the fight for the oppressed past” (*Illuminations* 262-263). *Assata* puts Benjamin’s quotation to work, pursuing in its persistent interruptions of narrative evidence of an oppressed past that JoAnne Chesimard’s criminalized identity acts to conceal. “Everybody says that i had my days mixed up with my nights and kept everybody up all night,” Shakur writes (17). The confusion of time’s limits inhabits her text. Two autobiographical narratives alternate through the first twelve chapters, augmented by poetic interludes. One recounts the childhood of JoAnne Deborah Byron from birth to her teen years and early adulthood; the other tells the story of Assata Shakur from her arrest onward to her incarceration, pregnancy, and trials. JoAnne Chesimard is her name after a brief marriage that receives cursory mention.⁴² Her narrative thus proceeds by interruption. Stories of family life are punctuated by interludes describing prison experiences and courtroom battles. Inside

⁴² The story of Shakur’s marriage is only briefly summarized (196), and mentioned when she discusses her name changes (185). Whatever the reasons for this event’s marginal inclusion in her story, it is her husband’s last name, Chesimard, that becomes part of her criminalized identity.

prison, her struggles with jailers determined to enforce draconian punishments before her guilt has been proven further emphasize the irrational, the out of order. As she attempts to recover from her gunshot wounds she is denied medical treatment, interrogated and beaten. The state's methodology of punishment thus disrupts an otherwise chronologically narrated autobiography. Remembrance unfolds in Shakur's narrative through gaps in the punitive mechanisms of the law. Memory already has the capacity to put the present on hold, to break with continuous time. As the faculty punishment forces upon her while in prison and exile, memory is conditioned to criminality.

The narrator's relationship to autobiography thus remains tenuous. Even as she rejects the labels the state assigns her, Shakur emphasizes the experience of oppression as the unique and exemplary feature of her story; here she finds herself in what Leigh Gilmore has described as "the autobiographical paradox of the unusual or unrepresentative life becoming representative" (19). As Gilmore and other scholars of autobiography have noted, many political autobiographies face an apparent contradiction because the form draws its power and authority from individualism. Shakur would rather align herself with values of communalism and self-sacrifice practiced in the resistance movement to which she belongs—values shared by the other authors included in this study, from George Jackson to the sixteen authors of *Look For Me in the Whirlwind* to Angela Davis. Shakur's writing may be seen as an attempt to embrace the contradiction Gilmore underscores, and by so doing, to overcome it; after all, part of her project is to suggest that because of the government's use of its law enforcement apparatus to silence dissent, any revolutionary thinker might just as easily occupy her position. Her strategy in assuming the autobiographical form includes a refusal to engage or repudiate the

state's accusations, thereby allowing these accusations to become another narrative alongside her own. Her status as enemy of the state becomes in her text a historical mystery, an accident, the anomic yet seemingly primeval condition her text never unravels.

Inside the interpolating narrative bars that chronicle, respectively, her court trials and childhood, shifting verb tenses further disrupt chronological sense, dissecting the act of storytelling from the sequential structure it normally affords. Written in the present and past tense, her experiences as a prisoner frame incarceration as a discontinuous, interruptive process. These sections foreground her textual identity as an identity created by the state and therefore a site of complex struggle between her own efforts at narration versus the state's efforts to overwrite her story with its own:

The hospital is glaring white. Everyone i see is white. Everyone seems to be waiting. All at once they are in motion. Blood pressure, pulse, needles, etc. Two detectives come in. I know they're detectives because they look like detectives. One of them has a face like a bulldog, with jowls hanging down the sides. They supervise the nurse as she cuts off my clothes. After a while, one of them dabs my fingertips with what look like Q-tips. Later i find out that this is the neutron activation test to determine whether or not i have fired a weapon. Another one then tries to fingerprint me, but he has trouble because my hand is dead.

“Gimme the dead man's kit.” He puts my fingers into spoon-looking things used to fingerprint dead people. They begin to ask me questions, but a bunch of doctors come in. One of them, who appears to

be the head doctor, examines me. He pokes and prods, throwing me around like a rag doll. then, like he is going to kill me, he jerks me around so that i'm on my stomach. the pain is like an electric shock. I moan. (4)

These paragraphs, chronicling Shakur's earliest recollections following the scene of her arrest on the New Jersey Turnpike, typify a narrative mode that will be employed and interrupted, or interruptively employed, throughout her text. The sentence—and here one might note the leaden quality of the word “sentence” when used to address a text heavy with prison's residue—cannot conceal the shock this memory holds in reserve. The sentence is shock's traumatic embodiment, the unit by which shock is dispensed. In an instant, “everyone” who in one sentence seems to be waiting becomes, in the very next sentence, the “they” who are “all at once [...] in motion.” No less significant is the misidentification that occurs in the effort to identify Shakur. The detective's words, “Gimme the dead man's kit,” aptly condense the unstable structure of identity the text thematizes throughout: when the narrator hears herself being hailed, the words her interlocutors employ fail to match the identity she would like to call her own.

Arrested as an enemy of the state on the first page of her autobiography, the misshapen loom of captivity thus twists the narrative threads leading back to Shakur's childhood. In the employment of a *hysteron proteron* sentence sequence, in the sentencing of shock through sudden shifts in action or tone, and in the seemingly paradoxical establishment of a narrator's identity through misidentification, the beginning of *Assata* catalyzes a textual pattern that repeats globally, in the chapter shifts between her captivity and childhood, and discretely, in the repeating of themes and tropes within the chapters themselves. The framing of the narrator as a “not-who-they-say” repeats

most visibly in Shakur's childhood anecdotes. These anecdotes portray disguise, dis-identification, and dissembling as the narrator's primary strategies to confront a chronologically confused, physiologically disembodied present.

In the sections that follow, I will suggest that these anecdotal disclosures also challenge distortions of history essential to American identity. In refusing the moral imperatives that story as a form so readily invites, *Assata* employs the anecdote as a potentially anti-narratological tool. This series of autobiographical anecdotes told by a "not-who-they-say" narrator allows *Assata* to fabricate its own seductive and obfuscating literary veil. By the end of *Assata*, we may know less about the era in which the events described therein transpire than we know about the ability of the narrator to vanish behind the identities she constructs. *Assata* is the explanation for the author's exile, but it is also, figuratively speaking, exile itself. *Assata* celebrates the autobiographical text's inevitable failures, its inability to account for the individual whose existence it proposes to chronicle. For an author who remains a fugitive still sought by the FBI, the limits of autobiography are also its redeeming features. Even as Shakur vanishes, the anecdote remains, a vehicle for first-person interrogation of the repressed past that emerges when systems of meaning tied to history and self-representation suddenly converge. The first chapter ends with a poem entitled "Story":

STORY

You died.

I cried.

And kept on getting up.

A little slower.

And a lot more deadly. (17)

This poem promises narrative and delivers in its place a shadow. If it is an address to Zayd Shakur (James Costan), who was killed during the confrontation with the New Jersey State Police the night Shakur was apprehended, it also functions as a representative text. The half-told story it initiates traces a collective identity; the lyrical “I” is no more personal than the anonymous “you” to whom the poem speaks.

The image of her early life that Shakur constructs in the second chapter builds upon this peek-a-boo pattern, celebrating the appearance and vanishing of its narrator. As JoAnne Deborah Byron, Shakur spends some years in Wilmington, North Carolina following her parents’ divorce. The house she lives in occupies an important place in her family history. “My grandfather originally thought that the house belonged to my great-grandfather, Pappa Linc (short for Lincoln),” Shakur writes. “Lincoln” appears here with an overdetermination as significant as that of the heart that beats in the mind of the murderer in Poe’s story. As the reader soon discovers, Lincoln reappears throughout Shakur’s text. As the namesake of her great-grandfather, he oversees the disjointed narrative that follows; forgotten details of his ambiguous legacy loom over the narrator’s encounters with repressed histories she conjures in subsequent chapters. The house supposedly owned by “Pappa Linc” and given to her family has in fact only been given to her great-grandfather to live in as long as he is alive, and is alienated to others by the state after his death. “Fine print and white lawyers have a way of robbing Black people of what is theirs,” Shakur notes.

As a result, her grandparents are “forced to buy the house again” (19). Their ability to overlook the tyranny involved in this process echoes the “fairy-tale history”

Shakur learns in school. Meanwhile, they forbid Shakur from associating with what they call “alley rats,” black children not born, like Assata, into the aspiring Black middle class. Most enlightening is the role of language in the charade of decency and class values they attempt to instill in her:

“Decent children” came from “decent families.” How did you know what a decent family was? A decent family lived in a decent house. How did you know what a decent house was? A decent house was fixed up nice and had a sidewalk in front of it. Decent families didn’t let their kids play in the street with no shoes on and didn’t let their kids say ‘ain’t.’ Little did my grandmother know that *ain’t* was my favorite word once i got two feet out of her hearing range. My grandmother had a little alley rat right under her roof and she didn’t even know it. Alley rats supposedly lived in alleys, in run-down shacks, but my grandmother would often call one of my friends an alley rat even if the kid didn’t live in an alley. (21)

Recognizing that words can be used to reveal *and* conceal the environment and the material goods that occupy its spaces, Shakur thus outlines a critique of language as it is employed by the capitalist society that surrounds her. The displacements and substitutions that fill the paragraph above animate linguistic distortions as mechanisms for fishing politics from narrative in order to enhance narrative’s progress. A language of circularity reinforces class difference through a set of “self-evident” values. The simultaneity with which language contains its referents via a chain of repetition *and* establishes through repetition the screen that allows those same referents to transform or disappear neatly condenses the autobiographical paradox.

Even as it offers a chronicle in which the literary self becomes its own subject in language, autobiography provides the means with which the “true subject” or author escapes. Her grandparents can employ language to cast aspersion upon less fortunate children, or perhaps those from families they simply don’t like, for as Shakur dryly notes, “alley rats” do not live in alleys, even as “decent children” are the self-evident products of “decent families” known as such because they possess “decent houses.” And yet language can also serve as Shakur’s means of disguise before her grandparents, not to mention before the “alley rats” she counts as her friends. This story does not so much introduce the narrator as it does alert the reader to her preference for camouflage. Rather than submit to the supposedly self-evident virtues of materialism, Shakur focuses on the shelter language provides for her grandparents. This shelter mirrors the one she assembles out of the same linguistic tools, manipulating her language to match the expectations of her listeners. Shakur suggests that she merely answers the call for deceptive self-representation already commonplace in a society determined to conceal, repress, or otherwise bury the history of racism and slavery behind a façade of equal opportunity. The society Shakur portrays is determined to live in Pappa Linc’s house; regardless of the cost this domicile passes on to each generation, it prefers the illusion of free occupancy to the real debt history’s distorted bookkeeping imposes.

In the zigzagging narrative threads that pattern the first twelve chapters, Shakur’s childhood sequences thus establish a pattern of disguise and subterfuge. These remembrances nominate self-representation as a strategy for resisting the pitfalls history and circumstance force upon the individual. In this deployment of self-representation as a self-conscious strategy, Shakur’s autobiography proposes a possible model for evading

the anxiety of authenticity limits Black Power as a political movement. FBI COINTELPRO letters document the government's own hand in developing and exploiting such anxieties. The split in the Black Panther Party facilitated during the trial of the New York 21 reflects the tension that individual activists felt to "authenticate" themselves to other members of the movement, an effort complicated by the actions of infiltrators such as Ralph White. (As noted in the preceding chapter, White's hot-headed militarism contributed to the perceived violence of the party as a whole, especially for fellow party members.) Although White's actions may have marked him as "inauthentic" to a handful of Panthers who suspected that he was indeed a police operative, his actions likely served as a model for others eager to prove themselves to the party.

Questions of authenticity also become the foundation for FBI efforts to prevent alliances between black revolutionary organizations. The most notable example is the campaign waged in Southern California, where local field offices set in motion aggressive, ultimately deadly confrontations between Ron Karenga's US organization and the Los Angeles branch of the Panthers. The most famous clash between these groups resulted in the murder of BPP members Jon Huggins and Alprentice "Bunchy" Carter on the UCLA campus in 1969. (Churchill and Vander Wall, *Agents of Repression*, 42-3; *COINTELPRO*, 131-5). The devastating influence wielded by the anxiety that surrounds authenticity is reflected in Jonathan Jackson's letter to his brother George Jackson: "Every time I think of [...] murderous turncoat idiots, my trigger finger fairly itches! Non-persons like [Ron] Karenga [head of the black nationalist organization US], LeRoi Jones [Amiri Baraka] and the other right-wing blacks are intelligent enough to know what they are doing [...] they are working for the government, the new house

niggers” (*Blood in My Eye*, 36-37). As Baraka himself points out in his own autobiography, such accusations as a direct result of the government’s counterintelligence efforts (cited by Churchill and Vander Wall, *COINTELPRO*, 358). For her part, in addition to her interest in disguise, impersonation, and methodologies of passing, Shakur’s disavowal of the rhetoric surrounding so-called authenticity is evidenced by the range of literary references present in her text. After her shooting and arrest by New Jersey state troopers, Shakur’s nurses signal their sympathy for her by giving her books. Shakur carefully notes the titles of the books she receives, which include Hermann Hesse’s novel *Siddhartha*; elsewhere she credits Jean-Paul Sartre, James Baldwin, J.A. Rogers, Julius Lester, Sylvia Plath, Sonia Sanchez, Edna St. Vincent Millay, Haki Madhubuti, Dorothy Parker, Amiri Baraka (the same writer, of course, who elicits Jonathan Jackson’s anger), Allen Ginsberg, and Ed Bullins for her expanding intellectual and literary perspectives.

This effort to complicate notions of authenticity by modeling forms of literary and intellectual diversity is complimented by chronicles of Shakur’s childhood in which she describes her growing awareness of beauty and appearance as one zone fraught with the overdetermined history of racism. She makes vivid the internalization of white markers of beauty in recalling the insults she and her friends hurl at one another. The lasting impression of these experiences concerns the relationship between self-images and the systems of meaning that influence them. “We had been completely brainwashed and we didn’t even know it,” she writes. “We accepted white value systems and white standards of beauty and, at times, we accepted the white man’s view of ourselves” (31). These observations consistently emphasize the semiotic system over and above the supposedly

essential or transcendent value others, including other Black revolutionaries, associate with race. Although she embraces the celebration of “natural” beauty associated with the Afro, she situates this style inside a structural network in which what is *said* about oneself involves a strategic wager formulated *in dialogue with* surrounding values and meanings, and appreciates such a style as an attempt to disrupt or counteract such meanings.

Like language itself, the Afro is a semiotic instrument for the repositioning of the subject. Throughout her discussions of beauty and appearance, Shakur never loses sight of the subject’s formation within language, even as her subject shifts through a variety of pronouns: “You,” “me,” “we.” “You can be a revolutionary-thinking person and have your hair fried up,” she writes. “And you can have an Afro and be a traitor to Black people. But for me, how you dress and how you look have always reflected what you have to say about yourself [...] In a country that constantly tells us we are nothing [...] we have got to constantly make positive statements about ourselves” (174-175). The Afro is, according to Shakur, a semiotic statement; it announces the forgotten, unclaimed, or otherwise absent African presence, culture, and influence in the United States. It is the antidote for the advice Shakur’s grandmother gives her to “marry some man with ‘good hair’ so your children will have good hair” (31). Once again emphasizing the value-laden language of her class-conscious, historically-disinclined progenitors, Shakur explains that to her grandparents, “Good hair was better than bad hair, meaning that straight hair was better than nappy hair” (31). If the body provides the exchange for trade in such linguistic stocks, Shakur’s insistence upon the Afro as a statement offers a currency designed to bankrupt whiteness as the gold standard for beauty’s discourse. At the same

time, the migrating pronouns in her sentences on the Afro's semantic value suggest bodies beside themselves, itinerant subjects awash in the linguistic overflow that threatens its grammatical levies. She recognizes the risk that awaits speculators who concentrate their investments in appearance alone when she cautions that "you can have an Afro and be a traitor to Black people." As one sign in the ever-shifting cryptogram history scaffolds to identity's skeleton, the Afro provides Shakur with an ambiguous but significant means of articulating an alternative politics and aesthetic. "I became aware of a whole new generation of Black women hiding under wigs. Ashamed of their hair—if they had any left. It was sad and disgusting," Shakur writes (174).

More importantly, the Afro's importance as a sign provides a means of understanding self-representational acts. As her political and criminal reputation grows, the Afro functions as one feature of her radical public image, and this image gradually escapes the historical specificity of its emergence. Shakur explains that the Afro mythologizes a lost past; the image that graces the cover of her book, her own face haloed by the Afro, offers readers an image of revolution emptied of its historical value in the climate of the present. As Angela Y. Davis writes in her own reflections on the hairdo that she made famous, photographs of the Afro as worn by revolutionary thinkers arrive in the present emptied of history, so that "the most salient element of the image is the hairstyle, understood less as a political statement than a fashion" (38). The function of photography in the effacement of history's details is of paramount importance to Shakur, for whom (like Davis) the photographic act itself marks the state's continuing efforts to capture and criminalize. On the other hand, the Afro provides Shakur with an image behind which she can maneuver; like Davis, once she goes underground, the Afro

disappears beneath a wig. The revolutionary features she employs gain their power through their relationship to shifting orders of meaning that she cannot control, but that she attempts to manipulate as best she can.

Shakur portrays self-representation as a confidence game in which the individual wagers the figure she would like to become against the image others use to contain her well before she discovers the Afro. This philosophy emerges through her recollections of an adolescence dedicated to the evasion of parents and other authority figures. In her repeated experiences as a runaway, Shakur establishes a proclivity for alternative personas and identities. “The older i got,” Shakur writes of her adolescence, “the more i seemed to grow into myself” (73). This statement becomes, in light of the anecdotes that supposedly illustrate its verity, somewhat ironic: for Shakur, growing into herself means becoming a master of disguise. After returning to New York City to live with her mother, the careful guidance Shakur has received from her grandparents disappears with the increasing friction of her mother and stepfather’s marriage:

I was always late getting home and in trouble. It was like i had some kind of disease. I could never make it home on time. I would leave with the best intentions, but as soon as i got out in the street, it was as if i was in a trance. I would forget all about the time until it was too late. And half the time when i realized that it was getting dark, i didn’t know where i was, much less how to get home [...] I was a lost cause. I was running away from home and i didn’t even know it. And one thing always led to another. I was turning into a fantastic liar. As soon as i got near home i

began making up lies [...] As the problems in my family intensified, i ran away consciously instead of unconsciously. (74-75)

These sentences reiterate the narrator's dysfunctional relationship to time. The language she employs slips between time's literal significance as a calculation of the duration of events, and as a metaphorical feature of familiar expressions ("it was too late," "half the time"). In her timeless wandering Shakur returns to language as the medium through which she can reshape her experiences; prevarication is her answer to the confounding puzzles time presents when she loses herself in the city's mysteries.

