2002

A Literature of Combat: African American Prison Writers of the Vietnam Era

John William Weber
College of William & Mary - Arts & Sciences

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.wm.edu/etd

Part of the African American Studies Commons, African History Commons, American Literature Commons, and the Criminology Commons

Recommended Citation
https://dx.doi.org/doi:10.21220/s2-1s65-et74

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Theses, Dissertations, & Master Projects at W&M ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in Dissertations, Theses, and Masters Projects by an authorized administrator of W&M ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact scholarworks@wm.edu.
A LITERATURE OF COMBAT:
AFRICAN AMERICAN PRISON WRITERS OF THE VIETNAM ERA

A Thesis
Presented to
The Faculty of the Department of History
The College of William and Mary in Virginia

In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts

by
John William Weber III
2002
APPROVAL SHEET

This thesis is submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

[Signature]
John Weber

Approved, August 2002

[Signature]
Kimberley L. Phillips, Chair

[Signature]
H. Cam Walker

[Signature]
David P. Aday
Department of American Studies
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TABLE OF CONTENTS</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ABSTRACT</td>
<td>iv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 1. THE ROOTS OF THE LITERATURE OF COMBAT</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 2. LITERARY COMBAT: THE PRISONER CREATES POLITICS</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 3. THE PERSONAL FOR THE POLITICAL: POLITICS CREATES THE PRISONER</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CONCLUSION</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BIBLIOGRAPHY</td>
<td>87</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
ABSTRACT

As urban unrest exploded throughout the United States in the late nineteen sixties, the American government waged war against Vietnam. While anti-colonial rebellions erupted around the world, some African Americans looked to these foreign revolutionaries as a model for liberation and societal change in the United States. Out of the prisons of America came many of the most forceful proponents of this revolutionary solution. Residing in a societal intersection of the regularized and sanctioned violence of American life, the international wave of revolutions, the upheaval of the nineteen sixties, and the privations of prison, these authors wrote that the salvation of the world required the destruction of the American social and political system. This body of literature represents what Frantz Fanon called a “literature of combat.”

There are two groups of these prison writers. The first were politicized by their experiences in prison, and gained fame through their prison writings. This group includes Eldridge Cleaver, Etheridge Knight, and George Jackson. The second were already well-known figures who went to jail because of their political activities. This group includes Angela Davis, Huey Newton, Bobby Seale, the New York 21, and Rubin Carter. While there are many differences among these writers, each shared a belief in the need for revolutionary change within the United States.

The purpose of this study is to reveal the roots of these writings by uncovering the societal strands that intersected during the Vietnam Era, while also examining the writings themselves as historical documents that revealed the nature of the prison system, American militarism, and unrest in African American communities.
A LITERATURE OF COMBAT: AFRICAN AMERICAN PRISON WRITERS OF THE VIETNAM ERA
Chapter 1: The Roots of the Literature of Combat

It seems evident that... one should speak of a struggle for a “new culture” and not for a “new art.”... To fight for a new art would mean to fight to create new individual artists, which is absurd since artists cannot be created artificially. One must speak of a struggle for a new culture, that is, for a new moral life that cannot but be intimately connected to a new intuition of life, until it becomes a new way of feeling and seeing reality and, therefore, a world intimately ingrained in “possible artists” and “possible works of art.”... A new social group that enters history with a hegemonic attitude, with a self-confidence which it initially did not have, cannot but stir up from deep within it personalities who would not previously have found sufficient strength to express themselves fully in a particular direction.

Antonio Gramsci

Violence is as american as cherry pie.