While traveling the streets on her own, Shakur meets a variety of generous and dangerous characters; she learns to shoplift, to turn quick cons, to distrust boys and men; and, through a chance meeting with a Greenwich Village character named Miss Shirley, begins to refine her ability to disguise herself. Shakur chooses the Village as her refuge because of its reputation for being "where artists and musicians and all kinds of weird people were supposed to live," and because, as she says, she was "fascinated by the idea of beatniks and bohemians, even though i had never met any" (99). Lured by the image, she begins to refine her own. After Shakur has spent several sleepless days and nights on the street, Miss Shirley spots her in the lobby of the residential hotel where Shakur decided to take up residence; after taking her to dinner, Miss Shirley seeks to unravel her young acquaintance's background:

"Well, honey," [Miss Shirley] asked me, "what in the hell are you running from or what in the hell are you running to?"

I told her [a] sad tale about my mother in the hospital.

"Do you actually expect me to believe that mess?"

I swore up and down that it was true.

“I ain’t no fool, honey, and I been out in these streets long enough to know that you running from something, and if you don’t want to tell me, that’s your business. But I like you and I’ll try to help you if I can.”

(105)

After finally getting a full night of sleep at the hotel, Shakur knocks on Miss Shirley’s door, thus receiving another lesson in the construction and performance of identity: “She opened the door with a razor in her hand,” Shakur writes. “I almost fainted. She was shaving her face. Miss Shirley was a man. When she saw my reaction, she fell out laughing. ‘You got a lot to learn, sugar. Ya got a lot to learn’” (106). In the pages that follow, Shakur begins to use the image others project upon her to her advantage; after meeting two fellow runaways also seeking refuge in the Village, she and her new friends hatch a plan to fleece johns looking for prostitutes. “Any black woman, practically anywhere in amerika, can tell you about being approached, propositioned, and harassed by white men. Many consider all Black women prostitutes,” she writes (106). “‘Yeah,’ her friends agree, ‘but we got something for they ass’” (107). They set up a john, trick him into putting up money to visit the brothel Shakur promises to show him, and escape back into the Village.

After Miss Shirley talks her out of future confidence games, Shakur takes a job as a hostess at a jazz club where girls like herself decorate the bar. Customers buy them drinks, and if the hostesses are willing, hire them as prostitutes. It is Miss Shirley who instructs Shakur in the supposedly feminine art of makeup: “Let me show you how to put your face on,” Miss Shirley tells her before her first day, “you look like a two-bit hoe”

(109). In another example of language abandoning its denotative powers, a friendly barmaid offers to pour Shakur “whiskey sours” without whiskey when patrons want to buy her drinks so that she does not get drunk. Meanwhile, Shakur practices acting in her conversations with customers. “I would sit there, making up stories to tell them just to keep myself amused. [...] If i thought that the man would go for a sob story and hand over some money, i would tell him a real tearjerker. Other times i pretended to be a college girl” (110). In order to maintain the charade of sexual intrigue—Shakur is thirteen at the time—she must also pretend to be older than her age. Band members in the house jazz group, who see through her masquerade, nickname her “jailbait.” “I was big for my age,” she later explains, “and well built and, with all the makeup i wore, i could usually pass for eighteen. I told everybody i was nineteen” (111).

As she learns to shape her self-representation to play off the expectations of others, Shakur also learns to be wary of the way others represent themselves. In the bar there are dangerous customers, but there are also her workmates, the other hostesses, the barmaid, and a bouncer who watch out for her; it is outside of work, when she seeks out her peers, that she falls into the trap of a boy who, along with his friends, is determined to rape her. He talks her into coming over to his house. Soon his friends arrive. The assault is delayed while the assailants argue over who will be first. She writes, “They were arguing and carrying on as if i wasn’t even human, as if i were some kind of thing” (114). The disregard these would-be rapists show for her humanity contrasts remarkably with the need they feel to preserve their own reputations: Shakur escapes when she realizes that the boy’s primary fear is that his mother’s apartment will be damaged during the assault. “That was my cue,” Shakur writes when she notices his concern, once again

introducing the language of performance into a disturbingly real situation. “ I picked up a vase and threw it at the wall. I picked up a lamp and something else, crying and screaming at the same time” (114). What follows includes a clever (if nonchalant) allusion to Jean-Paul Sartre’s play *Huis Clos*. Known to English readers as *No Exit*, *Huis Clos* suggests a meaning closer to “behind closed doors” in French, and has long referred to trials not made public, but kept private instead before a single judge. “I thought a lot about those boys after that night. I hated them, but what i couldn’t understand is why they hated me so much [...] I had read this play by Sartre. The play ended with the conclusion that hell is other people, and, for a while, i agreed” (115). Shakur’s casual reference to Sartre conjures a play in which individual characters, condemned to hell, must stand by and watch as their lives are reinterpreted through the perspectives of the other characters. The allusion is clearly not at all coincidental, nor is it simply based upon the concept that “hell is other people.” Like Shakur, Sartre’s characters bear witness to the destruction of their own self-images.

Other scenes similarly explore the relationship between the perspectives of others and self-representation. Soon after escaping sexual assault, Shakur’s self-fashioned career as a hostess comes to an end when a family friend recognizes her in the street. “I know you,” her aunt’s friend says, ““You’re Joey. Your aunt and your mother are worried to death about you” (116). Shakur pretends not to be the real “Joey,” only to have her aunt’s friend drag her away to confirm her identity. The scene represents a reversal of the famously perplexing scene found in Thomas De Quincey’s *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater* (1821). When he attempts to borrow against his future inheritance, De Quincey finds himself confronted with suspicious expressions on the faces of the

moneylenders examining the documents that detail the amount that will eventually be given to one “Thomas De Quincey.” De Quincey suddenly realizes that he has no means of proving that he is in fact the Thomas De Quincey against whose future inheritance he wishes to borrow: “One question still remained,” he writes, “which the faces of the Jews pretty significantly suggested,—was *I* that person?” (25). Whereas De Quincey must convince others that he does indeed inhabit himself, Shakur must continually find ways to escape the identities that others demand she inhabit. “In a way,” Shakur writes, “i was glad it was over. I was getting tired of the streets. I was tired of being grown and i wanted to be a kid again” (117).

Her autobiographical act thus turns again to the interchange between the image others ascribe to her and the image she would like to project. The confounding rupture these competing images force upon time’s passage accord with the interruptive cycles that define her narrative: “being grown” provides the opportunity to “be a kid again.” After being identified by her family friend, resuming her family life allows Shakur to return to school. It does not mean, however, that her proclivity for self-invention is retired. She pretends to be a bohemian and an intellectual before she begins reading extensively; after graduating from high school, she lies her way into a bookkeeping job, only to have her lies *confirmed* by the detective that performs her background check. Gradually, her disorienting experience as a young professional connects with her burgeoning political consciousness; after meeting some African students who study at Columbia, she begins to realize that the image she holds of her own country is made up of greater deceptions than any she can create on her own. “There he was,” she says of one interlocutor, “talking about the u.s. government just like somebody would talk about

a criminal. I just couldn't relate to it. But my mind was blown" (151). As she begins to notice the distorted image of the United States that she has been given throughout her childhood, the immediate environment that surrounds her rings hollow:

Nothing was like i thought it would be when i was little. [...] Nice old men sitting in the park weren't nice old men at all but were busy masturbating under their newspapers. I got so i didn't believe in anything. It seemed everybody was in some kind of bag, the dope bag, the whiskey brown paper bag, the jesus bag, the love bag, the sex bag, the make-it big bag, and none of these bags were doing anybody any good. I was looking for my own bag, but the pickings were slim. I kept on looking nevertheless, running and moving and hanging out until i was running myself ragged. One day i'd be downtown hanging out with my hippy, blippy (Black hippy) friends. The next i'd be uptown hanging out with the hustlers. But nothing seemed like it was for real, you know? The same dudes who would be talking slick and sniffing coke out of \$50 bills one day would be scrounging and begging for a loan the next. (155)

Here the self-referential logic previously invoked by Shakur's grandparents to define "decent children" through an endless chain of other "decent" entities is reversed in the narrator's invocation of "nice old men." The linkages short-circuit; "nice old men" are *not* "nice old men"; self-referentiality is replaced by self-pleasuring.

The image of the old men "'masturbating under their newspapers"' fittingly distills the logic used to confirm self-serving class values. "Everybody seemed to be in their own bag," Shakur says elsewhere, "and few seemed to care about anybody else"

(115). Shakur's distrust of the process through which self-image is negotiated contributes to her search for a revolutionary identity. After witnessing the alienating adoption of identities, the "some kind of bag" that others keep seeking, the narrator assumes her own search for alternative methods of self-representation. These investigations carry over into chapters that detail her discovery of revolutionary thought and activism. The mysteries surrounding self-representation also persist in chapters that interrupt her childhood anecdotes to describe the circumstances of her imprisonment and trials. "Everything is a lie in amerika," Shakur writes, "and the thing that keeps it going is that so many people believe the lie" (158). Such a conclusion does not point to a resolution of the crisis of self-representation. On the heels of her own experiments in self-invention, it points to the intersection of the personal and the historical, the moment at which the subject recognizes her own distorted image in the funny mirror through which history's transgressions present themselves.

I have suggested that the arrest with which Shakur's text paradoxically begins signals a rebirth, and that through this rebirth storytelling is delivered from the constraints of temporal logic that would inform a linear narrative. This deliverance informs the narrator's movements throughout, helps to structure the sophisticated evasions that read as self-representational fragments. Even as her captors take extra measures to watch over Shakur the prisoner, her appearance sparks surprise and confusion, repeating patterns of alienation and misidentification. As part of her rebirth, Shakur must re-familiarize herself with her body after being shot during the arrest. Of her first months in jail after leaving the hospital, she writes, "It was about that time that the miracles started. I was sure now that my hand was coming back to life. I was beginning to be able to tell it to do

things and it would actually respond” (58). This magical self-(re-)discovery counterbalances the poking, prodding, and pounding her body receives while in captivity. When guards come to look for her, another prisoner steps forward: “‘I’m JoAnne Chesimard,’ Eva said. [...] When the guards took one look at Eva and saw how big she was, their tone changed immediately. ‘Miss Chesimard, would you please return to your cell?’” These remarkable confusions over Shakur’s identity while in captivity elicit a voyeuristic anxiety on the part of her captors, which suggests that they also understand, perhaps unconsciously, the existential crisis provoked by the process of identification. As her trial date approaches, Shakur is moved from the workhouse for female prisoners to the basement of the Middlesex County Jail. The surveillance of her cell becomes so extreme that the effort dedicated to visual identification borders on paranoia:

Female guards were stationed at the door of my cell twenty-four hours a day. Their job was to sit there and look in the cell at me. They could see every move i made. The first day i moved the bed against the wall, away from the guard’s surveillance so that i could have a little privacy while i was sleeping. The guards ordered me to move the bed into the middle of the floor. I refused. The next day workmen nailed the bed to the floor in the center of the cell. They even peeked through the window in the bathroom when i was on the toilet or taking a shower. [...]

When i got ready to go to sleep the first night, i asked the guard to turn off the lights. She refused. “I can’t see you if the light isn’t on.”

“How in the world can you miss me? You can see everything in the cell.”

“Sorry.” (66-67)

In the effort to account for her presence, Shakur’s captors seem to fear that, left unseen, Shakur will become someone else, will transform into a figure they cannot recognize like the shape-shifting “arch-felon” of Milton’s *Paradise Lost* (225-227). The radio address Shakur records and has her lawyer smuggle out of jail while she awaits trial further compounds the anxiety evident in the actions of her captors. Defying the silence imposed upon her by the court, operating in concert with media accounts of her criminality, this address contributes to the hyperbolic persona that precedes her.

In her radio address Shakur declares herself a Black revolutionary, professes her innocence for the crimes of which she is accused, and explains the stance of the Black Liberation Army. The transcript of this radio broadcast stands out in Shakur’s text as a rare, direct reference to the crimes themselves. In the context of her autobiographical text, the transcript calls attention to itself as a performance of self-representation, a narrator invoking her own words as self-representative echo housed within a text of self-representation. After introducing herself and professing her love for her Black brothers and sisters, Shakur makes the most lucid declaration of political allegiance to the Black Liberation Army to be found anywhere in *Assata*:

I am a Black revolutionary woman, and because of this i have been charged with and accused of every alleged crime in which a woman was believed to have participated. The alleged crimes in which only men were supposedly involved, i have been accused of planning. They have plastered pictures alleged to be me in post offices, airports, hotels, police cars, subways, banks, television, and newspapers. They have offered over

fifty thousand dollars in rewards for my capture and they have issued orders to shoot on sight and shoot to kill.

I am a Black revolutionary, and by definition, that makes me a part of the Black Liberation Army. The pigs have used their newspapers and TVs to paint the Black Liberation Army as vicious, brutal, mad-dog criminals. They have called us gangsters and gun molls and have compared us to such characters as John Dillinger and Ma Barker. It should be clear, it must be clear to anyone who can think, see, or hear, that we are the victims. The victims and not the criminals.

It should also be clear to us by now who the real criminals are. Nixon and his crime partners have murdered hundreds of Third World brothers and sisters in Vietnam, Cambodia, Mozambique, Angola, and South Africa. As was proved by Watergate, the top law enforcement officials in this country are a lying bunch of criminals. (50)

The clarity of the narrator's political allegiances is clouded by the displacement involved in the act of quotation itself. "I made my tape of 'To My People' on July 4, 1973, and it was broadcast on many radio stations. Here is what I said," Shakur says when introducing the transcript. More confusing is her definition of the Black Liberation Army: "I am a Black revolutionary, and by definition, that makes me part of the Black Liberation Army." It would seem that this militaristic allegiance is not necessarily a chosen one; who, her declaration asks us to consider, decides one's membership in the Black Liberation Army? "Black revolutionaries do not drop from the moon," she says. "We are created by our conditions. Shaped by our oppression. We are being

manufactured in droves in the ghetto streets, places like attica, san quentin, bedford hills, leavenworth, and sing sing” (52). By the end of her recording, Shakur has inverted the government’s narrative of her supposed criminality: she is the recipient of her radical image. This image is the product of distortions authorized by others. Similarly, in her reference to prisons, she suggests that her revolutionary identity is the result of her incarcerated condition; the government, in targeting her as a Black radical, makes her a revolutionary.

Shakur thus becomes the image of a revolutionary, and as such, part of a myth she does not control, one that overshadows her past, but at the same time, one that she embraces. When she meets prisoners after the address is broadcast, they cannot believe her appearance. ““When I saw your picture I thought you was much bigger. And much blacker, too,”” says one prisoner. ““When i asked people what they thought i looked like,”” Shakur writes, ““they would describe someone about six feet tall, two hundred pounds, and very dark and wild looking. [...] ‘And here you are,’”” another prisoner says, ““just a little ole thing’”” (87). The experimental acts of self-representation conveyed in her youthful anecdotes seem to betray a much more significant understanding of identity as an evolving fiction, and for the revolutionary, an instrument both dangerous and powerful. This identity is furthered by the planning that leads to her astonishing pregnancy despite almost constant surveillance, made possible through her meetings with Sundiata Acoli (Clark Squire) as they await trial for the murder of a New Jersey State Trooper. Shakur’s pregnancy flaunts accusations of her role as the “mother hen” of the BLA and becomes a remarkably innovative means of resistance, provoking rage in her

captors, causing endless battles over the conditions of her imprisonment and her right to medical care, and resulting in the delay of her trial for over two years.

The date affixed to the address itself—July 4, 1973—offers further confusion in the guise of an origin's supposed clarity. This date stands out, of course, due to the narrator's self-declared inability to relate to time as a concept, not to mention the chronological disjunctions inherent to the narrative itself. "The statement seemed to take forever to write," Shakur recalls before re-presenting her previous act of self-representation. "I wanted to make a tape of it and enlisted Evelyn's [her aunt and lawyer's] help. As my lawyer, she was dead set against it and advised me not to make the tape" (49). The obvious explanation for Shakur's interest in enlisting time as she introduces her address is to conjure the coincidence of history, to partake in the frisson provided by the 4th of July as the day marking the declaration of her revolutionary stance against the United States government. How long does it take Shakur to write the statement? How long does it take her to convince Evelyn to allow its recording? How long does the manuscript await the tape recorder Evelyn provides? Is it broadcast on the same day that it is made? When does the first broadcast occur? Such questions apparently do not interest the narrator. Indeed, the emergence of this dated declaration in the third of twenty-one chapters might lead readers to believe Shakur will chronicle her decision to join the Black Liberation Army; and although she will discuss her political transformations, she will not mention the BLA directly, nor will she explain how she becomes suspected of membership, nor when exactly she leaves the Black Panthers, just as she will not explain when or where or what she might have been doing during the moments when the various crimes of which she is accused are committed. Thus is this

nested address hitched to the nation's birth. It is a document of self-declaration and self-sacrifice, and as such, a text fraught with contradiction: a declaration of independence by way of an ascribed identity, an inscription that establishes the narrator's resistance by paying homage to the nation she wants to destroy. Her imprisonment signals, after all, the climax of her revolutionary activities; she can declare herself a revolutionary only after the possibility for revolutionary activity fades. In her broadcast Shakur tacitly acknowledges that the only acts of resistance in which she can engage will hereafter be forged according to language's constraints: "Every revolution in history has been accomplished by actions, although words are necessary" (52). The transcript effectively declares its author a revolutionary by virtue of her inability to partake in revolution. Relegated to language, Shakur sutures her image to the textual tradition of the Declaration of Independence, an article that takes its place among the mythical symbols of the popular American history she spends much of her text challenging. Reprinted under the auspices of a disjunctive autobiographical project along with the date of its recording, Shakur's self-echoing transcript seeks the aura that imbues the 4th of July with its magical socio-political power over the American imagination.

Shakur's history thus positions itself according to a partially re-written revolutionary calendar. Writing of the French Revolution in his essay "Theses on the Philosophy of History," Walter Benjamin notes the importance of the calendar as a mind-altering artifact: "The great revolution introduced a new calendar. The initial day of a calendar serves as a historical time-lapse camera [...] it is the same day that keeps recurring in the guise of holidays, which are days of remembrance. Thus the calendars do not measure time as clocks do; they are monuments of a historical consciousness"

(262-263). Shakur's dated announcement refers to an event that sharpens its significance on the grindstone of patriotism; by striking through the mystique of the 4th of July with her own declaration, Shakur encourages her readers to reconsider the date's significance. What freedoms does it mark, and for whom? For Shakur, the 4th of July conjures revolution and revolutionary failure, the foundation myths of the founding fathers and the misdeeds obscured by notions of freedom and justice with which they are associated.

As one of the few dates her narrative provides, July 4, 1973 also conjures the dates to which Shakur does not refer: the dates the crimes of which she is accused are said to have occurred. The trial chronology that precedes her text has prepared the reader to seek such dates as essential indicators of person and place. Instead, Shakur provides her readers with history lessons that digress from the anecdotes of her youth. In these digressions, the specificity inherent to dating is eroded by popular historical fantasies that masquerade as history lessons in elementary schools. Soon after reminiscing about her grandparents' methods of classification for "decent people" and "alley rats," Shakur describes her role as a cherry tree in a school play about George Washington:

Every holiday a class was assigned to put on a play. [...] Our class had George Washington's birthday, and our play was about his cutting down this cherry tree when he was a little boy. I was selected to be in the play. I was tickled pink and so proud. I was cast as one of the cherry trees. The teacher put some green crepe paper over my head and told me to stand at the back of the stage where i was to stay until the end of the play. Then the cherry trees were supposed to sway from side to side and sing:

“George Washington never told a lie, never told a lie, never told a lie.
George Washington never told a lie, and the truth goes marching on.”

I didn't know what a fool they had made out of me until I grew up and started to read real history. [...] Here they had this old craka slavemaster, who didn't give a damn about Black people, and they had me, an unwitting little Black child, doing a play in his honor. When George Washington was fighting for freedom in the Revolutionary War, he was fighting for the freedom of “whites only.” Rich whites, at that. After the so-called Revolution, you couldn't vote unless you were a white man and you owned a plot of land. The Revolutionary War was lead by some rich white boys who got tired of paying heavy taxes to the king. It didn't have anything at all to do with freedom, justice, and equality for all. (33).

In the context of Shakur's narrative, history marks the burden of a repressed or misrepresented past that suddenly reveals itself in a frivolous detail or familiar memory. Shakur's cherry tree recollection redirects her readers to the intersection of history and mythology, an intersection that replaces the unpleasant events of a very real past with more palatable fantasies. Such fantasies form a mythological wellspring tapped in the everyday, a source from which Americans draw their distorted self-images. Shakur recalls that the following school year she had a teacher who actually made “fairy-tale history” “interesting,” and as a result she memorizes Whitman's “Oh Captain, My Captain.” This recollection spurs its own supplemental historical digression: Shakur devotes a paragraph to the argument that the Civil War was less about the freeing of

slaves than it was about protecting the economic interests of the nation's wealthiest factions, the Northern industrialists and the Southern slaveholding aristocracy, in a politically divided country. "Little did i know that Lincoln was an archracist who had openly expressed his disdain for Black people," she states. "He was of the opinion that Black people should be forcibly deported to Africa or anywhere else" (33).

Lincoln is thus once again invoked as the patriarch of Shakur's "fairy-tale history," thereby recalling the coincidental appellation attached to her own great-grandfather, "Pappa Linc." One hundred fifty pages after this digression on Lincoln's racist stance, Shakur digresses one more time to recall Lincoln's misdeeds. In a sudden departure from an account of her college experience and the intellectual interests it awakens, Shakur spends nearly five pages revisiting with significantly more detail her thesis that economic interests, not the desire to free slaves, led to the Civil War. Along the way she quotes from Lincoln's letters, citing the second volume of African American scholar George Washington Williams' seminal work *The History of the Negro Race in America, 1619-1880* (1883) as her source and including the page number on which the quotation is found.

This historical detour reinforces *Assata's* most important functions. What is at stake in the Civil War narrative? For Shakur, Lincoln's reluctance to free the enslaved, his allegiance to Northern industrialists, and the undeniably racist constructs that inform his thought cut to the quick. The deletion of these facts frees the North of its culpability in the history of slavery, its long-standing interest in corporate profits over individual rights, its participation in slavery as yet another tool for the consolidation of wealth. Aside from the factual inaccuracies necessary in the effort to remake the Civil War

narrative as a simplistic liberation tale, the concealed role of Northern industrialists in the perpetuation of slavery becomes a symbol for an editorial tendency in the publicly-constructed comfort narratives of nation-building that educate and implicate American citizens. More important to the project of *Assata* is the interruptive function of history made manifest by the Civil War digression. The act of storytelling requires listeners to put the concerns of the present on hold; when finished, the storyteller releases her audience back into a changed world, one that has moved on without them, but also a changed world because the story's afterimages burn on in light of the present. The past introduced by Shakur inside her own narrative complicates this model, knotting her past to the past of that past, and to the pasts of that past that otherwise conceal the past's past. The trick storytelling plays on time offers itself as a theory of history. Revisiting the past and its ideological fictions, redeploying narrative to dissolve such ideologies, and refiguring this history of narrative through narrative, Shakur patterns a present constantly altered by the interruptive function of the story. The present produces in its passing a series of layered, branching historical narratives for the storyteller to gather as kindling and to set burning.

The smoke that cloaks the present evidences the intensity with which historical narrative burns; in the ashes of the fire lie history's remains. The Civil War narrative that emerges in Chapter Twelve allows Shakur to revisit the historical inaccuracies and ideological whitewashing that inform her recollections of elementary education in Chapter Two. Elementary details beget a historical legacy, reigniting in the everyday an alternative vein to the past, transforming by shock and surprise, instructing and alienating in a single gesture. Leigh Gilmore's meditations on traumatic memory provide a clue to

the oddity of such history lessons. “What,” Gilmore asks, “happens to trauma if it cannot be remembered? What is memory if it is purged of trauma?” Gilmore suggests that the purging of trauma from memory is both an individual and cultural phenomenon:

Cultural memory, like individual memory, develops characteristic and defensive amnesia with which those who have experienced trauma must contend. [...] Remembering trauma entails contextualizing it within history. Insofar as trauma can be that which breaks the frame, rebuilding a frame to contain it is as fraught with difficulty as it is necessary. Placing a personal history of trauma within a collective history compels one to consider that cultural memory, like personal memory, possesses ‘recovered’ or ‘repressed’ memories, and also body (or body politic) memories of minoritized trauma like racial and sexual violence. (31-32)

In Shakur’s digressions, history strikes and sparks against the amnesia of the everyday. By employing digression as a tactic against narrative’s neatly formed frames, Shakur’s autobiographical history attempts to reclaim the trauma concealed by cultural memories—and here, we can remember again Pappa Linc, patriarch of history lost, forgotten, obscured, disinherited. In the refusal to disseminate uncomfortable facts that contradict Civil War liberation mythologies, Shakur recognizes a pattern of denial and dissociation that runs throughout her American experience, one that exchanges truthful self-scrutiny for wealth. “The schools we go to are reflections of the society that created them,” she writes after her Civil War digression. “Schools in amerika are interested in brainwashing people with amerikanism, giving them a little bit of education, and training them in the skills needed to fill the positions the capitalist system requires” (181). Her

project requires a different “frame,” an alternative score by which to transcribe new lyrics. Gilmore’s insistence upon the importance of some other frame or structure in which to situate one’s own trauma provides shelter for Shakur’s discovery of the Civil War, refiguring this section in light of the narrator’s alienation from the repressive frames that surround her, from her grandparents’ middle-class “values” to the self-centered “bags” everyone seems to be after.

As we have seen, Susan Howe’s collection of early poems, *Frame Structures* (1974), also attempts to expand the view through which repressed historical memories frame the present. As noted in her introduction to this volume, Howe’s family nickname bears traces of slave-trading ancestors whose deeds have been disinherited through a family effort to forget, ignore, or dissociate. In a later essay from *The Birth-mark: unsettling the wilderness in American literary history* (1993) entitled “Incloser,” Noah Webster’s first dictionary of American English provides a metaphor for the paradoxical function of the “frame,” fence, or disciplinary boundary according to which an archive, history, or community is defined. The essay takes its name from the verb “inclose” (or “enclose”). Howe’s essay circles around this curious word while also examining the colonial setting that helps to produce Webster’s landmark work. Webster notes that “inclose” may mean “to separate from common grounds by a fence”; yet the word may also mean “to include,” as easily as it may refer to a form of captivity, “to shut in” (*The Birth-Mark* 44). These conflicting definitions accompany Howe’s investigations into the forgotten persecutors of nonconformist thinkers within the nascent Massachusetts Bay Colony. In particular, “Incloser” focuses on a Puritan teacher named Thomas Shepard.

Shepard is partially responsible for the martyrdom and subsequent fame granted to the early American feminist and antinomian Anne Hutchinson.

Hutchinson's story, like *Assata*, includes a series of very public trials that lead to exile. Ejected from her community by the patriarchal fathers entrusted with its governance, Hutchinson was killed by members of the Mohican tribe in 1643. The biblical battles surrounding Hutchinson's persecution inform Howe's understanding of the present, recasting the America she knows: "the arena in which Scripture battles raged among New Englanders with original fury is part of our current American system and events, history and structure" (*Birth-mark*, 47). Central to this history is the personal narrative or first-person testimony that frames the unique experience of the individual within the symbolic language of the community, a symbolic language ultimately policed and edited by men such as Shepard whose duty it is to record the stories they hear. Shepard's notebooks include numerous conversion narratives; the Massachusetts Bay Colony relied upon these conversion testimonies in order to decide whether or not individuals deserved admittance as members of the Colony. In one notebook his own autobiography begins and leaves off, incomplete; turn the notebook over, and he begins his story again, again leaving off, this time even less complete; in the middle of the notebook lies what Howe describes as "the empty center," some eighty unfilled pages (59). Howe thus reflects upon the function of such texts in her own meditations on America's captive archives, histories, and communities:

My writing has been haunted and inspired by a series of texts, woven in shrouds and cordage [...] they are the buried ones, they body them forth. [...] Every statement is a product of collective desires and divisibilities.

Knowledge, no matter how I get it, involves exclusion and repression. National histories hold ruptures and hierarchies. On the scales of global power, what gets crossed over? Foreign accents mark dialogues that delete them. Ambulant vagrant bastardy comes looming through assurance and sanctification. (45)

In the re-adjusted frame Howe constructs, lost men like Thomas Shepard, he of the twice-unfinished autobiography with the empty center, re-emerge as monstrosities inhabiting an alternative American mythos. Shepard spearheads the effort to have Anne Hutchinson cast out of the Colony, reacting with horror to the religious meetings she organizes, in which she and other women gather together to discuss the scripture outside the patriarchal reach of the Colony's elders. Howe cites Cotton Mather's summary of Shepard's effort to eliminate Hutchinson: "From the womb of this *fruitful opinion*, and from the countenance here given to immediate and unwarranted revelations, 'tis not easie to relate how many monsters [...] arose in these regions of *America*: But a *synod* assembled at *Cambridge*, whereof Mr. Shepard was no small part, most happily crushed them all" (*The Birth-Mark*, 52). Left off the register of famous Americans, Shepard's hollow testimony nevertheless speaks to the silence of history and to the violence that encloses the American past and present, yet remains absent from the chronicles.

The alternative American mythos Howe fabricates out of these forgotten texts seizes upon the directive issued by her poetic forerunner Charles Olson and sets her work apart from much of what has been described as "language writing." In a letter to the anthropologist Ruth Benedict, Olson writes, "It is my feeling that *the record of fact* is become of first importance for us lost in sea of question. [...] I think if you burn the facts

long and hard enough in yourself as crucible you'll come to the few facts that matter. And then fact can be fable again" (*Selected Letters*, 58). Howe's research regularly confronts the archival and editorial bias whereby voices of the disempowered or marginalized, especially the testimonies of women—are repressed, excluded, or altered by the patriarchal authorities who have traditionally policed public discourse and served as gatekeepers to the historical record. What distinguishes her work from that of many of her contemporaries associated with "language writing," or what I have described in the introduction as the "language regime," is that, through her use of largely ignored curiosities or fragments considered unimportant by those charged with overseeing the archives, Howe's investigatory works construct clear, carefully-researched, direct and convincing political arguments. These arguments depend upon archival "discoveries" that testify to deeply-rooted historical distortions; such distortions remain vital to American politics and to the strategies of containment and captivity through which select constituencies, collaborators, agencies, and individuals consolidate wealth while maintaining a monopoly over the use of violence.

Like Howe, Shakur uses the American tradition of the personal narrative to mobilize forgotten histories. *Assata* proceeds from "the record of fact" toward legend. The factual details of Shakur's story surrender to the fantastic features of its unbelievable ending. As Margo V. Perkins notes in her study of *Assata*, "the most subtle silence in Shakur's text is that surrounding details of her actual activities as an intellectual." This silence is only topped by "the silences surrounding her prison escape," which Perkins characterizes as "commensurately glaring" (18). Although Perkins' suggestion that such silences are necessary to protect her co-conspirators rings true, these silences may also

have another function: they allow Shakur's legend to flourish in the mystery of her activities, escape, and exile.

The extraordinary efforts on the part of the state to prove Shakur's guilt lend significance to such silences. Photography is one of the primary means with which the government repeatedly attempts to frame Shakur's criminality. Because the images captured by a bank's security cameras do not bear a sufficient resemblance to Shakur, the government's lawyers attempt to reproduce her photographic image to match the film from the security camera. When Shakur protests having her picture taken in court, she is manhandled by marshals who force her to be photographed. The results are comical:

The FBI had blocked out the faces and hands of the marshals and FBI agents choking and assaulting me. They had cropped the picture so that the only thing the jury could see was my face. But my facial expression in the photograph was one of such agony [...] the FBI came up with a brilliant idea. They brought in some dude from the FBI who said he was an expert on identifying photographs by examining them under a microscope. He was a real pro, slick as grease. He had charts and diagrams and whatnot, and i was worried to death that the jury would go for that crap. He sounded real good, until it came time for cross-examination. It turned out that he was a specialist in paleontology and had spent a lot of time studying rocks. [...] The day our photographic expert testified [...] he explained to the jury the chemical process of photography and what the FBI agent said was absolutely impossible. He said that if you look at a photography under a microscope all you will see is little

dots. [...] The capper came when the manager of the bank came forward to testify on my behalf. He said that i was definitely not the woman who robbed the bank and that the robber was a different height and weight from mine.

The government thus attempts to prove the fidelity of one image to another in the effort to prove Shakur's guilt. In the government's attempted disavowal of present truths for photographic manipulations of the past, the courtroom scene described above recalls Shakur's earlier reference to *No Exit* (or *Huis Clos*, "in camera"), in which characters prefer their own rearranged self-images to the images of themselves conjured by the other characters whose company they share. The government's attempts to frame the correct picture of Shakur only enhance the importance of her photographic image as mystery and symbol. Even as she lives in exile, the image that graces her autobiography gestures not only to her revolutionary leanings, but also to her capture and enclosure, to her perpetual incarceration inside the government's narrative of criminality.

Assata as Narrative, Myth, Image

A woman whose birth goes unreported in the chronicles becomes a cult hero, defending the oppressed and the underprivileged, and as such, is perceived as a threat to the ruler; the ruler's minions charge her with crimes of which she professes her innocence; while in prison awaiting trial, she miraculously conceives and gives birth to a daughter, giving her accusers further reason to suspect her of evil; she is convicted and sent to prison; after an astounding prison escape she becomes an underground legend,

living beyond the reach of the ruler on a far-off island from which only a handful of visitors are said to have returned.

Thus does legend of *Assata* emerge when one assembles Shakur's disconnected narrative. Common sense tells us that myth resides on the other side of reality from history; much of this chapter has suggested, as have many others, that the cultural and political forces myth employs usually furthers the interests of those in power. *Assata* recognizes this same dynamic; the narrator herself berates the endurance of "fairy-tale" history. Nonetheless, *Assata* also presents an alternative mythos, one in which the narrator herself might become the agent of change portrayed in plays schoolchildren perform. Narrative, Hayden White writes, "entails ontological and epistemic choices with distinct ideological and even specifically political implications." For this reason, he suggests, "Far from being a neutral medium for the representation of historical events and processes, [narrative] is the very stuff of a mythical view of reality, a conceptual or pseudoconceptual 'content' which, when used to represent real events, endows them with an illusory coherence and charges them with the kinds of meanings more characteristic of oneiric than of waking thought" (ix). The narrator's exploration of self-imagining and self-scrutiny in the text of *Assata* leads her to the conclusion White draws and thus destroys the cultural frame that would allow her to represent herself in a straightforward autobiographical enterprise. Shakur pulls the sheet off narration's ghostly face; the expression its form circumscribes is all-too familiar. When she turns from narrative to history and back, Shakur is distilling the past in order to mythologize its forgotten facts and to weave her own image into the fabric of America's historical fables.

In the wake of her mythological undertaking, numerous mysteries emerge: the unusual circumstances surrounding the death of Shakur's attorney Stanley Cohen during her trial for the murder of the New Jersey State Trooper, resulting in the confiscation of her legal papers by the New York City police; the death of Shakur's co-defendant in a trial for kidnapping (the fabricated testimony of an FBI operative led to her acquittal), Rema Olugbala (Melvin Kearney), who supposedly fell to his death in an attempt to escape jail; the relationship between Shakur's escape and the Brink's Robbery case, involving the robbery of an armored car in Nyack, New York, and leading to the arrest of several people said to have aided her escape⁴³; and numerous other links between Shakur's fate and the fate of fellow revolutionaries, in particular former Black Panthers acquitted in the case of the New York 21, and subsequently convicted in other cases, often on suspect evidence (see Churchill and Vander Wall, 158).