H. Rap Brown

With the publication of Black Skin, White Masks in 1952, Frantz Fanon eloquently summarized the motivation of liberation movements around the world when he wrote, “I consider the present in terms of something to be exceeded.” Through his writing, the Martinican psychiatrist would become well known in the United States as the most influential theorist of anticolonial struggle. Combining a probing analysis of colonial psychology with a desire to bring about the fall of the colonial structures, Fanon argued that “[i]t is the racist who creates his inferior.” The individuals who made up the African diaspora did not have innate feelings of inferiority. Instead, these beliefs and practices were forced on them by the nature of colonial rule. “I begin to suffer from not being a white man to the degree that the white man imposes discrimination on me,” wrote

5 Fanon, Black Skin, White Masks, 93.
Fanon. White insistence that “I must bring myself as quickly as possible into step with 
the white world” was to blame for the condition of colonized people; in his writing, 
Fanon proposed “nothing short of the liberation of the man of color from himself.”

Liberation required the destruction of this colonial society. While such a struggle 
would proceed slowly, even the slightest “breaches made in colonialism are the result of a 
victory of the colonized over their old fear and over the atmosphere of despair distilled 
day after day by a colonialism that has incrusted itself with the prospect of enduring 
forever.” Still, decolonization would not be a simple or painless process, “[f]or if the 
last shall be first, this will only come to pass after a murderous and decisive struggle 
between the two protagonists.” This violence was not something to be avoided, 
however. To the contrary, “violence is a cleansing force. It frees the native from his 
inferiority complex and from his despair and inaction; it makes him fearless and restores 
his self-respect.” Out of this violence, Fanon wrote, individuals would emerge “who up 
till then would never have thought of producing a literary work,” but caught “in 
exceptional circumstances” such as prison, these individuals “feel the need to speak to 
their nation, to compose the sentence which expresses the heart of the people, and to 
become the mouthpiece of a new reality in action.” These works, according to Fanon, 
“may properly be called a literature of combat, in the sense that it calls on the whole 
people to fight for their existence as a nation. It is a literature of combat, because it 
molds the national consciousness, giving it form and contours and flinging open before it

---

6 Ibid., 98.
7 Ibid., 8, 98.
8 Frantz Fanon, A Dying Colonialism (New York: Grove Press, 1965), 52-53.
9 Frantz Fanon, The Wretched of the Earth (New York: Grove Press, 1963), 37.
10 Ibid., 94.
11 Ibid., 223.
new and boundless horizons; it is a literature of combat because it assumes responsibility, and because it is the will to liberty expressed in terms of time and space.”

I will examine the literature of combat that emerged from within the United States in the late nineteen sixties and early nineteen seventies. Just as Fanon predicted, prisons produced a group of writers who sought to give justification for and provide an impetus to an American colonial liberation movement. These writers would describe the United States in a manner similar to Fanon, who wrote, “Two centuries ago, a former European colony decided to catch up with Europe. It succeeded so well that the United States of America became a monster, in which the taints, the sickness, and the inhumanity of Europe have grown to appalling dimensions.” In the Vietnam era, in which the United States government simultaneously attempted to crush the Vietnamese liberation movement and discredit and assassinate domestic voices of dissent, this literature of combat appeared, fusing an ideology of colonial liberation with calls for organized violence. This violence, which historian Brenda Gayle Plummer called “a critical facet of Americans’ understanding of history and their socialization,” was essential to destroy a system which perpetuated itself through force. As Amiri Baraka would write years later, these writers sought to avoid “the same errors that Fanon and [Amilcar] Cabral laid out.” Instead, “[t]he solution is revolution. . . . [I]t is a system that’s got to be killed.”

This literature of combat that emanated from the prison colonies of the United States

12 Ibid., 240.
13 Ibid., 313.
16 Ibid.
brought together two competing but related themes -- the pervasiveness of institutionalized, regularized, sanctioned violence in American culture, and the emergence of an international ideology of anticolonial rebellion -- that were viewed through the filter of imprisonment, and used them to attack the society that placed these writers in prison and relegated the African American population to a form of internal colonization, with social revolution as the goal.17

I refer to the period of this study as the Vietnam era for two reasons. First, the Vietnam War appeared in several of these books as a symbol of American oppression, and as such, provides a simple organizational theme. Second, and most importantly, I am placing these works within the context of the war, as opposed to the civil rights movement, because violence is the primary theme in all of these works. The specter of war pervades each of these texts, and thus, Vietnam seems the more appropriate framework within which to place them. The sanctioned nature of the violence in the war abroad, and the domestic war to which it gave rise, are the subject of these prison writings, not the mob violence of Bull Connor's Birmingham or the indiscriminate violence of the Ku Klux Klan or assorted other white terrorists.