These unexplained events add to the aura Shakur's exile foments. Her silence concerning the government's accusations allows the government's biography to become a part of her own. By refusing to address the questions that surround her revolutionary activities, Shakur forces her readers to ask themselves why her guilt or innocence actually matters. To resist engaging such questions is to resist the self-evident values her grandparents emphasize, to resist the simplistic, moralistic judgments Americans prefer, the kind of judgments that rewrite history so that national heroes—the George Washingtons and Abraham Lincolns—cannot tell lies, cannot be racist. To remain silent is to use readers' expectations to her advantage, to fashion from her broken narrative a mirror that reflects the reader's desire for knowledge. The image others project provides

⁴³ See "Brinks Robbery Casts Shadows From the Past." *New York Times* 31 Oct. 1981.

another disguise behind which, once again, *Assata* vanishes. In a mode reminiscent of Amiri Baraka's nationalist chants,⁴⁴ Shakur thus concludes the final poem in *Assata*:

We carried it on.
 Carried on the tradition.
 Carried a strong tradition.
 Carried a proud tradition.
 Carried a Black tradition.
 Carry it on.
 Pass it down to the children.
 Pass it down.
 Carry it on.
 Carry it on now.
 Carry it on
 TO FREEDOM! (264-265)

The poetry that has served as the coda to Shakur's earlier chapters abandons its personal references and speaks through a time and a people. The evisceration of the individual voice brings her project to a "natural" ending: from the out-of-body arrest that begins her story, to the concluding pages that describe, in the most general and vague terms, the circumstances of her Cuban exile, Shakur's autobiography circles an empty center for which Thomas Shepard's incomplete life story provides a visual equivalent. "A narrative refuses to conform to its project," Susan Howe writes; Shakur's life story refuses to furbish the details her readers desire (*The Birth-Mark*, 61). *Assata's* nonconforming

⁴⁴ See "It's Nation Time" for an example of Baraka's invocatory nationalist verses, reprinted in *The LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka Reader*, 240.

narrator leaves in her wake the possibility for the historical imagination Howe proposes, that which “gathers in the missing” (*Frame Structures*, 3). Distant though she may be, Shakur’s autobiographical project makes present her hallowed image. In *Assata*, America’s collective (revolutionary) imagination must confront its own empty center. By establishing her character as a shape-shifter capable of becoming what others want her to be, Shakur courts the ascription of identity by the state as the basis for a revolutionary strategy. She proposes a subjectivity that is radical because it is fleeting. She pursues resistance as an underground process in which the willful adoption of the alienating identity ascribed by the state becomes one step in the adoption of aliases and experimental selves developed in order to deflect, disguise, or distract attention from one’s actual revolutionary activities. Shakur’s version of subjectivity prefers the temporary to the authentic and the evanescent to the concrete. For the subject who takes shape in *Assata*, escape, obsolescence, and disappearance mark the imminent events that always await her, that simultaneously sculpt and dismantle experience.

In the chapter that follows I examine *Angela Davis: An Autobiography* (1974). Davis’s text produces yet another radical, experimental form of subjectivity, similarly borne of governmental surveillance. The narrative that establishes Davis’s textual identity maintains a linear trajectory and appears to conform to a fairly conventional autobiographical frame. Published over ten years before *Assata*, Davis’s book provides a model from which Shakur’s own narrative appears to borrow significantly, and from which it departs. Rather than pursuing a revisionist history through the courting of a mythical identity, Davis’s text assumes a philosophical stance. Her autobiography takes the place of the doctoral dissertation she cannot finish following her arrest. In the place

of her dissertation, through movements of the body and the discursive maneuvering of an oppositional politics, Davis's philosophical life-writing recasts the boundaries of disciplinary study as extensions of the prison regime and the logic of confinement. As an alternative to institutionalized discipline, *Angela* asserts the value of experience and activism. Revolutionary action begins in space and time, with the movement of the body—individual as well as collective. The insistence upon *movement* throughout *Angela* challenges the passive, inactive tenure of the language regime, a regime that comes to occupy many American universities following the destruction of the Black Liberation Movement. Through its depoliticized, socially-disengaged, language-focused analyses, the language regime ultimately normalizes and assimilates radical writers and intellectuals. While *enclosing* the works of writers such as Charles Olson within the limits of conservative educational and cultural institutions, the following chapter argues that the language regime effectively eliminates from the landscape of contemporary American literature works such as *Angela*, in which ostensibly conventional “life-writing” conceals radical philosophical and political positions.

4

“Look, Dick, Look”: Reading Ignorance, Decoding Power
 Disciplinary Boundaries, Threshold Violence, and the Trespassing
 Body in *Angela Davis: An Autobiography*

The documents of resistance discussed in previous chapters embody innovative forms, dismissing various autobiographical conventions in order to pursue unusual, improvised structures. In contrast, *Angela Davis: An Autobiography* (1974) follows a fairly conventional structure. The narrator’s flight from the law and her eventual arrest, events recounted in the first chapter, establish crises that the last chapters resolve by describing her legal defense and the outcome of her trial. And yet, these traditional storytelling strategies construct an unremarkable façade that conceals an innovative methodological stance; *Angela* challenges deeply-entrenched criteria used to evaluate and segregate forms of cultural and material production. Its experimentation with the autobiographical form as a vessel for political resistance and epistemological inquiry disrupts the disciplinary boundaries between philosophy and literature, history and political science. Behind the book’s cover image of the author in the “natural” hairstyle with which she continues to be identified, beneath the comforting, linear body of the central narrative, disguised by the languid descriptions of people and places that influence the narrator’s decisions and development, *Angela* proposes a reorientation of knowledge in which the prison plays a fundamental role.

Through an analysis of the violence and discipline that define the radically-impooverished experiences of prisoners, *Angela* challenges the role of the academy as a sanctuary for knowledge. Using physical and political movements as primary but

loosely-defined philosophical principles, Davis attempts to unravel the violent stupidity behind her own experiences. As the chronicle of an unfinished dissertation that nonetheless collects a lifetime's worth of knowledge in order to contribute an original document of historical and cultural critique, Davis's autobiography interrogates the standardizing methods and policing practices that define disciplinary boundaries. These boundaries represent conceptual equivalents to the very real boundaries imposed by geographical borders, guarded buildings, the rings of barbed-wire running across the tops of prison walls.

Davis's autobiography circles around the potential relationship between the position of the physical body in space and the conceptual territory occupied by forms of thought. This relationship appears to reflect her experiences as the target of governmental campaigns to silence political dissidents. The story of her own fame begins with the policing of the university; in 1969, media reports began circulating regarding the "controversial" hiring of Angela Y. Davis for a lectureship in the philosophy department of UCLA. Davis was then a twenty-five year old Ph.D. student at the University of California, San Diego; she had completed all requirements for her degree, save her dissertation. Stories regarding her appointment emerged through the coordinated efforts of federal and state officials, in concert with sympathetic contacts in the press.⁴⁵ The media effort to target Davis regularly sought to "authenticate" the danger

⁴⁵ The media contacts likely employed by government officials include *San Francisco Examiner* reporter Ed Montgomery. See Churchill and Vander Wall, *Agents of Repression*, for a list of FBI media contacts, among whom Montgomery is listed. Montgomery's legacy includes the suspicious interview with Vanita Anderson mentioned in Chapter 1, in which Montgomery credits Anderson, a former Black Panther supporter who visited Jackson on the day he was killed and who later became a law professor promoting jobs in the California Department of Corrections, with the theory that Jackson was set up by the Panthers—rather than by prison officials, as all other evidence would suggest.

posed by her sworn allegiance to the Communist Party through the use of visual “evidence”; photographic portraits of Davis in what would become her trademark Afro almost inevitably accompanied stories of her battles with the Board of Regents. Accusatory and supportive articles left Davis feeling equally misrepresented: “I was portrayed as a conspiratorial and monstrous Communist... whose unruly natural hairdo symbolized Black militancy... [or as] a charismatic and raucous revolutionary... Since I considered myself neither monstrous nor charismatic, I felt fundamentally betrayed on both accounts” (“Afro Images,” 39).

The controversy attracted the attention of California Governor Ronald Reagan, whose attempts to control campus politics had begun several years earlier during the Berkeley Free Speech Movement. In September of 1969, Davis was fired by the University of California Board of Regents. Davis continued to press her case, drawing the support of students and some members of the faculty; the Regents ignored University recommendations and dismissed her. After a court decision on her behalf, she was reinstated. During this time, the case against the Soledad Brothers also reached the media. Davis made use of her notoriety to campaign on their behalf, serving as one of the founding members of the Soledad Brothers Defense Committee. In the spring of 1970, the Board of Regents used her speeches about the case to justify a refusal to renew her contract; according to the Regents, Davis’s speeches on the Soledad Brothers were “inflammatory,” constituting “a breach of professional ethics” (Aptheker, 4).

On August 7, 1970, George’s brother, Jonathan, led a takeover of the Marin County Courthouse; he was killed, along with one of his hostages, Judge Harold Haley, and two San Quentin prisoners, James McClain and William Christmas, who were in

court that day for McClain's trial, in which he was accused of assaulting a guard. A week later, an arrest warrant was issued for Angela Yvonne Davis, accused of aggravated kidnapping and the first degree murder of Judge Haley according to a long-forgotten California law, "Section 31 of the California Penal Code." This law, as Bettina Aptheker notes in her book *The Morning Breaks: The Trial of Angela Davis*, "had seldom been invoked"; "its constitutionality was questionable because it abolished the distinction between an accessory before the commission of the crime, and a principal partaking in the commission of a crime" (21). Moreover, the charges against Davis intersected with the effort to pass legislation expanding the government's law enforcement capacities. Between her disappearance and her arrest, scores of Black women throughout the country suddenly found themselves the targets of intensified police scrutiny; meanwhile, the same newspapers reporting on Davis and the brand of "terrorism" the government claimed she sanctioned also followed the movement of the Nixon Administration's crime bill through Congress:

On the 18th of August FBI Director, J. Edgar Hoover, placed Angela Davis on his list of "Ten Most Wanted" criminals.... Wild rumors circulated through the press.... One report said Angela was in Birmingham.... Another placed Angela en route to Paris. Another said she was still in Los Angeles.... A veritable reign of terror descended upon every Black community in the country. Young women, especially if they happened to be light complected and happened to wear their hair in an Afro style, were most vulnerable to the dragnet. Literally hundreds were detained, searched and questioned.... Angela was arrested by special agents of the

FBI on October 13th, 1970 in New York City. President Richard M. Nixon appeared on national television for ceremonies attendant to the passage of his new crime bill. The President took the occasion to congratulate FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover for the capture of the dangerous terrorist, Angela Davis.

(Aptheker, 21-4)

The very same day, the *New York Times* published a letter from George Jackson to Angela Davis, “a former philosophy professor... on the F.B.I.’s Most Wanted List as an outgrowth of the spectacular San Rafael shootout last August” (“Soledad: A Letter to Angela Davis”, 45).

The letter published by the *Times* captures the media’s fascination with the cases of both activists. Its point of departure is the only photograph of Davis that Jackson’s captors have allowed him to keep. The photograph frames frustrations that inform his daily existence as prisoner, coloring Angela’s image with his own anger: “As I think of this present situation, the things that happen all day, the case they’ve saddled me with, in retrospection of the aggregate injury—all now drawn against the background of this picture you’ve given me—no one will profit from this, sister... They’ve created in me one irate, resentful nigger” (47). Taken out of the context of the larger correspondence, the romantic overtones of the letter printed in the *Times* overwhelm whatever political allegiances Jackson and Davis claim to share. “Do you sense how drunk this photograph has made me,” Jackson’s letter concludes, “You’ve got it all, African woman. I’m very pleased, if you don’t ask me for my left arm, my right eye, both eyes, I’ll be very disappointed. You’re the most powerful stimulus I could have” (47). In selecting this

particular letter for publication, the *Times* anticipated with disturbing prescience the court case that would unfold against Davis several months later. At her trial in San Jose, California, prosecutors would attempt to link Davis to Jonathan Jackson's courthouse raid through a romantic narrative. They would claim that her love for George Jackson had led her to aid his brother in the courthouse raid which (although the prosecution could not prove this point) ostensibly served as prelude for a plan to free the Soledad Brothers as well.

Since the publication of her autobiography, Davis has worked for decades as a political organizer and professor, demonstrating in her publications and through her continuing commitment to a variety of causes a steadfast refusal to reduce these labors to such simplistic, romantic narratives. The story told by prosecutors attempts to strip Davis's relationship with Jackson of any socio-political relevance, calling upon racist, sexist fantasies to undermine the affinity they have built from a common interest in strategies of resistance. The transformation of the figures of resistance continues through time; Davis notes that her own image has suffered a similar fate. In her essay "Afro Images: Politics, Fashion, and Nostalgia" (1994), Davis writes, "it is both humiliating and humbling to discover that a single generation after the events that constructed me as a public personality, I am remembered as a hairdo" (37). Her autobiography resists any easy translations of revolutionary thought into commercially-exploited iconographies by carefully detailing her own experiences amongst various revolutionary organizations, from the Communist Party, to Ron Karenga's US, to the Black Panther Party. Rather than seek out new formal arrangements to counteract the distorted images and histories offered by the government and its secret operatives, Davis attempts a comprehensive

chronicle of her own experiences, including the numerous disagreements and fractures between various activist groups and political organizations. In following the details and innermost disputes that divide or unify these groups, Davis constructs a text that refuses to spin idealized fantasies of the political organizations with which she works. Unlike the illusions of unity courted in the collective autobiography of the New York 21, Davis documents individual as well as ideological disagreements that inform her activist experiences. Her determination to represent “the struggle” without glamorizing the tedious labors political organizing requires, without ignoring the constant quibbling over ideological positions, without neglecting the obstacles posed by individual egos and weaknesses, signals her willingness to explore contradictions and shortcomings, and marks the seriousness with which Davis treats political activism. Her prose often assumes a detached, objective, reportorial tone; as she digresses to address the lessons imparted by various experiences, the events she describes assume a tangible presence as objects of inquiry; a reflexive analytical impulse drives the text. Narrative emerges as a mode of expression for what is, in fact, a philosophical project.

As it collapses distinctions between autobiography and philosophy, *Angela* illuminates the restrictions imposed by traditional, institutionalized modes of intellectual inquiry and analysis. Although its over-arching narrative structure may be described as conventional, a large part of what makes this autobiography “experimental” or innovative is the purpose behind its composition. In *Autobiography as Activism* (2000), Margo V. Perkins suggests Davis’s book shares much with the autobiographies of Elaine Brown and Assata Shakur, writers who, like Davis, conceive of their life stories as “extensions of their activist work” (xv). Furthermore, in the preface to her book, Davis states

explicitly that hers will be a “political autobiography” (Davis, xvi; cited in Perkins, 3). In order to achieve this purpose, her text wagers on the variety of actions and events catalogued under the word “movement.”

As a word associated with forms of grassroots political organizing designed to effect political change, questions of how one might facilitate mass movements are central to *Angela* and have defined Davis’s life. In addition, her autobiography places special emphasis on forms of “movement” that describe the process through which the position of the body changes, relative to its surroundings; in this sense, the process of continual negotiation that movement captures, that which draws its energy and power from the friction between the physical body and its immediate exterior environment, serves a vital structural function, pushing the narrator to understand the relationship between her own movement through time and space, and the grassroots political movement that ultimately helps to win her freedom. *Angela* thus unfolds along the often illegible boundary according to which sense perception establishes the body’s limits. The threshold that divides internal sensations and self-directed actions from exterior influences and varieties of experience, products generated by forces beyond the control of the individual, serves as the staging ground for her inquiries. If a commitment to mass movement drives Davis’s autobiography, questions regarding the relationship that such political events bear to forms of movement as experienced in physical phenomena and as varieties of experience that construct a personal history remain no less central. The progression of the body through space and time; the employment of muscle fibers in response to stimuli; the physical and mental efforts necessary to change the position of the body itself, and to influence the movements of surrounding bodies; these seemingly self-directed forms and

experiences of movement appear intimately bound by history and circumstance to a vast collection of forces, exterior to the body, that nonetheless influence its locations and that impose constraints on its activities, that help determine crucial cultural and political variables, and that restrict varieties of action or reaction available to a given individual.

Migrations, removes, escapes, travels; Davis's autobiographical narrative traces the coordinates of a world map in the making. Although the author was just 28 years old when she composed *Angela*, the story she tells requires some 400 pages. The first chapter begins with her flight from the law after she is named as an accomplice in Jonathan Jackson's takeover of the Marin Courthouse, and moves on to tell the story of her arrest while living underground as a fugitive in New York; it provides the details of her incarceration before concluding with her extradition to California to stand trial. Subsequent chapters retrace the personal history preceding the dramatic events of the lengthy first chapter. In a straightforward, mostly linear fashion, the central body of Davis's text recalls her childhood, beginning with her family's experiences in pre-Civil Rights Birmingham, Alabama, including their move from a housing project to the infamous neighborhood known as "Dynamite Hill," the site of various racially-motivated bombings. Additional chapters trace Davis's political maturation while attending high school in New York, her college years at Brandeis, her studies abroad in Germany, her travels in Europe, her pursuit of a doctorate in philosophy at the University of California, San Diego, her burgeoning interest in the Black Power movement, her visit to Cuba, her decision to join the Communist Party, and the controversy that erupts as a result of this decision after her appointment as a lecturer at the University of California, Los Angeles; meanwhile, Davis's doctoral dissertation goes unfinished. The last chapters pick up

where the first chapter left off, returning to her extradition from New York to California. Drawing upon the familiar techniques of the courtroom drama, Davis describes in great detail the deliberations behind her defense, building toward a suspenseful finish in which the outcome of her trial, though no mystery to most readers, provides a neat, almost cinematic ending to the narrative.

However conventional *Angela's* formal organization may seem, the trajectory of the narrative fulfills an experimental, distinctly de-individuated purpose. While sheltering the strategic political concepts that contribute to Davis's efforts in tracing the dynamics of power, *Angela* allows for a thorough investigation of the curious equation by which historical forces construct scenarios of oppression and scenarios of liberation. Bound by (and to) the physical and perceptual limits of the body, the matrix of perceptual, cultural, and historical factors that converge under the category of movement trace a project with ambitions that outstrip the self-representational prerogatives and paradoxes commonly associated with autobiography. *Angela* impersonates autobiography in order to pursue paths of inquiry that transgress the boundaries of philosophical discourses and the autobiographical genre. In light of her discoveries, the narrator's individual experiences of oppression and liberation appear encryptions of larger, more far-reaching dynamics through which historical processes come into being. As a catalyst for political change, the word "movement" points to the exercises and reorientations necessary to shift distributions of power; as a set of embodied actions and events, Davis's text maps "movement" as a function of the human body. The repositioning of the body signals the influence of power; the forces and exertions that alter movements through space trace violence, the lurking threat and final solution

through which those who have power ensure its preservation. *Angela* attempts to graph these forces, producing a textual body marked by anonymous state agents and interests, clandestine operatives engaged in the rewriting of personal narratives, alongside the complex dynamics that organize less ominous edifices of power such as educational and cultural institutions.

As a project authorized and sanctioned by the state's system of higher education, Davis's unfinished doctoral dissertation in philosophy holds a special place among the movements and transformations that her autobiographical narrative reconstructs. When she is not working with various political organizations, the dissertation consumes Davis's time. Explaining her activities in the summer of 1970, Davis writes, "under ordinary circumstances—that is, if the UCLA affair had not exploded into an all-consuming aspect of my life—the dissertation would have already been done" (274). The unfinished dissertation will thus provide her with an alibi—her use of resources housed in the University of California's Berkeley libraries as part of her dissertation research—when authorities suggest her visits to the Bay Area are part of her efforts to aid Jonathan Jackson in his takeover of the Marin Courthouse. Abandoned by necessity when she goes into hiding, the dissertation continues to cast its shadow over the narrative, naming the intellectual task to which her energy would be devoted, were it not for her imprisonment. By the conclusion of her trial, Davis's interest in academic scholarship appears to have greatly diminished. The last few pages fail to mention her academic work, describing instead her immediate plans to organize and agitate on behalf of political prisoners. Nonetheless, the chapter that follows asserts that her autobiography effectively becomes the dissertation in philosophy otherwise left incomplete. *Angela*

Davis: An Autobiography does not stand in for a dissertation in philosophy, it is a philosophical work. *Angela's* straightforward narrative constitutes an innovative, oppositional, politically-motivated effort to remake the discipline of philosophy through the movements the narrator witnesses, and to which she contributes. For Davis's narrator-philosopher, the disciplinary boundaries of philosophy, the body of philosophy proper, begins with the body itself—racially marked, gendered, circumscribed by history, geography, class. *Angela* proposes a philosophy unbound, one that engages the relationship between the physical body and its material surroundings.

This compounding of autobiographical narrative and philosophical inquiry represents a vital political and intellectual statement. The composite form and function of Davis's text trespasses disciplinary territories as part of an ongoing struggle over voice and discourse, power and knowledge, truth and value. Accordingly, such terms refer to no "outside" authority or system of thought, but to the ever-present now in which complex political and economic mechanisms influence distributions of power. *Angela* traces its narrator's efforts to map this machine, to understand its inner workings and organizing principles. If the ignorance of power allows an embrace of violence, brutal stupidity, Davis's refusal to relinquish her analytical powers suggests her desire to counteract the dumb force that power wields. The subject is she who sets out to survey this system, as well as the system itself, that which pushes against her efforts, redirects her energies, takes inventory of her activities. Amidst the positional shifts that push and probe the forces of power, the practice of philosophy acquires a cartographic function: the narrator's body becomes the legend for the map her movements trace as narrative. The actions taken by government agents and authorities inscribe the identity that her

autobiography attempts to refashion. The body of her text records strategies and movements in an attempt to resist the state's repressive ideologies and interventions. Its contours define a critical struggle, the meaning of which belongs to others, the outcome of which she cannot control. As the embodiment of disparate modes and methodologies, *Angela* generates yet another version of what other chapters have defined as apparitional subjectivity. In this case, *Angela's* apparitional subjectivity begins with the narrator's surrendering of the autobiography to the specific political events and movements that define her experience. Employing storytelling, history, and philosophy as equally viable tools in the effort to comprehend the network of economic interests and ideological structures that intervene and redirect oppositional forms of knowledge and ways of being, Davis re-conceptualizes philosophy as an ongoing process of de-individuation and disorientation. These are necessary consequences. The effort to unhinge ideological frameworks that authorize dehumanizing practices, varieties of government repression delivered through violent and non-violent actions of state juridical apparatuses, secret bureaucratic agencies, and covert operatives, demands a process of re-education that disavows notions of a fixed, stable identity. According to the historical and political engagement her autobiography maps, dominant ideologies from which state power issues define forms of identity that must be disturbed, divided, or disavowed. Actions and movements—of individuals, as well as groups and masses—must be designed to disrupt the functional dynamics by which state-administered forms of identity take shape. In its investigations of the relationship between movement as manifested in individual and collective acts of dissidence, and state-administered efforts to control the identities, positions, and movements of the body politic, *Angela* models a philosophy of

engagement in which individual actions probe apparatuses of containment and constraint. In an effort to map weaknesses in state ideology or mark unguarded passages through which power might be accessed, *Angela* sanctions revolutionary philosophical labor, recruiting revolutionary actors to search for gaps in social mechanisms of control and containment that might allow for movements and migrations, transformations in bodies of thought that also allow for changing relationships between physical bodies.

The Violence of the Threshold

Angela's opening paragraphs reflect the body's centrality in the narrative that follows. Dated August 9, 1970, her story begins two days after the murder of George Jackson's brother, Jonathan, during his takeover of the Marin County Courthouse. After learning that an arrest warrant has been issued in her name, a friend helps Davis prepare to go into hiding. The mirror scene constructed by the first sentences thus reads as a masterful pastiche of the endless identity crises at the heart of autobiography:

I believe I thanked her but I am not sure. Perhaps I simply watched her dig into the shopping bag and accepted in silence the wig she held out to me. It lay like a small frightened animal in my hand....

I walked toward the bathroom and stood before the mirror trying to fit the ends of my hair under the tight elastic. Like broken wings my hands floundered about my head, my thoughts completely dissociated from their movement. When finally I glanced into the mirror... I saw a face so filled with anguish, tension and uncertainty I did not recognize it as my own..... I looked absurd, grotesque. I snatched the wig off my

head, threw it on the floor... I forced the wig back on my head. I had to look normal; I could not arouse the suspicion of the attendant in the station where we would have to gas up the car.

As the narrator recreates this abject scene of self-reflective despair, *Angela* nominates the body as the corporeal, embodied product of historical forces, the material out of which the state's juridical apparatuses refashion "grotesque," morbid, living archives. The opening passages of her text thus activate literary legacies rooted in slave narrative, conjure the tactics of resistance commonly found in narratives of passing, and employ rhetorical twists, personifying the wig while animalizing and dehumanizing the narrator. As introductions to the philosophical investigations that follow, these sentences insist upon the relationship between individual experience and the exterior forces of history through which such relationships are formed or find meaning.

Beginning with her donning of the wig, the evasive maneuvers that define Davis's time in hiding establish themes of the body and movement as the text's dominant themes. The subtle registers through which consciousness comes into bodily knowledge serve as potential foundations for transformative philosophies. The activity with which her own experience makes manifest the relationship between the physical body and the asymmetrical distribution of force across social spaces and geographical territories is movement. She must call upon families and friends of friends whom she has never met, strangers who have risked their own arrest under charges of harboring a fugitive in order to take her in: "I left the car and timidly rang the doorbell. What if we had misunderstood the house number and this was the wrong place? Anxiously waiting for the door to open, I wondered what the people were like, how they looked, how they

would react to me,” Davis writes of one such moment while in hiding (7). These clandestine movements conjure cultural legacies of the underground railroad: “Thousands of my ancestors had waited, as I had done, for nightfall to cover their steps, had leaned on one true friend to help them, had felt, as I did, the very teeth of the dogs at their heels” (5-6). The crimes with which she has been charged posit murder as the possible penalty of her conviction. Traversing geographical, political, and cultural territories allows Davis to record subtle shifts in relative degrees of power. Along the thresholds through which bodies pass, asymmetrical distributions of power become palpable. Throughout *Angela*, the violence of the border or boundary serves as the means with which power is made flesh, becomes real, inscribes itself as brute force onto (or makes visible the threat of brute force against) trespassing bodies.

Her experiences in jail attest to the varieties of bodily knowledge that restrict or help to contain acts of resistance. After her arrest, Davis is placed in the New York Women’s House of Detention, a city jail in Greenwich Village. Prison officials seem uncertain as to how they should handle a prisoner with the notoriety that Davis has gained during her time in hiding; as they move her through various improvised cells in an attempt to keep her out of the general population, Davis learns the basic features of prison life. Her experiences describe the terms through which the physical, biological body identifies itself or is classified by others. This process of identification makes manifest deeply-embedded political constraints often understood as the “natural” products of biological reproduction: “I was bewildered and awed by the way in which the vast majority of the jail population had neatly organized itself into generations of families: mothers/wives, fathers/husbands, sons and daughters, even aunts, uncles, grandmothers

and grandfathers” (53). This system at first appears to provide a refuge that empowers prisoners and strengthens the bonds between them; over time, however, Davis comes to see the voluntary institution of heterosexual family structures amongst the all-female population of the prison—what she sarcastically refers to as the prison’s version of “The Gay Life”—as another manifestation of coercion and control: “Certainly, it was a way to counteract some of the pain of jail life; but objectively, it served to perpetuate all the bad things about the House of Detention... ‘The Gay Life’ was all-consuming; it prevented many of the women from developing their personal dissatisfaction with the conditions around them into a political dissatisfaction” (55). The jailhouse relocations that follow her capture measure the interior of the prison as a continuum that moves from spaces of relative freedom to the unknown immobility represented by the corpses of those who die inside. Rather than reading the improvised family structures that rewrite the identities of individual prisoners as a sign of enduring resistance to prison’s institutionalized homogeneity, Davis discerns the evisceration of a politics of resistance; in its place, a “resistance of desperation” emerges, “based on the assumption that the prison system will continue to survive”; prisoners colonize whatever spaces their jailers allow them to control, elaborating their own systems of control and coercion that ultimately fulfill the will of their captors.

The threats of violence that provide the ultimate means with which the House of Detention’s authorities maintain control result in dramatic tensions made most palpable as prisoners are transported from one space to another. Like the sudden rush of air into a vacuum, the movement from one policed space to another results in quick and violent bursts of energy. Near the end of the first chapter, Davis is escorted through the New

York House of Detention; she has been told that her lawyer is waiting to see her, but in fact, New York authorities are preparing to extradite her to California. Refusing to submit to a strip search, Davis sits down, explaining that she would prefer to wait for her lawyer. Prison officials begin to assemble, including two officers, a librarian and a front desk clerk, who have always appeared unusually kind to Davis. Their presence proves disorienting; as she tries to understand what is happening, Davis notices “two men in guard’s uniforms” coming up behind her; forewarned by a fellow inmate that these male guards are always on duty, but only called upon when brute force is “deemed necessary,” Davis takes action:

I jumped up, took a battle stance and prepared to defend myself. One of them grabbed my arm. I kicked him. When the other man came to his aid, they both knocked me to the floor. By the time I could get up, the deputy warden and some of her female helpers were in on the action—as if two male prison guards weren’t capable of subduing me.

At this moment, the two officers standing on the sidelines threw themselves into the fight. Their entrance into the battle was a shock—were they too willing to go to bat for the enemy? But it was even more of a shock to discover that they were not trying to subdue me but rather were beating the men who, by now, were really roughing me up.

The fight turned into a free-for-all. No one really know who was on whose side. In all the confusion, both men managed to grab me, each one seizing an arm....

Bruised and breathless, there was nothing I could do to prevent them from locking the handcuffs. (68)

This scene establishes a limit case regarding the threat of violence that distinguishes Davis's experiences of thresholds and boundaries throughout the narrative. Following her extradition to California, the narrative turns to Davis's life before her arrest, chronicling her childhood, her education, and her travels, repeatedly exploring the curious territorial apparatuses according to which movements across thresholds become manifestations of violence. These experiences rewrite the American "frontier" as a series of checkpoints, border crossings, and closely-guarded territories.

The second chapter tells the story of Davis's childhood, beginning with another border crossing marked by violence: her family's move to the Birmingham neighborhood that would become known as "Dynamite Hill" after a series of bombings orchestrated by white residents that targeted their new African American neighbors. A lesson emerges: irrespective of the distances traversed, the slightest shift in position can trigger violent responses and evoke the brute force with which power enforces absolute limits:

The big white house on top of the hill was not far from our old neighborhood, but the distance could not be measured in blocks. The government housing project on Eighth Avenue where we lived before was a crowded little street of little red brick structures—no one of which was different from the other. Only rarely did the cement surrounding these brick huts break open and show patches of green. Without space or earth, nothing could be planted to bear fruit or blossoms. But friends were there—and friendliness.

In 1948 we moved out of the projects in Birmingham, Alabama, to the large wooden house on Center Street. My parents still live there. Because of its steeples and gables and peeling paint, the house was said to be haunted. There were wild woods in the back with fig trees, blackberry patches and great wild cherry trees. On one side of the house was a huge Cigar tree. There was space here and no cement. The street itself was a strip of orange-red Alabama clay. It was the most conspicuous house in the neighborhood—not only because of its curious architecture but because, for blocks around, it was the only house not teeming inside with white hostility. We were the first black family to move into that area, and the white people believed that we were in the vanguard of a mass invasion. (77-78)

The relationship between power and space exceeds mere delineations of territory. After spending a summer with a childhood friend in New York, Davis sees Birmingham differently; in downtown Birmingham, “if we were hungry, we had to wait until we retreated back into a Black neighborhood... if we needed to go to the toilet or get a drink of water, we had to seek out a sign bearing the inscription “Colored.” Most Southern Black children of my generation learned how to read the words “Colored” and “White” long before they learned ‘Look, Dick, look’” (83). As features that shape the very process of learning, legacies of violent boundaries and thresholds—as reflected by the history of segregation—infuse the acquisition of knowledge with danger and violence. The spaces themselves harbor contradictions bred by the asymmetrical distribution of power across a society that professes ignorance by perpetuating an empty ideology of

equality. Thus, the transition from a bunker-like housing project to a beautiful, tree-lined residential neighborhood paradoxically signals a move from a sanctuary for human warmth to a battleground teeming with deep-seated animosity. Such contradictions typify the lessons drawn throughout Davis's narrative, in which dialectical analyses indicting historical injustices provide the impetus for recollections of individual experience.

Amidst the relocations that *Angela* maps, the narrator traces her growing frustration with the ideologies of race and class that shape Birmingham's black community. In describing her reaction to the middle-class values to which her parents and many of their friends ascribe, language abandons the narrator, who must grapple with the imprecise but more intense, more threatening sensation of impending bodily harm:

At fourteen, in my junior year, I felt restless and exceedingly limited. The provincialism of Birmingham bothered me ... I could not define or articulate the dissatisfaction I felt. I simply had the sensation of things closing in on me—and I wanted to get out. The time was fast approaching when, in order not to be outcasts, girls my age in middle-class circles had to play an active role in the established social life of the Black community.... I had to get away. (103)

Movement and sensation overwhelm discourse; the body provides varieties of knowledge for which language appears insufficient. Davis's path out of the stifling atmosphere of Birmingham's aspiring middle-class culture includes a symbolic railroad trip to New York. "As the Jim Crow train moved through Alabama, Georgia, and up through Washington, my friends left the train in small groups.... By the time the train slid out of Washington, I had been abandoned to the company of strangers and to the strangeness of

white people entering the car and taking seats which had been ‘For Colored’” (105-6). The exchange of passengers as the train passes northward, emptying of friends and filling with strangers who inhabit a world beyond the territorial violence of segregation, emblemizes the dialogical movement of *Angela*. Every step involves a negotiation of positive and negative consequences, and no easy resolution exists to the incompatible facts that surround each new experience. In its careful elaboration of such complexities, *Angela* pursues modes of analysis that exceed the ambitions of conventional narrative.

The repeated insistence on the multi-dimensional ramifications of each and every event emerges alongside a recurring symbolic figure, a “Janus head.” This image first appears as Davis reflects upon her train ride to New York, where she attends high school: “It was as if I were two persons, two faces of a Janus head. One profile stared disconsolately into the past—the fretful, violent, confining past broken only by occasional splotches of meaning... The other gazed with longing and apprehension into the future” (106). Through her host family and the leftist faculty at Elisabeth Irwin High School, Davis becomes thoroughly educated in socialism and Marxism, and participates in protests against the hiring practices of Manhattan’s Woolworth department store. Nonetheless, as the Civil Rights movement gathers steam, she is torn between her love for her education and the events that surround her family at home: “The Janus head was still fixed,” she writes, “one eye full of longing to be in the fray at Birmingham, the other contemplating my own future” (113).

After her freshman year as a scholarship student at Brandeis University, Davis receives funding that allows her to attend the World Festival for Youth and Students, a counter-cultural gathering in Helsinki, Finland. “I was eager to meet revolutionary youth

from other parts of the world,” Davis writes, “but my decision was also motivated by a simple desire to leave the country in order to get a better perspective on things” (120). An FBI agent greets her upon her return: “‘What were you doing at that Communist Youth Festival this summer?’ the agent wanted to know. ‘Don’t you know how we feel about Communists? Don’t you know what we do to Communists?’” Her boarder crossings thus register as features of her life story that matter to others besides herself, seemingly serving as important pieces of a biography constructed by unknown agents of the state. Nonetheless, the festival in Helsinki inspires her subsequent fields of study, encouraging her to expand her knowledge of languages by majoring in French, which also allows her to pursue her interest in existentialism. Davis’s investigations of segregation’s curious territories have already employed French as a means of traversing otherwise impermeable boundaries; Davis remembers visiting a shoe store as a teenager and speaking French with her sister, Fania. Claiming to be from Martinique, they are allowed to shop in the “White” section of the store until they can’t help but let their audience in on the joke (86-7). The decision to study French as a college student thus articulates a complex relationship between the body and the study of language. As a form of knowledge with geographic or territorial links, language facilitates the trespassing of thresholds that state-sanctioned collaborations between ignorance and violence otherwise prohibit.