Still, these writers cannot be considered outside of the ferment of the civil rights movement. By 1968, when the first of these prison writers was published, the movement had undergone a dramatic shift. This could most clearly be seen in the figure of Martin

Luther King, Jr. “The pacifist minister who once struggled for desegregated buses, was now, thirteen years after Montgomery, organising militant black urban workers [King was in Memphis supporting striking sanitation workers when he was assassinated], building a national poor peoples’ march, and defying a president. He had come a long way; so had his vision for reconstructing America.” Groups like the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), and the Black Panthers had shifted their priorities even further. Simple civil rights were no longer the goal. They now looked for equal human rights and the construction of a system that could guarantee these rights.

I have divided these writers into two groups. The first group -- Eldridge Cleaver, Etheridge Knight, and George Jackson -- were initially radicalized by their prison experience. Convicted of rape, assault, and robbery, respectively, they did not deny that they committed the crimes that sent them to prison, but they also did not write as repentant prisoners. Instead, they followed in the footsteps of Malcolm X, or what they perceived to be the footsteps of Malcolm X, and sought to renew themselves and society through their writing. These three authors sought to redirect the trajectory of the black

---


criminal and redefine the nature of criminality in the United States. They advocated a revolution against the true criminals who kept them in prison.

The second group -- Angela Davis, Huey Newton, Bobby Seale, Rubin Carter, and the New York Twenty One -- received prison sentences because of their radical activities. Each was alleged to have committed murders or acts of terrorism, and each denied their guilt. Unlike the first group, these prisoners' works were more personal, proclaiming their innocence at the same time that they pointed their fingers at the criminality of American society which unjustly imprisoned them. Their works were similar thematically to those written by Cleaver, Knight, and Jackson, but the nature of their imprisonment made their writing different. The federal government and its Counterintelligence Program targeted each of these well-known radicals and tried to silence them in prison. They experienced government repression firsthand. They wrote to exonerate themselves, so their subjects were not as general as those in the first group; instead, each introduced elements of autobiography to combine the personal with the political.

Few scholars have examined the writings of prisoners. H. Bruce Franklin's *Prison Literature in America: The Victim as Criminal and Artist* is the landmark text in the field, but there has been little to supplement it. He argued that the prison narrative derived


21 See Eric Cummins, *The Rise and Fall of California's Radical Prison Movement*
from the slave narrative, undergoing transformations through the twentieth century, with influences such as Herman Melville, the proletarian literature of the thirties, and most importantly, Malcolm X. "Contemporary American prison literature," wrote Franklin, "can be dated from The Autobiography of Malcolm X." 22 His transformation from prisoner to national leader "still define[s] the frontiers of both prison literature and much of our subsequent experience as a nation-state." 23 This study has been largely shaped by Franklin's work, though it looks at these writings less as literary works than as historical documents which portray the convergence of several societal and cultural strands at a given time in history: the Vietnam era. There have been numerous works that have examined Huey Newton, Bobby Seale, and Angela Davis since their prominence in the late sixties, but none have viewed them explicitly through their prison writings. This is a deficiency that I have tried to correct in this paper. Further, the American predilection for short historical memory has submerged many of these writers well beneath the consciousness of the general public and the scholarly community. The purpose of this study will be to put all of these writings into the historical context of the Vietnam era and to uncover the nature of dissent that rose out of the prisons of America in this period of rebellion at home and abroad.

* * *

(Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1994). Cummins gave a neo-conservative depiction of Eldridge Cleaver, George Jackson, Bobby Seale, Huey Newton, and Angela Davis, though he only dealt with the writings of Cleaver and Jackson. His argument was essentially that the prisoners and their outside supporters deluded each other into believing that the roots of revolution could be found within prison. He concluded by blaming both the prisoners and their supporters in the New Left for bringing on the conservative "law and order" binge of the Reagan years. 22 Franklin, Prison Literature in America, 236. 23 Ibid.
As historian Brenda Gayle Plummer has argued, African Americans in the twentieth century were not uninformed about American foreign policy and world events. Beginning with responses to the Italo-Ethiopian War, which she called “the first great manifestation of Afro-American interest in foreign affairs,” Plummer has illustrated African Americans’ massive involvement in many of the public debates over world events in the decades before and after World War II.24 The attacks on Ethiopia, for example, led to fundraising, formation of volunteer militias, boycotts of Italian-owned stores, and petitions to the Pope from African American communities, while the American government remained silent and the mainstream press spent little time or space discussing Ethiopia.

World War II elicited an even more vocal, if mixed, response from African American communities. The Double V campaign sought to win the war against fascism abroad, but not without the destruction of oppression at home. This dual goal was rooted, according to historian Robin Kelley, in the “collective memory of the unfulfilled promises of democracy generated by the First World War,” so that “[t]his time around, a victory abroad without annihilating racism at home was unacceptable.”25 As Kelley has pointed out, however, there was also a strong current of discontent among African Americans over having to fight a “white man’s war.” When Dizzy Gillespie reported to his recruitment officer during World War II, he assured himself of 4-F exemption: “Well, look, at this time, at this stage in my life here in the United States whose foot has been in my ass? . . . You’re telling me the German is the enemy. At this point, I can never even

24 Plummer, Rising Wind, 37.
remember having met a German. So if you put me out there with a gun in my hand and
tell me to shoot at the enemy, I’m liable to create a case of ‘mistaken identity,’ of who I
might shoot.”26 Malcolm X would do the same while in Harlem in 1943, telling his
recruitment officer, “I want to get sent down South. Organize them nigger soldiers, you
dig? Steal us some guns, and kill up crackers!”27 These two examples illustrate the sense
of distrust many felt. What good would defeating the Nazis do for someone in rural
Mississippi or Harlem?

The Korean War, of which Etheridge Knight and Rubin Carter were both
veterans, produced no movement similar to the Double V campaign. It was not greeted
cheerfully. Talk of civil rights, which was very soft during the Truman administration,
was pushed off the agenda entirely. De facto segregation continued in the armed forces
despite the legal integration of the armed forces, with even the Red Cross’s blood supply
labeled by race.28 Morale among black troops was so low, in fact, that the NAACP had to
send Thurgood Marshall to defend thirty-nine troops from a single regiment who were
accused of “displaying cowardice.” General MacArthur did not want to let Marshall into
Japan, where the troops were held, claiming that there was no discrimination in the
military so the NAACP was not needed. Marshall was eventually allowed into Tokyo
and was able to secure reduced sentences for many of the defendants, but the racist nature
of the war effort was plain to all who cared to look.29 A writer for the New York Age
connected the war against North Korea and the racial situation in the United States,

26 Ibid., 171-2.
106.
28 Plummer, Rising Wind, 204.
29 Ibid., 205.
editorializing that use of the word “gook” was nothing more than a “new way of saying N....R.”