Davis’s studies also provide her with access to the arena of theory. As noted throughout this project, theory informs the work of the many writers identified with the contemporary American literary avant-garde. During her second year at Brandeis, Davis happens upon the work of German exile and Frankfurt School philosopher Herbert

Marcuse. She pursues the study of philosophy with Marcuse himself, who was at that time teaching at Brandeis, during weekly, individual meetings. After spending her junior year in France, she travels to Frankfurt and attends Theodor Adorno's lectures; "Later," Davis writes, "I read all of Adorno's and Horkheimer's works that had been translated into English or French, in addition to Marcuse's writings. In this way I had acquainted myself with their thought, which was collectively known as Critical Theory" (135). Her undergraduate career concludes with an honors thesis "on the Phenomenological Attitude," Davis writes, "which I thought I had discovered in the works of the contemporary French novelist [Alain] Robbe-Grillet" (135). These details suggest that Davis acquires a familiarity with avant-garde literature not enjoyed by the autobiographers discussed in preceding chapters; this familiarity makes the conventional features of her own autobiography all the more distinctive.

The following year, Davis returns to Frankfurt, planning to pursue a doctorate in philosophy under Adorno's tutelage. "When I boarded the boat sailing for Germany," Davis recalls, "Watts was burning. I felt again the tension of the Janus head—leaving the country at that time was hard for me" (138). While living in Berlin before her studies begin, Davis repeatedly visits East Berlin. Checkpoint Charlie thus provides yet another memorable threshold experience: for the first time, her racial identity becomes an advantage. The East German guards process her passport with startling rapidity. "This was their way of showing their solidarity with Black people," Davis writes (140). These travels imperil her study; the West German police later detain her, claiming that she has violated the terms of her passport by living at multiple Berlin addresses without registering with the closest police stations. Narrowly avoiding deportation, Davis

concludes that she was “positive that the harassment was a little retaliatory action for my trip to the GDR” (142). As much as it furthers her intellectual development, Davis explains that studying in Frankfurt leaves her feeling too far removed from the Black Liberation Movement. Her ongoing correspondence with Marcuse (who had moved on to the University of California, San Diego after his political positions forced his ouster from Brandeis) convinces her that the best compromise between her interests requires her to leave Frankfurt and join Marcuse in San Diego, where she continue her doctorate in philosophy while also becoming active in the political struggles over Black identity and American imperialism.

Olson’s “Proprioception,” *Angela*’s “Natural Clumsiness”

In addition to providing a metaphor for the narrator’s divided allegiances, the multiple perspectives captured in the figure of the “Janus head” demonstrate Davis’s commitment to epistemological models that evade the closed parentheses designating a mathematical set, models capable of elaborating ever-more intricate graphs, and thus incorporating the real contradictions of human existence. This determination is shared by the American poet Charles Olson, whose work provides a means of articulating shared varieties of political, intellectual, and philosophical compromises that Olson, like Davis, repeatedly refuses. In locating the origins of his own appreciation for contradictions reflected in the open parentheses that appear in his own poems, conjuring uncertain or indefinitely deferred conclusions, Olson cites John Keats. Paraphrasing Keats’ famous letter, Olson writes that Keats, “thought to himself all that irritable reaching after fact and reason, it won’t do. I don’t believe in it. I do better to stay in the condition of things. No

matter what it amounts to, mystery confusion doubt, it has a power, it is what I mean by *Negative Capability*” (*Collected Prose*, 120)⁴⁶.

Forms of inquiry that refuse the suspect limits imposed by the history of shifting notions classified as “fact or reason” appear to influence the career decisions that lead Olson into a life of poetry. In 1937, after studying English as an undergraduate and an M.A. student at Wesleyan University, Olson began research for a book on Melville that would emerge some ten years later as *Call Me Ishmael* (1947). The interim years were marked by repeated opportunities to climb career ladders, first in the academy, and then in the federal government. In 1936, Olson entered Harvard as a graduate student in English; in 1937, he was accepted into Harvard’s new American Civilization Program; in 1938, he won a Guggenheim Fellowship that allowed him to pursue his research on Melville; in 1940 Olson began pursuing a new career as a civil servant; between 1940 and 1945, Olson moved through various governmental and non-governmental organizations, including the Office of War Information, where he served in the Foreign Language Division (1942-1944); his power within the Democratic Party continued to grow, and in 1944, Olson was named director of the party’s Foreign Nationalities Division; after working for the Democratic Party throughout Roosevelt’s reelection campaign, Olson’s interest in politics diminished; soon after Roosevelt’s death in 1945, he had forsaken politics entirely (*Selected Letters*, xxvii-xxx).

Olson’s death in January of 1970 preceded the date of Davis’s wig episode by mere months. Among other things, his oeuvre remains notable for its consistent attention

⁴⁶ Keats defines his terms in slightly different language: “that is, when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact or reason” (quoted in the notes supplied by editors Donald Allen and Benjamin Friedlander for their edition of Olson’s *Collected Prose*, 399).

to the body as the first principle and manifestation of history. Olson's poems regularly touch upon his incompetence at sea, a disgraceful reality, given the circumstances of his childhood; having spent much of his early life in small fishing towns on the Massachusetts coastline, his awkwardness distinguished him in a sea-faring culture: "I have had to learn the simplest things / last. Which made for difficulties. / Even at sea I was slow, to get the hand out, or to cross / a wet deck. / The sea was not, finally, my trade" (*The Maximus Poems*, 56). Like Olson, Davis's autobiography notes childhood humiliations stemming from an inability to learn particular forms of movement: "Saturday mornings I joined scores of leotard-clad girls at the Smithfield Community Center in the projects where we used to live.... Ballet during the first part of the class, then tap, soft shoe. My natural clumsiness defied the delicate ballet steps, so I always tried to find a place to hide" (98). Both of these writers understand the body as an expression in and of history—and history names a concept of far greater importance to either writer than developing sea legs or the perfect plié—that has long been neglected. Recognition of this fact requires a radical reorientation. In a series of notes entitled "Proprioception" (originally published in journals edited by Amiri Baraka—then LeRoi Jones—in 1961 and 1962), Olson proposes a comprehensive reworking of knowledge as such, beginning with the acquisition of sense perception. Olson's reflections in "Proprioception" build upon inquiries he began formulating much earlier, in works such as *Call Me Ishmael* (1947), and that remain crucial to his five volume magnum opus, *The Maximus Poems*, completed shortly before his death in 1970. "I take SPACE to be the central fact to man born in America, from Folsom cave to now," Olson writes in *Call Me Ishmael*. "I spell it large because it comes large here. Large, and without mercy" (17).

In “Proprioception,” the title names the concept with which he suggests new learning should begin. In his words, “proprioception” refers to “the data of depth sensibility / the ‘body’ of us as object which spontaneously or of its own order produces experience of, ‘depth’ Viz. SENSIBILITY WITHIN THE ORGANISM BY MOVEMENT OF ITS OWN TISSUES” (*Collected Prose*, 181). As part of the developmental process from infancy onward, proprioception describes the physiological changes through which an improving sense of balance allows one to stand, and eventually, to walk. Movement hones the senses and allows for some sense of scale, of “depth.” As refashioned in the notes Olson organizes under the term, “Proprioception” describes the literal, corporeal and developmental processes, themselves evidence for the embodied forms that knowledge assumes. It also serves as a metaphor to emphasize the penetrating, cellular proliferation of the institutional or officially-sanctioned forms of knowledge.

Olson’s choice to abandon two promising careers, first as an academic, and then as a Democratic operative and would-be Washington power-broker, suggests his committed resistance to institutional forms of knowledge that essays such as “Proprioception” ultimately embody. As noted in the introduction, his decision to abandon politics was in and of itself a political decision. In the wake of Franklin Roosevelt’s death, the Democratic Party’s policies and positions underwent rapid shifts. Newly-empowered Democrats adopted accommodating stances toward domestic and foreign policies that would define Cold War politics for decades to come; such decisions proved unpalatable to Olson. His correspondences mark his increasing discomfort with the informal ideological formations and institutional structures that foment violent forms of American ignorance; after establishing a friendship with Ezra Pound, Olson tires of

Pound's racist rants against immigrants. In a letter expressing his outrage at Pound's ignorance, Olson also condemns the very institutions to which he had dedicated his labor over the previous ten or more years of his life:

BUT you have to deal with us Olsons, Leite-Rosenstock-Huessys; your damn ancestors let us in. (AND AS ABOVE I DON'T THINK THE BATHTUB WAS SO CLEAN WHEN THEY DID.) We're here, and to tell you your own truth, you damn well know anglosaxonism is academicism and shrieking empire: LIFE out of Yale, CULTURE out of Princeton, and THE BOMB out of Harvard....

...The breakdown of the cells: the Indians of the Northwest used to call all whites "Boston men." Yr. gd damn Euopeans (I speak of my ancestors) (and yrs) acted from the start like a fucking bunch of G.I.s on leave in invaded country.

(Selected Letters, 75-76)

In pointing to "academicism and shrieking empire," Olson thus targets two fields, academia and American foreign policy, that have defined his work history. Other features of this letter suggest the expansive terrain covered in the research projects that replace such abandoned pursuits and that Olson begins pursuing soon thereafter. His observation that, "the Indians of the Northwest used to call all whites 'Boston men'" indicates his understanding of the tremendous conceptual constraints imposed by particular cultures. Knowledge, Olson suggests, is local, historical, particular.

Previous chapters examine what I have called “apparitional subjectivity,” an elusive, de-individuated, shadowy form of subjectivity. Apparitional subjectivity helps to disguise, shelter, or shield the autobiographical subject. It requires a refusal to engage with the temptations of the idealized, unified image of selfhood constantly reproduced throughout popular, material, or commercial culture. This version of self-possession represents a culturally, socially-bound understanding of individuality reflected in the obsessive persecution of America’s criminalized underclass, whose courtroom and prison experiences have yet to witness any material benefits of the splintered forms of subjectivity ostensibly manifested in visions of the postmodern, or whatever endlessly looping “simulacra” stands in for this epoch otherwise known as the present. For the collective body that authors *Look for Me in the Whirlwind*, the “butcher shop” they call subjectivity begins at the level of one’s own organs. Similarly, Olson’s interest in “proprioception,” the body’s awareness of itself in relationship to its surroundings, has no relationship to ego psychology; on the contrary, Olson’s interest in sense perception concerns the concentrated impact thus registered, the dense confrontation between forces and priorities, what Robert Creeley would cleverly describe in a perfect understatement as, “a complex occasion, both inside and out” (Olson, *Selected Writings*, vi).

If it must be defined as such, “poetry” provides Olson with what appears to have been, in retrospect, the only space available for the pursuit of his inquiries. His most famous essay, “Projective Verse” (1950), provides the formal framework of “composition by field” through which Olson’s research projects come to occupy poetic structures (*Collected Prose*, 239). In her book *Career Moves* (2000), Libbie Rifkin attends to the confluence of factors by which Olson and other postwar avant-garde American poets

(Robert Creeley, Louis Zukofsky, and Ted Berrigan) come to occupy positions of considerable importance within the poetry establishment. Rifkin notes that it is precisely by assuming oppositional stances against this establishment, championing forms and practices derisively described as “experimental” by the poetry establishment’s more conservative members, that Olson and his cadre gain influence. The publication history of Olson’s most famous essay provides one of her first examples: “Published initially in *Poetry New York* in 1950, ‘Projective Verse’ became known within the avant-garde community... and by 1960 its call for ‘composition by field’ to counter the ‘closed verse’ of the New Criticism-sanctioned poetic mainstream was generally considered the mantra of the ‘raw’ poets.”

Rifkin credits Olson’s rising reputation amongst this group of poets to “Donald Allen’s placement of Olson at the beginning of *The New American Poetry* and of ‘Projective Verse’ at the beginning of its poetics section” (21). According to Rifkin, Allen’s use of Olson’s essay results in an undeservedly reverential status for essay and poet alike; “Projective Verse,” Rifkin explains, provides a “theoretical cachet and [a] patina of unity” to the anthology’s “otherwise errant energies” (21-22). In the course of her analysis, Rifkin quotes briefly from a portion of Olson’s essay most frequently criticized by readers of poetry. In an apparent embrace of a kind of organic form, “Projective Verse” imagines a seamless exchange between the mind and body of the poet and the written word: “the HEAD, by way of the EAR, to the SYLLABLE / the HEART, by way of the BREATH, to the LINE” (quoted in Rifkin, 22). Olson and “Projective Verse” thus become test cases in Rifkin’s analyses of the contradictions that emerge as

“oppositional,” anti-establishment poetics become mainstays within the poetic “establishment.”

Unfortunately, Rifkin’s own analysis replicates the fundamental error committed by the self-segregating practices through which the “poetry establishment” (an unwieldy combination of small presses, independent journals, reading series, and academic institutions) preserves itself. Rifkin appears to accept the conventional wisdom regarding “Projective Verse”: that its “radical” aspects emerge as elaborations of the essay’s oft-quoted slogan, a phrase with which Olson, in the essay, credits Robert Creeley: “FORM IS NEVER MORE THAN AN EXTENSION OF CONTENT” (*Collected Prose*, 240). The fundamental error committed by Rifkin—and, in fairness, the vast majority of Olson’s readers before her—is to assume that Olson’s comments regarding form are what mark his essay as “revolutionary” and significant. On the contrary, these aspects of the essay ease its assimilation, however gradual, into the poetic establishment. The most radical element of “Projective Verse” concerns the question of *content*, not *form*: “It all comes to this, this whole aspect of the newer problems. (We now enter, actually, the large area of the whole poem, into the FIELD, if you like... It is a matter, finally, of OBJECTS, what they are, what they are inside a poem, how they got there, and, once there, how they are to be used” (*Collected Prose*, 243). The question of content is, as Olson recognizes, above and beyond anything else, a political question: “the projective involves a stance toward reality outside a poem,” Olson writes, “as well as a new stance towards the reality of a poem itself” (*Collected Prose*, 246). In his mind, this “stance” requires “getting rid of the lyrical interference of the individual ego... the peculiar presumption by which western man has interposed himself between what he is as a

creature of nature... and those other creations of nature which we may, with no degradation, call objects. For a man is himself an object... the more likely to recognize himself as such the greater his advantages" (*Collected Prose*, 247).

By "getting rid of the lyrical, individual ego," Olson recognizes in "field composition" what today's academicians might call an "interdisciplinary" methodology. Olson's interest in proprioception reflects his recognition of the body as the surface, boundary, or threshold upon which this "complex occasion" is enacted. The archaic, mythological aura that surrounds poetry, the dense linguistic histories reflected in the parts of speech its practitioners employ, the awkward English adherence to syntaxes and syllabic quantifications derived from Latin, these legacies and traditions not only discipline pages and volumes full of pages within archives, they also indicate forms of discipline enacted upon the physical bodies of their readers. The history of poetry represents but a tiny selection amidst a much wider array of disciplining apparatuses. In his adoption of poetry as his own field with which to understand the legacy of human history, Olson's imperative is not to represent his individual experience, but to understand the dynamic means through which inequities of power and history inscribe themselves upon the body of the writer, as well as the body of the text. "Put war away with time," Olson writes in "La Préface," "come into space." This poem represents one of Olson's earliest attempts to locate his writing firmly and unequivocally in the particularities of his historical moment. In "La Préface," Olson declares the need for a new methodology with which to understand life after the Holocaust, nominating the inscriptions left behind by victims of the death camps as the first manifestations of art in this new epoch:

“I will die about April 1st...” going off

“I weigh, I think, 80 lbs...” scratch

“My name is NO RACE” address

Buchenwald new Altamira cave

With a nail they drew the object of the hunt.

(Selected Writings, 160)

“La Préface” can be read as Olson’s response to the set of concerns articulated in Theodor Adorno’s famous statement: “To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric” (162). The ancient paintings in Spain’s Altamira cave depicting “the object of the hunt” present images of a mythological innocence long vanished from human history; Buchenwald’s inscriptions articulate a reality that demands new tools of analysis. As Olson develops his “composition by field,” transcribed documents and fragments of history such as the Buchenwald inscriptions become increasingly prominent, evidencing Olson’s interest in the “complex occasion” of humanity that extends far beyond the narrow concerns of individual perception, subject formation, or self-representation.

Davis’s own preface to her autobiography indicates a shared sense of the need to eliminate, as much as possible, “the lyrical, individual ego” in an effort to comprehend the present. Her comments frame the autobiographical form that *Angela* inhabits as the paradoxical result of the actions of others, of historical “forces” beyond her control:

I was not anxious to write this book. Writing an autobiography at my age seemed presumptuous. Moreover, I felt that to write about my life, what I did, what I thought and what happened to me would require a posture of difference, an assumption that I was unlike other women—other Black

women—and therefore needed to explain myself. I felt that such a book might end up obscuring the most essential fact: the forces that have made my life what it is are the very same forces that have shaped and misshaped the lives of millions of my people. Furthermore I am convinced that my response has been unexceptional as well, that my political involvement, ultimately as a member of the Communist Party, has been a natural, logical way to defend our embattled humanity.

The one extraordinary event of my life had nothing to do with me as an individual—with a little twist of history, another sister or brother could have easily become the political prisoner whom millions of people from throughout the world rescued from persecution and death. I was reluctant to write this book because concentration on my personal history might detract from the movement which brought my case to the people in the first place. I was also unwilling to render my life as a personal “adventure”—as though there were a “real” person separate and apart from the political person. My life would not lend itself to this anyway, but even if it did, such a book would be counterfeit, for it could not convey my overwhelming sense of belonging to a community of humans—a community of struggle against poverty and racism. (xv-xvi)

Davis’s discomfort with the autobiographical form anticipates the “autobiographical paradox” described by Leigh Gilmore in her book *The Limits of Autobiography* (2001). Even as she seeks to represent histories, events, and political movements, the autobiographical act suggests that Davis’s “unexceptional” life is qualitatively different

from the lives that others experience; in this way, Gilmore writes, “the unusual or unrepresentative life becom[es] representative” (19). In the face of this paradox, Davis attempts a preface that strives for the collective spirit that embodies the New York 21’s autobiography, *Look for Me in the Whirlwind* (1971): however individual its specifics, her story represents historical forces at work behind the apparition called subjectivity.

Rather than deny or ignore the paradox of autobiography, Davis redefines the parameters. By attributing “the one extraordinary event of [her] life” to “forces” and “a little twist of history,” Davis undermines the valuations and ideologies that have shaped the development of autobiography as a genre. In her discussion of Davis’s preface, Margo Perkins notes that even as Davis follows in a long tradition of autobiographical works, she nonetheless writes “against this tradition.” In Davis’s hands, Perkins suggests, autobiography is “a vehicle used less to explore and glorify... individual uniqueness than to examine those experiences that connect” Davis to her compatriots (10). Rather than draw a portrait of an agent of change in, on, or through history, Davis’s text presents a phenomenological model in which accident, chance, and opportunity carry far greater weight than the choices or actions taken by an individual. The fact that the same forces have also “shaped and misshaped the lives of millions” refashions the paradox that Gilmore associates with autobiography. The fact that Davis’s text becomes a part of the cultural record makes evident the continual loss of history: only the extraordinary event allows one among millions of silenced voices to speak. Like Olson’s transcriptions from Buchenwald, Davis’s preface thus establishes the footprint for a kinetic socio-political form of documentation in which the individual and his text are but residue of and conduit for larger, more encompassing phenomena.

Movement as Philosophical Imperative

The object-body of the narrator moves at the mercy of the forces that act upon it; Davis's effort to understand these forces in *Angela* wagers on the possibility that autobiography's origins at the heart of the very cultural paradigms and legacies that she hopes to change might also make it a useful form through which to pursue a transformation of these selfsame paradigms. Once again, her evocation of autobiography as a speculative form for the investigation of movement(s) reinforces the common values her work appears to share with Olson. For Davis, as for Olson, relinquishing one's sense of self-importance is but one necessary step toward such an investigation; Davis's work assumes that understanding the concealed or deeply-embedded forces that influence the present requires attention to the local, the specific, and the particular. Despite the seemingly conventional autobiographical form in which it arrives, her work thus shares the investigatory imperative set forth by Olson in "Proprioception": "SENSIBILITY WITHIN THE ORGANISM BY MOVEMENT OF ITS OWN TISSUES."

Drawing upon her experiences as a prisoner, Davis continually assesses the boundaries and forms of knowledge that define what might be called into discourse with the word "experience." Shaped by and reacting to territorialized spaces, relating to and confined by the unpredictable events of history, Davis's narrative traces her shifting position across space and time as the evidentiary material for a philosophical thesis. Like the historical and geographical explorations that complicate Olson's cross-genre works of poetry and prose, Davis's effort to understand America's citizens and the territorialized spaces in which they live as products of events concealed beneath the existent

institutional, material, and commercial edifices demands that she create or adapt a discursive form to suit her needs. The autobiographical form allows her to frame her analyses within a populist form, and a form that allows her to expose, and then to analyze in a convincing, first-person mode, the bodily forms of violence enforced with, or more often without, the state's employment of brute force.

Throughout Davis's text, knowledge is embodied, and it is the body that must confront the violent thresholds according to which various powerful entities—the state, capitalist interests, the university—attempt to police access to knowledge while reinforcing preferred modes of ignorance.

We spent a week in the small village of Santa Maria II, located in the sugar center, Antonio Guiterras, living in log cabins with cement floors... The toilet was a rectangular outhouse... The shower was a cement stall into which we took large buckets of cold water fetched from the one faucet on the grounds.

We were roughing it, even by Cuban standards. We followed the routine... Cane-cutting was far more difficult than work in the coffee fields. But again, I was determined to do at least my share, and I meticulously followed the system: A powerful stroke at the root of the plant; careful strokes down the leaves; then the last motion of slicing the stalks into pieces the right size for processing. It was hard, and the heat was even more intolerable because our clothes were blue jeans, heavy long-sleeved work shirts, high-top boots, and gloves. All this was for protection from the liquid that seeped out of the cane... One day I

remarked to a Cuban how I admired his skill in cutting cane—it was almost like an art, the way he did it. He thanked me for the compliment, but quickly added that his skill was a skill that needed to become obsolete. Cane-cutting was inhuman toil, he said. Before the revolution thousands had had to depend for their survival on working like animals during the cane season. Many of them would end up having to cut off a finger with the machete for a little insurance money to make ends meet.... the business of cutting cane was not work fit for human beings; it made you old before your time.... In this way he subtly criticized me for having romanticized something that was really nothing more than terribly hard work.” (208-9).

These paragraphs demonstrate *Angela's* repeated insistence upon embodied knowledge as the final test against which any theory must ultimately be tested. Her own "romanticized" vision of cutting cane overlooks the physical struggle to which her own weariness testifies, and which, in the end, proves more telling than the relative ease with which her Cuban colleague accomplishes the same tasks.

Charles Olson's work helps to magnify the literary and philosophical dynamics at play in the explorations of embodied knowledge that repeatedly inform *Angela's* political analyses. Olson's embrace of a revolutionary "stance" in writing, one that makes use of the actual and most immediate facts influencing the poet's experience, asks that practitioners transcend disciplinary boundaries in the attempt to bring these surroundings into the space of the poem. The conventional surface of Davis's text belies its remarkably similar, extra-disciplinary function. *Angela* is equal parts a work of

experimental literature, a document of political resistance, a philosophical treatise, and a manifesto on the relevance of the body to each of the above forms: it rewrites a personal history as a responsibility to engage in bodily self-reflection and self-criticism. A collective history, *Angela* suggests, must begin with the physical laws and forms of knowledge that structure the body's movements through space. The material, dynamic arrangement of words in Olson's works, the experimental, fragmented, willfully misshapen splay of text across paper, exhibits Olson's determination to make clear the transgression and trespassing necessary to transform American politics and culture.

As in previous chapters, my intention is to illustrate the value in reading what are, at this point, largely neglected writings by Black Liberationists; these texts provide alternative trajectories within African American literature as well as American literature and American Studies, broadly defined. In juxtaposing works of white avant-garde poets with those of Black Liberationists, this project is not intended to establish or reverse a hierarchy, be it real or imagined; rather, the purpose is to insist upon the value of such a form of analysis, in which seemingly disparate texts are placed alongside one another. As Davis's autobiography and long career as an anti-prison activist demonstrates, the status and power of the prison regime, deeply-embedded within a vast array of America's economic, cultural, and political systems, demands that we find ever new, nuanced, and creative strategies with which to resist its devastating influence. In addition to elucidating the hidden role the prison regime plays in texts seemingly far-removed from its influences, we must seek to understand the ways in which works of political or protest literature might be better understood by reading them alongside works of the

contemporaneous avant-garde poets who drew from such protests while attempting to effect change from within the poetic establishment.

Olson's observation that "the Indians of the Northwest used to call all whites 'Boston men'" signals his expanding awareness of the cultural and political obstacles to knowledge. These obstacles are not arbitrary; their contours are traced by political forces designed to ensure imbalances of power. Olson recognizes that the "tradition" championed by New Criticism serves as rose petals scattered over centuries of rotting corpses scattered the New World over. Increasingly fascinated by artifacts of ancient North American cultures, Olson's investigations anticipate subsequent trends in "multiculturalism" as well as Ethnic and American Studies. His self-directed research incorporates cave paintings and dwellings, Native American languages, the pre-Columbian cultures of the Mayan peninsula, the confused encounters between the first Americans and their European counterparts; such collisions between ancient and so-called modern cultures become source materials for his massive work, *The Maximus Poems*. This series, begun sometime in the early 1950s, would occupy him until his death in 1970.

The Maximus Poems combine forms of knowledge and lines of research that most institutions of higher learning continue to segregate to this day. For literary scholars, Olson's notes on "Proprioception" may appear to invoke the titular term in a purely metaphorical fashion. Such a misreading of the essay might view its corporeal frame as an elaboration of the notions of "organic form" associated with "Projective Verse," the source from which Libbie Rifkin lifts Olson's lines emphasizing "the HEAD, by way of the EAR, to the SYLLABLE / the HEART, by way of the BREATH, to the LINE." Such

readings undermine the explicit purpose behind Olson's projects. The closely-guarded cultural and political institutions that Olson abandons have been constructed to prevent or exclude the interdisciplinary— trans-cultural, trans-historical, geographical, biological— forms of research realized in Olson's poetic projects.

According to Rifkin, the crowning moment of Olson's ascension amongst the American avant-garde was ensured by his appearances at the Berkeley Poetry Conference. Held in the summer of 1965 and thus arriving on the heels of a year's worth of arrests, strikes, and protests that marked the beginning of the Free Speech Movement, Rifkin suggests that this conference signaled a sea change in the politics of American poetry, the moment when the wayward children of the avant-garde consolidated themselves as a cultural force and at last began to assume positions of power within the poetry establishment. Even as (and because) they had positioned themselves as anti-establishment outsiders, numerous Berkeley conference contributors gradually joined the tenured ranks of the university system, assuming what Rifkin describes as "the uncanny role of permanent revolutionaries" (Rifkin, 14). Olson was booked to close the conference with a final reading that has since "been viewed both as brilliant enactment of the open-form poetics that Olson is credited with founding, and as a drunken ramble" (14). Three days earlier, he delivered his "Causal Mythology," from which Rifkin quotes:

I think we live so totally in an acculturated time that the reason why we're all here that care and write is to put an end to that whole thing. Put an end to nation, put an end to culture, put an end to divisions of all sorts. And to do this you have to put establishment out of business. It's just a structure

of establishment. And my own reason for being, like I said, on the left side and being so hung up on form is that I feel that today, as much as action, the invention, not the invention, the discovery of formal structural means is as legitimate as—is for me the form of action. The radical of action lies in finding out how organized things are genuine, are initial.

(Quoted in Rifkin, 20)

The last sentence reads awkwardly; its possible meanings appear uncertain. Rifkin claims that it demonstrates a belief that “The goal is radical (read ‘genuine,’ ‘initial’) organization, not anarchy, and the action called for is the measured, backward movement of recognition, not revolution” (20).

As in her reading of “Projective Verse,” in which Rifkin implies that Olson’s essay outlines a prescribed form—thus effectively undermining the less explicitly literary, more radical potentials according to which his essay outlines a concept of “composition by field”—Rifkin’s treatment of this passage confines Olson’s stance to the narrow field of literary study. Her reading demonstrates the compound purposes behind this form of textual analysis, which in a single stroke attempts to cement its status as the measure of specialized, “professional” expertise, designates Olson’s work as the right and property of this limited field, and confines readings of Olson to similarly “literary” topics. In effect, Olson’s work is thus “*acculturated*” by Rifkin’s book *Career Moves* into a field increasingly sparse but for its literary points of reference; the various cultural, historical, and scientific topics to which Olson devotes so much of his own writing recede. By further acculturating Olson into the poetry establishment, Rifkin eviscerates

the power behind Olson's institutional and political critiques that emerge as part and parcel of his formal arguments.

Rifkin's assumption that "Causal Mythology" (the very name of which suggests a renovation of the past in order to change the future) calls for a "backward movement of recognition" closes what appears in fact to be an open-ended, or at the very least, a "Janus head"-like combination of perspectives. Olson's refusal of magical "invention" in favor of a more laborious "discovery" exemplifies his efforts to reconfigure the ideology of poetry through an engagement with the world. When he writes that "The radical of action lies in finding out how organized things are genuine, are initial," Olson is not advocating "organization," as Rifkin suggests; he is suggesting that "revolution" must begin with a thorough investigation into the organization of the establishment as such. To "put establishment out of business" requires an understanding of the organization behind its structures. The claim that "organized things are genuine, are initial" thus echoes the work of the Frankfurt School philosophers whose works influenced Angela Davis. While reflecting on the legacy of the Holocaust in "The Meaning of Working through the Past" (1960), Adorno argues that the persistence of fascism's appeal can be attributed to "the fact that the objective conditions of society that engendered fascism continue to exist." "To see through the nexus of deception" would require "that painful intellectual effort that the organization of everyday life, and not least of all a culture industry inflated to the point of totality, prevents. The necessity of such adaptation, of identification with the given, the status quo, with power as such, creates the potential for totalitarianism" (13).

Rifkin's misreading is important because it so precisely recapitulates the corrosive work of acculturation that Olson hoped to resist; by forcing his work back into the select poetic circles Olson himself rarely entered, Rifkin fulfills the terms of her professionalized "literary study" while ignoring the anti-disciplinary, anti-literary frame through which Olson constructs his work. As much as he achieved over the course of his lifetime the hard-won, mythical status of the bohemian poet par excellence, the fact that Olson began writing poetry reflects the space available for the methods and practices he wished to pursue, as much as it does any deeply-rooted desire to become a poet. Indeed, this decision ultimately led to his living a life of poverty in the rather remote village of Gloucester. Despite his meager means and distance from the nation's cultural centers, Olson cultivated an impressive and diverse intellectual community. His correspondents included the psychologist Carl Jung, choreographer Merce Cunningham, anthropologist Ruth Benedict, geographer Carl O. Sauer, and economist Oscar Lange, along with senators and other government officials, painters and photographers, writers and poets.

In his book reviews and essays, Olson occasionally surveys the relatively myopic views peddled as new scholarship in the academic world he had rejected. Reflecting on the publication of yet another "close reading" of Melville, Olson writes, "so much academicism has wasted its time on classic American literature... the place of allegory and symbol in Melville and his contemporaries.... It is rather quantum physics than relativity which will supply a proper evidence here, as against naturalism, of what Melville was grabbing on to when he declared it was *visible* truth he was after" (*Collected Prose*, 124). Olson goes on to frame *Moby Dick* according to the discoveries in quantum physics, concluding that, "matter offers perils wider than man if he doesn't do

what still today seems the hardest thing for him to do, outside of some art and science: to believe that things, and present ones, are the absolute conditions; but that they are so because the structures of the real are flexible, quanta do dissolve into vibrations, all does flow, and yet is there, to be made permanent, if the means are equal” (125).

Disciplinary Boundaries and the Ignorance of the Machine

In *Call Me Ishmael*, Olson famously locates the American dilemma in the problem of space, “large” and “without mercy.” As America’s first global capitalist enterprise, whaling provides *Moby Dick* with endless models from which Melville constructs the *Pequod*, the industrialized machine that carries his narrative. The machine has been America’s answer to space, Olson writes: “It is the only master of space the average person ever knows, ox-wheel to piston, muscle to jet. It gives trajectory” (*Collected Prose*, 17). In his influential critique of contemporary society, *One-Dimensional Man* (1964), Herbert Marcuse writes, “Today political power asserts itself through its power over the machine process and over the technical organization of the apparatus... The government... can maintain and secure itself only when it succeeds in mobilizing, organizing, and exploiting... the machine process” (3). The figure of “the machine” famously prevails throughout the dissident rhetoric of the sixties; thus Free Speech Movement leader Mario Savio’s famous declaration, delivered on the steps of the University of California’s Sproul Hall in 1964:

There’s a time when the operation of the machine becomes so odious that you’re so sick at heart, that you can’t take part, you can’t even passively take part, and you’ve got to put your bodies upon the gears, and upon the

wheels, upon the levers, upon all the apparatus, and you have to make it stop, and you've got to indicate to the people who run it, and the people who own it, that unless you are free the machine will be prevented from working at all. (*Berkeley in the Sixties*)

Angela represents the intersection whereby Marcuse's critique of the machine process, resistance to which Savio articulates so brilliantly, that which increasingly drives and controls modern life—churns through the vision of space Olson discovers in Melville. Like Olson, Davis's text pursues a thorough investigation of space as the condition that defines personal history and experience.

Angela allows movement—as both activity and event—to structure its plot and provide the enduring goal its narrator continues to seek at the book's conclusion. Although the book concludes with Davis's acquittal, this event fails to satisfy the conditions necessary for her book to be considered finished, as established by the narrator herself in the preface. The fact that the narrative provides no resolution according to the conditions she prescribes proves crucial to its experimental nature: the certainty closure provides epitomizes the philosophical orientation Davis's book challenges. Such an orientation would also limit philosophy as a discipline to a specific set of problems or questions; for Davis, philosophy's most important questions exceed such boundaries, emerging as the result of injustices that permeate the socio-political sphere, challenging and undermining rhetorics of capitalism and democracy. What machine drives *Angela's* narrative? In essence, the book's meandering narrative represents an attempt to answer this question. Through no fault of its own, this attempt ends in vain. The “machine” it confronts is too all-encompassing to occupy a single symbolic vehicle; more importantly,

the “deep politics” that lead to Davis’s arrest remain shrouded in secrecy. And though the covert actors and interests represented by such events remain largely unknown, their discovery remains irrelevant to the events in Davis’s life that precede her arrest; uncovering the primary players cannot illuminate the life story that precedes the arrest itself. Rather than imbuing a symbolic machine with the task of representing a convoluted, incompletely understood system of corrupt authorities and imbalanced powers, *Angela* pursues a more realistic, more frustrating, less reassuring task, documenting one person’s attempt to understand the hidden mechanisms through which political and economic powers exert themselves.

Accordingly, the narrator becomes the reader’s own apparitional body, the host he or she travels inside of, a vehicle designed to mobilize the reader. What the text offers through autobiography is, as Davis tells us, not her experiences but the outcome of historical forces her text attempts to track, map, and analyze. The particularity of the experiences is less important than the samples they provide of America’s crucial, formative systems of governmental and community organization, the gears that drive its mechanisms of power and oppression, the ways in which its citizens are deformed or paralyzed as socio-political actors. Davis’s mentor, Herbert Marcuse, dedicates much of his work to these topics, insisting upon the continuing obfuscation of power through the construction of false freedoms of the market. In his analyses, economically-exploitative interests and classes use governmental actors beholden to their influence, power, and money in order to curtail fundamental political rights, to contain the growth of anti-capitalist modes of thought, and to control a potentially uncooperative populace. In the machine that Davis’s narrative measures, the threshold appears as the definitive element.

The threshold marks the limit and boundary at which the violence that defines the arrogance and ignorance of power moves from the imaginary that conceals the threat, into the brutality of the real; as a record of the narrator's movement through these paces, *Angela* maps the state violence as violence of the threshold; the prison regime, a regime defined by constraints, boundaries, fences, walls, and borders, is the state's incubator for threshold violence. The autobiographical form allows her to construct a stance, a methodology or critical framework, through which one might begin to understand one's own experience as a political and historical development, a fragment or rag like those sought by the rag pickers Benjamin saw as emblems of 19th century Paris and as models for the historian himself, each rag an essential piece of history the historian must seek out as his essential resource, and, as a political being, as his potential lifeline, final fact or solution to the overwhelming political obstacles that confront him in the present.