The assassination of Patrice Lumumba in 1961, followed by the escalation of the Vietnam War and the invasion of the Dominican Republic, again illustrated for many the malevolence of American foreign policy. After 1965 African American leaders such as James Farmer, Julian Bond, Ralph Abernathy, James Lawson, and Martin Luther King began to speak out against the war in Southeast Asia. King declared that the “bombs in Vietnam explode at home. They destroy the hopes and possibilities of a decent America.” Independence movements erupted throughout Africa and were met by intransigent colonial militaries intent on maintaining their parasitic domination. At the same time, rebellions similar to those occurring in the streets of American cities appeared in Paris, Prague, and across Europe, and were met with overwhelming force. Foreign policy and world events, then, mirrored the American domestic situation. The assassination of Lumumba began to look very much like the assassinations of Fred Hampton and Mark Clark of the Black Panthers. At the same time that Soviet tanks were rolling through the streets of Prague, American tanks rolled through the streets of Chicago. This was a world, in the words of Fanon, “where they are never done talking of Man, yet murder men wherever they find them, at the corner of every one of their own streets, in all the corners of the globe.”

* * *

30 Ibid., 206.
31 Ibid., 304.
33 See discussion of Huey Newton and Bobby Seale below.
34 Fanon, Wretched of the Earth, 311.
Some began to focus this view of colonialism on the black communities of the United States. Stokeley Carmichael (Kwame Ture) and Charles V. Hamilton argued that "institutional racism has another name: colonialism."\(^{35}\) Black communities sold their labor since they did not own any of their own land or means of production, and thus were economically colonized. They were politically colonized because they were "faced with a ‘white power structure’ as monolithic as Europe’s colonial offices have been to African and Asian colonies."\(^{36}\) Black politicians within this power structure were nothing more than a "class of captive leaders" who could claim no real constituency within African American communities.\(^{37}\)

This colonial reality was even clearer for those in prison. Prison recreated, in the United States, a colonial situation similar to Africa, with an unmistakable division of ruler and ruled. Further, the prisons, according to Howard Zinn, "had long been an extreme reflection of the American system itself: the stark life differences between rich and poor, the racism, the use of victims against one another, the lack of resources of the underclass to speak out, the endless ‘reforms’ that changed little."\(^{38}\) Viewing the world through the eyes of a victim of colonialism was not difficult for those who moved from ghetto to prison, as many of these writers did. In the words of George Jackson, "Blackmen born in the U.S. and fortunate enough to live past the age of eighteen are conditioned to accept the inevitability of prison. For most of us, it simply looms as the next phase in a sequence of humiliations. . . . I was prepared for prison. It required only

\(^{36}\) Ibid., 10.
\(^{37}\) Ibid., 13.
minor psychic adjustments." If African Americans have been viewed as a colonized segment of the United States, then the prisons would be the site of the colonial mindset at its most acute, and would thus be the origin of the most violent repudiations of this mindset. For this reason, these prison writers and their works provide an important opportunity to examine the implications of Fanon’s theories of colonialism and its effects.

* * *

The roots of the prison system within which these authors produced their works must be sought in the South at the end of the Civil War. In the aftermath of the abolition of slavery, the cotton economy lost its coerced workforce. Southern states responded to this newly freed labor pool by passing a series of laws in 1865 and 1866 known as the Black Codes that made such vague offenses as juggling, loitering (staying in one place), and vagrancy (moving around) punishable by state servitude in prison, but only if committed by a black person. In this way, the states were able to place a large part of the free black population back in bondage, because the Thirteenth Amendment clearly stated that slavery was not allowed “except as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted.” The Reconstruction governments erased the Black Codes, but their spirit would continue to animate southern penology for decades. The convict-lease allowed southern states to lease their prisoners, predominantly African

---

Americans, to plantations, mines, and other large labor-intensive enterprises. At the
time, Frederick Douglass wrote, “It is sad to think of the multitude who only dropped out
of slavery to drop into prisons and chain-gangs . . . but it is consoling to think that the fact
is not due to liberty, but to slavery, and that the evil will disappear as these people recede
from the system in which they were born.” The convict-lease system died a slow death,
pushed along its path to extinction by a combination of humanitarian concern, most
notably in the writings of George Washington Cable, and the anger of small farmers who
wished to end the lease for the advantage it gave to the plantation owners. The lease
was promptly replaced by prison plantations and chain gangs in all of the southern states,
so that the state now controlled the labor of all of its inmates, which, in Georgia for
example, was 91% African American when the convict-lease was abolished in 1908.
These new forms of prison labor would continue into the 1940s throughout the South,
while some states still use these laws.