As ground zero for "disciplinary" learning that seeks to limit, silence, or eradicate thought, the prison regime and its attendant ideologies demand forms of intellectual inquiry that refuse simple categories or containers. The effort to confine learning constitutes a curious manifestation of threshold ideology, binding "academic freedom" to the seemingly contradictory directives of disciplinary classifications. In his *Fragments of an Anarchist Anthropology* (2004), David Graeber argues that ignorance defines the exercise of power:

Academics love Michel Foucault's argument that identifies knowledge and power, and insists that brute force is no longer a major factor in social control. They love it because it flatters them: the perfect formula for people who like to think of themselves as political radicals even though all

they do is write essays likely to be read by a few dozen other people in an institutional environment. Of course, if any of these academics were to walk into their university library to consult some volume of Foucault without having remembered to bring a valid ID, and decided to enter the stacks anyway, they would soon discover that brute force is really not so far away as they like to imagine—a man with a big stick, trained in exactly how hard to hit people with it, would rapidly appear to eject them. In fact the threat of that man with the stick permeates our world at every moment; most of us have given up even thinking of crossing the innumerable lines and barriers he creates, just so we don't have to remind ourselves of his existence.... Such a theoretical emphasis opens the way to a theory of the relation of power not with knowledge, but with ignorance and stupidity. Because violence, particularly structural violence, where all the power is on one side, creates ignorance. If you have the power to hit people over the head whenever you want, you don't have to trouble yourself too much figuring out what they think is going on... the sure-fire way to simplify social arrangements, to ignore the incredibly complex play of perspectives, passions, insights, desires, and mutual understandings that human life is really made of, is to make a rule and threaten anyone who breaks it. (71-3)

Graeber's disarticulation of the knowledge / power axis in order to describe the violence with which power practices ignorance provides a useful frame with which to approach *Angela Davis: An Autobiography*. In the first chapter, I noted the seemingly irreparable

divide between the prison-house murder of George Jackson on August 21, 1971, and the publication of Fredric Jameson's *The Prison-House of Language* (1972). I suggested that the successful career of Jameson, then a professor at the University of California, San Diego, and the murder of Jackson, then a famous political prisoner housed in California's San Quentin prison just 500 miles up the coast from San Diego, serve as emblems for the coterminous elaboration of what I have called the "language regime" in academic departments, and the massive expansion of what others have called the American "prison regime" in other arenas of American life. *Angela* thus returns to the awkward moment of this disengagement, when language-oriented forms of critical theory begin to flourish alongside elaborating structures of imprisonment.

Angela reconsidered as a dissertation illuminates the edge of philosophy as a discipline. The covert agencies and operatives employed to silence Davis suggest the degree to which her modes of critique and analysis exceed academic boundaries. In the years since her arrest and acquittal, American philosophy departments have become increasingly hostile to the modes of social, political, and historical analysis that inform Davis's autobiography. Indeed, Davis's works remain exiled from the field of philosophy in which they were born. The transformation of philosophy departments raises crucial questions regarding the policing of discourse throughout American life; the allocation of disciplinary territories within American universities appears but one manifestation of larger trends involving the restriction of speech, the banishing of all but the least dangerous (and most benign but distracting) of controversies from public discourse, and the continual shrinking of critical scope or attention so as to encompass increasingly specific, de-contextualized, and ever-more limited subject matter.

As test case for the development of strictly limited discourse, philosophy proves a useful example. In 1967, when Angela Davis began studying for her doctorate in philosophy at the University of California, San Diego, she entered a recently reconstructed field still cluttered with the debris of demolitions and remodels. As a student of “Frankfurt Marxism” (Mike Davis’s term for the collection of Weimar ex-patriots who gathered in California and that included Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, in addition to Marcuse), Angela Davis entered philosophy through a door that the discipline would soon slam shut. She was a student of a philosopher whose interests spoke to politically-engaged thinkers, students eager to understand how the intricacies of capitalism and liberal democracy could result in the American war in Vietnam, the widespread impoverishment of millions of Americans, rampant racism, and so on—in short, as a philosopher of what Rorty labels the “old school,” interested in problems philosophy had not solved, and *not* interested in the invention of new games that might be solved on their own, apart from the real-world of human beings and their interactions.

“In the early fifties,” Richard Rorty writes, “analytic philosophy began to take over American philosophy departments.... By 1960, a new set of philosophical paradigms was in place” (214). Hans Reichenbach’s book, *The Rise of Scientific Philosophy* (1951), serves as Rorty’s emblem for this transformation. According to analytically inclined thinkers such as Reichenbach, philosophers of the “old school” lacked critical tools necessary to keep pace with their field: “ ‘the philosopher of the old school is usually a man trained in literature and history,’ ” Reichenbach writes, “ ‘who has never learned the precision methods of the mathematical sciences or experienced the

happiness of demonstrating a law of nature by a verification of all its consequences' ” (quoted in Rorty, 215). The pursuit of “the ‘scientific’ style” results in what Rorty characterizes as a peculiar brand of highly-educated debaters. The primary professional achievement available to philosophers working in the wake of *The Rise of Scientific Philosophy* is the invention of “new language-game[s],” “putting together arguments and pulling them apart”:

Perhaps the most appropriate model for the analytic philosopher is now the *lawyer*, rather than either the scholar or the scientist. The ability to construct a good brief, or conduct a devastating cross-examination, or find relevant precedents, is pretty much the ability which analytic philosophers think of as “distinctly philosophical.” It is sufficient to be a good lawyer or to be a good analytic philosopher that you be able to see at a glance the inferential relationships between all the members of a bewilderingly large set of propositions. (221)

Rorty’s description of remodeled philosophy departments provides a useful context for the autobiographical surrogate that stands in for Angela Davis’s dissertation. These former meeting places for historically-minded individuals engaged in the study of human thought’s most arresting conundrums now house (in an exaggerated paraphrasing of Rorty) collections of ambulance chasers hoping to salvage some new form of argumentation from the latest crash in logic. Although many of his own works might deserve the same critique, Rorty realizes that the foremost analytic philosophers dismiss earlier methods—methods that find crucial questions deserving of philosophical inquiry at play in the world itself, amidst the injustice, exploitation, or outright violence practiced

by its inhabitants—for the pursuit of logical dilemmas raised by their own linguistic games and logical puzzles.

To his credit, Rorty recognizes that his cannibalistic system offers almost no practical means of making the world more humane. As much as this goal interests him, in this instance his engagement with such questions appears to be largely accidental, a consequence of his conjuring of the lawyer as a model for the analytic philosopher. The figure of the lawyer that Rorty employs inadvertently gestures to the government's use of the criminal legal system to disrupt Angela Davis's career as a philosopher. Rorty's description of the scientific philosophers as having abandoned interest in the questions most relevant to human existence captures the oppositional factions in the philosophy department at UCLA during their debates over whether or not to support Angela Davis and challenge the Board of Regents decision to fire her. "The philosophy department... had been initially divided," Bettina Apetheker writes. "The logicians and the positivists didn't see the desirability of retaining a scholar of Marxist persuasion. The dialecticians and Hegelians did" (2).

In an effort to reinstate considerations of serious socio-political discussions as proper topics within the discipline of philosophy, Richard Rorty writes, "The question of what propositions to assert, which pictures to look at, what narratives to listen to and comment on and retell, are all questions about what will get us what we want (or about what we *should* want)" (*Consequences of Pragmatism*, xliii). Davis's autobiography suggests that the disciplinary boundaries that classify academic labor and define disciplines of study remain dangerously unaware of the foundational role that captivity plays in the structure of American society and culture. The varieties of ignorance she

traces, whose origins lie buried in the unmarked graves of the enslaved, whose contemporary forms are bred by the prison regime, are reinforced by educational institutions. Her own career as a member of such an institution serves as an exception that proves the rule; even in an instance wherein the academy provides some form of shelter for a revolutionary thinker, its modes of operation remain bound up in the delusions of knowledge, far removed from the “brute force” that defines the ignorance and violence of true power.

The subject whose story drives Davis’s text remains ancillary to the text’s organizing principle: the book has as its stated goal the political mobilization of its readers. Concepts of movement—the movement of its narrator across nations and their segregated territories—in addition to “movement” as a political event, a collection of forces for revolution or resistance—provide its fundamental structure. The last sentences of her book refigure the supposed climax of the story, her trial victory, as the beginning, announcing the life of political activism that follows. On the one hand, this move marks a complete break with the academic subplot that surrounds her incomplete dissertation in philosophy; on the other hand, she never explicitly explains the material that her unfinished project would have covered. The dissertation thus serves as an open-ended parenthesis, an opening in narrative that can only be filled by the author’s continuing efforts as a political activist.

Conclusion

In an Oregon folktale I learned in my youth, a family out for a hike happens across a bear. Immediately, the parents begin to bicker. It's a black bear says one, the best thing is to scream and yell, make yourself big. You always want to tell everyone what to do says the other, you're always wrong, what's more, nobody listens to you, and anyway, as everyone knows, that's a brown bear, and with a brown bear, the best thing to do is to retreat slowly and stealthily, make clear that you're fearful and intimidated, back away. You always want to back away says the other, for once in your life stand up for yourself, for god sakes, stand up for your family. You always want to scream and yell says the other, well go ahead then, scream and yell all you want, if you ever listened to me you'd already know that nobody's listening to you, and so on. Meanwhile, the bear eats the children.

As literature departments have bickered over the fine points of various critical stances and analyses, the prison regime has feasted on America's economically devastated communities. While writing this dissertation, I have occasionally wondered what it might have taken for a serious critique of the American prison regime to have emerged with the fervor that has accompanied language-based theoretical inquires, or for anti-prison activists to have achieved the influence and notoriety granted to language writing's foremost practitioners. In such moments I have often returned to a brief anecdote that introduces the final chapter of Angela Davis's autobiography, the chapter in which the drama of her courtroom battle plays out. This chapter begins with a recollection of the trip Davis takes to Charles Olson's hometown: "Early one Saturday morning during my first year at Brandeis," Davis writes, "my friend Lani and I decided to

hitchhike up north to see the fishing boats in Gloucester, Massachusetts. We had plans to stay the night. But since we knew no ‘adults’ in Gloucester, we had to engage in a small transgression... Signing out of our dormitory, we indicated that we had permission from our parents to visit a family in New York.” With vague plans to sleep on the beach, two friends make their way to the coastal village. “Gloucester was magnificent,” Davis recalls, “with its multicolored autumnal trees, the massive beauty of its seaside boulders, its throngs of ships and fishermen. For hours we walked along the coast, then we toured the little streets dating from the eighteenth century. Though we were practically moneyless, a nice man in a little restaurant gave us as much food as we could eat and wouldn’t hear of letting us work off our meal” (349). The cold air of the late afternoon convinces Davis and Lani that they would be better off sleeping in their own beds. After hitchhiking back to campus, they arrive long past curfew. In order to evade the security guards, they take refuge in the less heavily policed men’s dormitory, where a friend has offered to give up his room for the night. Despite their careful efforts to avoid detection, someone reports their transgressions to the dean, and they must undergo a tribunal in order to avoid expulsion from Brandeis.

The coincidence of Davis’s visit to Olson’s seaside village augurs future near-misses in the parallel histories of the language and prison regimes. Avant-garde writers are confronted with their own series of shakedowns and trials as part of the government’s counterintelligence campaigns. As Allen Ginsberg points out in his report for the PEN American Center, “Outline of Un-American Activities” (1983), the government’s case against John Sinclair marks a unique turning point in this history. Sinclair, “a rock and jazz impresario,” as Ginsberg puts it, and “a poet much beloved of Charles Olson,”

became a COINTELPRO target because of his efforts to unite white and black artists, musicians, and activists in and around Detroit (40). In addition to his efforts as an underground publisher, and as the organizer of various workshops for activists and artists, Sinclair founded the White Panthers, an anti-racist group formed in solidarity with the Black Panthers. As Ginsberg tells it, the government's campaign against Sinclair was plodding, deliberate, and not especially sophisticated:

The narcotics police sent in a young married couple to hang around with John Sinclair and wash his dishes and do mimeographing and distribute papers, and they were constantly harassing him: would he please give them a joint, would he give them some grass? Which he didn't do, fortunately, for a long long while. Finally, one late night, they were really on his back to give them some grass, so he gave them a stick of marijuana. He was busted several weeks later, set up for a long trial, had to pay a lot of money for that, was convicted of peddling marijuana, and sentenced to nine and a half to ten years. (40)

Sinclair's case outraged activists; most famously, it attracted the attention of Yoko Ono and John Lennon, whose concert on behalf of Sinclair preceded his early release, so that in the end, he served but a fraction of the original sentence. Of course, as Ginsberg points out, Yoko Ono and John Lennon were themselves targeted by the government and ultimately forced out of the country, thus disrupting their plans to campaign for the release of political prisoners throughout the country, including Angela Davis herself: "They had an itinerary: they were going to wind up in 1972 at the Republican Convention in Miami... It might have resulted in enormous cultural changes, a sort of cultural

revolutionary shot... [instead, they] had to drop their whole political campaign, [and] not go to Angela Davis' trial" (Ginsberg, 41).

As Ginsberg recounts the government's efforts to disempower writers and the press, he repeatedly notes the ways in which these efforts focused on discouraging alliances between black and white activists. At the same time, his focus on the lettered, the literate, and the politically active citizen prevents him from recognizing that the strategies used against such individuals become widespread in the years to come, thus contributing to the prison regime's rapid rise. Despite Ginsberg's best intentions, his seems a rather limited awareness or concern, one that fails to incorporate an analysis of the government's active, continual persecution of its most economically and politically disenfranchised citizens. Rather than expand his vision to include attacks against more vulnerable and less familiar Americans, Ginsberg appears most concerned with defending his personal cadre of relatively well-known writers, activists, musicians, celebrities, and intellectuals.

This myopic vision (coupled with a disdain for those who do not share it) is one of the criticisms leveled against Ginsberg by fellow poet Robert Duncan. In the footnotes he provides for the planned 1959 republication of his essay "The Homosexual in Society," Duncan admonishes Beat writers (what he calls "the 'Beat' cult") for the "intolerance" that members of the cult direct toward "the hated 'square'" (*Selected Prose*, 41). From Duncan's perspective, the Beats dehumanize those they view as enemies in the same way that those affiliated with the movement are dehumanized by their most hateful, most conservative critics. For Duncan, the notion that his own status as a "queer" might serve as some kind of ticket into a supposed club of outsiders demonstrates

the flawed ideology at the heart of the Beat movement. “Where being ‘queer’ or a ‘junkie’ means being a pariah (as it does in beat mythology),” Duncan writes, “behavior may arise not from desire but from fear... paroxysms of self-loathing in which the measure of human failure and sickness is thought so true that the measure of human achievement and life is thought false” (42).

Duncan’s groundbreaking yet little-known essay first appeared in the journal *Politics* in 1944. Duncan (who would later become a close associate of Charles Olson and Robert Creeley) was just twenty-five years old when the essay was published. The essay primarily reflects upon Duncan’s complex emotions after discovering a community of gay intellectuals with whom he can begin to explore his own sexuality. This discovery is followed by a devastating realization: amongst this group, Duncan notes, there persists forms of snobbery and inhumanity as brutal as any forms beyond its selective milieu. In response to this disconcerting revelation, Duncan insists upon the need for a refusal of such identifications: “Only one devotion can be held by a human seeking a creative life and expression, and that is a devotion to human freedom, toward the liberation of human love, human conflicts, human aspirations,” he writes. “To do this one must disown *all* the special groups (nations, churches, sexes, races) that would claim allegiance. To hold this devotion every written word, every spoken word, every action, every purpose must be examined and considered.... The old protective associations will be there, offering for a surrender of one’s humanity congratulation upon one’s special nature and value” (47-48).

Like Duncan, the writers whose works I address in this dissertation seek the freedom of others by repeatedly resisting memberships in a variety of groups to which

they might easily claim allegiance. Their acts of resistance include efforts to resist monolithic varieties of Black Power and Black Liberation, suggesting that these movements entailed forms of identity and identification far more complex than is often assumed. Most importantly, such acts of resistance frequently require resignations of selfhood, individuality, and ego. The courage in seeking the company of those relegated to the periphery requires repeated gestures of self-denial and unbecoming; in this way, the determination to remain separate may nonetheless be considered an act in support of the collective, rather than a recapitulation to the more vigilantly defended (and violently asserted) varieties of “individualism,” out of which America’s most dangerous anti-communal ideologies have been built.

The works discussed *In the Butcher Shop of Subjectivity* experiment with disavowals of the most “natural” and familiar allegiances. In a more recent and closely-related book, *This Side of Glory: The Autobiography of David Hilliard and the Black Panther Party* (1993), the tradition of anti-individualist autobiography continues. Hilliard de-centers his narrative by quoting freely from the autobiographies of others, including those discussed in previous chapters. In addition, he does not hesitate to confess his own missteps; at one point, he remembers firing drunken potshots at a passing police car (152). Hilliard confirms his resignation of individuality and authority in his painful confessions of addiction that conclude his narrative. As a member of Alcoholics Anonymous, Hilliard notes the ways in which his participation in a depersonalized community of self-confessed addicts paradoxically restores a sense of self-control and agency. Although the focus of his book is not the prison regime, Hilliard’s book suggests

that its dismantling might begin with an acknowledgement of the prison regime as one of America's most deeply-entrenched addictions.

This Side of Glory thus continues the tradition of innovative autobiography established by the four works that inform this study. By seeking uncertain encounters in the underground or on the periphery, by recognizing in the comfort of "individual" self-image a duplicitous relationship to socially-policed groups and oppressive varieties of identity, by experimenting with disguise, self-denial, and self-betrayal, by trafficking outside the political and philosophical limitations of America's formative ideologies, by exploring ancient, foreign, forgotten, officially unsanctioned, or seditious worldviews, by dissolving notions of personal narrative for collective articulations, and by engaging the collaboration between ignorance and violence through which power patrols the thresholds and boundaries of knowledge, these works imagine innumerable processes through which the powerful, deeply-repressed, perpetual forms of state-sanctioned violence—*embedded in and embodied by* the public secret of the prison regime—might be transformed. The tasks necessary to enact this transformation remain; my hope is that more readers will encounter these books, and through these books, develop the determination their authors possess to change the way this nation practices its methodologies of criminalization and imprisonment.

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