41 See W.E.B. Du Bois, Black Reconstruction in America (New York: The Free Press,
1998), 670-710; Alex Lichtenstein, Twice the Work of Free Labor: The Political

42 Frederick Douglass, as quoted in Angela Y. Davis, “From the Prison of Slavery to the
Slavery of Prison: Frederick Douglass and the Convict Lease System” in Joy James, ed.,

43 For overview of humanitarian efforts to improve southern penal system, see
Lichtenstein, Twice the Work of Free Labor; Jane Zimmerman, “The Penal Reform
Movement in the South During the Progressive Era, 1890-1917” Journal of Southern
History (Nov. 1951), 462-492.

44 Prison plantations still exist in Mississippi, Louisiana, Texas and Arkansas. The chain
gang was reinstituted in Alabama in 1995, and other states have followed.
Douglass was wrong, then, in his prediction that the racial nature of imprisonment, as a form of legalized slavery, would change as time passed. Prison labor was more exploitative than the slavery that it replaced because the value of unpaid labor was greater for the lessees and the state in the post-lease labor programs. Unlike slaves, the individual prisoners meant very little. The workers were purchased, often by former slaveholders, and used in units, so an “individual convict as such did not represent a significant investment, and his death or release, therefore, not a loss.” W.E.B. Du Bois said of this system that “in no part of the modern world has there been so open and conscious a traffic in crime for deliberate social degradation and private profit as in the South since slavery.” Legalized slavery returned in the years after the Civil War, with its racial characteristics largely intact and its geographical reach extended across the nation. In the following decades, the racialized character of American prisons became more apparent as African American prisoners constituted a disproportionate share of the population. The overt economic exploitation of the postbellum southern prison system would give way to a system based, at least rhetorically, upon reformation of criminals, but the racial reality within prisons did not change. Further, as Michel Foucault wrote after visiting the Attica Prison in 1972, these prisons did not reform prisoners, but instead were “a machine for elimination, a form of prodigious stomach, a kidney that consumes, destroys, breaks up and then rejects, and that consumes in order to eliminate what it has already eliminated.”

* * *

46 Du Bois, Black Reconstruction in America, 698.
47 Michel Foucault, as quoted in Angela Y. Davis Reader, 98.
Confronted with such a situation, African Americans often responded to American violence with threats to respond in kind. In 1829 David Walker leveled a warning against the slaveholders of the United States: “The whites want slaves, and want us for their slaves, but some of them will curse the day they ever saw us. As true as the sun ever shone in its meridian splendor, my colour will root some of them out of the very face of the earth.”

Henry Highland Garnet, a disciple of Walker, continued this line of thinking. In 1848, Garnet wrote, “This is a revolutionary age, the time has been when we did not expect to see revolutions; but now they are daily passing before our eyes and change after change, and revolution after revolution will undoubtedly take place until all men are placed on equality.”

W.E.B. Du Bois continued in this same tradition when he wrote, “This the American black man knows; his fight here is a fight to the finish. Either he dies or wins. . . . He will enter modern civilization here in America as a black man on terms of perfect and unlimited equality with any white man, or he will not enter at all. . . . There can be no compromise.”

The end of the Second World War and the return of black veteran Robert Williams to his native Monroe, North Carolina, would provide one of the most powerful examples of opposition to white violence. In 1957 he assumed leadership of the moribund local chapter of the NAACP and, along with a core of other former military veterans, publicly espoused armed self-defense for the black community. Well-versed in both the sanctioned violence of the military and the indiscriminate violence of

---

50 W.E.B. Du Bois, as quoted in Ibid., 245.
intransigent southern whites, Williams and his supporters sought to destroy the ability of the white power structure in Monroe to maintain the racial status quo. Racial violence was the “last great bulwark” of the white South, “and without its effectiveness white supremacy was gone with the wind.”51 The most complete chronicle of his thought can be found in Negroes with Guns, which he wrote while in exile in Cuba in the early sixties. “All those who dare to attack are going to learn the hard way that the Afro-American is not a pacifist; that he cannot forever be counted on not to defend himself,” Williams warned. “Those who attack him brutally and ruthlessly can no longer expect to attack him with impunity.”52 As Williams himself noted, however, this was not a new method of resistance for African Americans. He sought liberation in a manner which he described as “more Nat Turner than whitey’s Marxism-Leninism.”53 His struggle was firmly rooted in the African American past, for, as historian Timothy Tyson has written, “the civil rights movement and the Black Power movement, often portrayed in very different terms, grew out of the same soil, confronted the same predicaments, and reflected the same quest for African American freedom.”54 In North Carolina, Williams simply revived the tradition of armed opposition to white oppression. The self-defense that he advocated was not a drastic change in the civil rights movement, but was a “facet of African American life [that] lived in tension and in tandem with the compelling moral example of nonviolent direct action.”55

53 Robert F. Williams, as quoted in Tyson, Radio Free Dixie, 293.
54 Ibid., 308.
55 Ibid. For more on African American armed self-defense in the South, see Charles M. Payne, I’ve Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi
At the same time that Williams came to prominence in Monroe, Malcolm X began his climb within the Nation of Islam. The son of a preacher and Garveyite, Malcolm was confronted with white violence at an early age. His earliest memory was an attempt by two white men to burn down his family’s house in Lansing, Michigan. A few years later, his father’s skull was crushed by white thugs. These memories would stay with Malcolm as he opposed white society from his years as a zoot suiter and hustler, to his time in prison, until his rise through the Nation of Islam, and his emergence as one of the foremost spokesmen for black liberation. Through his autobiography and many public pronouncements, Malcolm became the most influential proponent of black self-defense, and created a model which many would try to follow after his death. In The Autobiography of Malcolm X, the black criminal, for the first time, examined his situation and placed the blame back on the society that imprisoned him. By telling the story of his life, from his early remembrances of his father’s violent death, to his life of crime, his imprisonment, his rise in the Nation of Islam, and the break with this group that led to his death, Malcolm X showed the potential of the black prisoner to educate himself and others about the reality of the American past and present.

Malcolm entered prison in 1946 for robbery. He spent his first months breaking rules in order to earn time in solitary, where he “would pace for hours like a caged...

---


56 Bruce Perry has questioned the accuracy of Malcolm’s portrayal of his father’s death. Perry’s research led him to believe that his death was either suicide or an accident, not murder. See Bruce Perry, Malcolm: The Life of a Man Who Changed Black America (Barrytown, NY: Station Hill Press, 1991), xii-45. Perry’s conclusions have not been universally acclaimed, however. See Robin D. G. Kelley, Race Rebels: Culture, Politics, and the Black Working Class (New York: Free Press, 1994), 163 fn. 5.
leopard, viciously cursing aloud to myself. And my favorite targets were the Bible and God. But there was a legal limit to how much time one could be kept in solitary. Eventually, the men in the cellblock had a name for me: ‘Satan.’ Because of my antireligious attitude.”

Over time, Malcolm began to read from the extensive library at the Norfolk Prison Colony, “aimlessly” at first, “until I learned to read selectively, with a purpose.” At the same time, he began to listen to his brother and sister as they talked to him about the Nation of Islam. Elijah Muhammad, leader of the Nation of Islam, wrote him in prison, saying that “the black prisoner . . . symbolized white society’s crime of keeping black men oppressed and deprived and ignorant, and unable to get decent jobs, turning them into criminals.”

Malcolm then began to look to history to corroborate what Elijah Muhammad told him. He “read the histories of various nations, which opened my eyes gradually, then wider and wider, to how the world’s white men had indeed acted like devils, pillaging and raping and bleeding and draining the whole world’s non-white people.” He read of the slave trade and colonization of Africa by outside powers, and of the atrocities perpetrated in the name of European civilization on every continent. He saw that Africans’ role in history did not appear in the books he read. Instead, he had to make a diligent effort to find it. All of this reading led Malcolm to the realization that “[t]he whole stream of Western philosophy has now wound up in a cul-de-sac. The white man has perpetrated upon himself, as well as upon the black man,

58 Ibid., 158.
59 Ibid., 169.
60 Ibid., 176.
so gigantic a fraud that he has put himself into a crack. He did it through his elaborate, neurotic necessity to hide the black man's true role in history."

When Malcolm received his parole in 1952, he had decided to spend the rest of his life "telling the white man about himself -- or die." Having fallen to the bottom of society, he reemerged to tell everybody about the wrongs he had endured; the Nation of Islam gave him the platform on which to do so. Malcolm devoted his life to the teachings of Elijah Muhammad, who had resurrected him from his spiritual death. As a minister, Malcolm X taught what he had learned in his prison studies and revealed the hypocrisy of whites, liberal and conservative alike. To those who accused him of preaching hate, he responded: "For the white man to ask the black man if he hates him is just like the rapist asking the raped, or the wolf asking the sheep, 'Do you hate me?' The white man is in no moral position to accuse anyone else of hate." He would not meekly cede the moral high ground to his white antagonists, but instead sought to fight them with every rhetorical device he had at his disposal. The goal was not assimilation with white society. Assimilation would only bring Europeanization, breaking all ties African Americans had with Africa and the rest of the Third World. Self-respect could be attained only through black efforts to control their own means to betterment, such as ownership of stores in black communities. White society, Malcolm argued, condemned these efforts as too radical. "The Negro's so-called 'revolt,'" he wrote, "is merely an asking to be accepted into the existing system!" But the time of conciliation was past, as the tensions within black society grew with each year that passed with no demonstrable change in condition.

61 Ibid., 180.
62 Ibid., 185.
63 Ibid., 241.
64 Ibid., 367.
Legal segregation ended, but had anything actually changed? Malcolm answered no, nothing had truly changed. "You name the city," he wrote. "Black social dynamite is in Cleveland, Philadelphia, San Francisco, Los Angeles . . . the black man’s anger is there, fermenting." White politicians had no desire to change this. While Northern whites pointed to the racial injustice of the South, they treated African Americans with the same contempt. They were just better able to hide it. Liberals and conservatives were not really different at all: "‘Conservatism’ in America’s politics means ‘Let’s keep the niggers in their place.’ And ‘liberalism’ means ‘Let’s keep the knee-grows in their place -- but tell them we’ll treat them a little better; let’s fool them more, with more promises.’"

Elijah Muhammad silenced Malcolm in 1963 after his claim that the assassination of John F. Kennedy was a case of "the chickens coming home to roost." Shortly thereafter, Malcolm left the Nation of Islam. Following his break with Elijah Muhammad, Malcolm’s message changed from a conservative segregated black capitalism that in many ways echoed the ideas of Booker T. Washington, to an evolving worldview that drew from many sources. In the Nation of Islam, Malcolm had preached a kind of black capitalism that would remain separate from white America, but in many ways proceed parallel to it. He pointed an accusatory finger at white America, but proceeded no further. The similarity of Elijah Muhammad’s doctrine with Booker T. Washington’s idea from his Atlanta Compromise speech that "we can be as separate as the fingers” should be obvious.

---

65 Ibid., 312.
66 Ibid., 373.
One example of the evolution in Malcolm’s thought was his more forceful advocacy of self-defense. Malcolm and his Harlem temple had supported Robert Williams since the late fifties by sending money for the purchase of arms, but his later speeches became more insistent on this point.\(^6^7\) He no longer told African Americans simply to separate themselves from white America, but instead exhorted them to fight for their human rights "by any means necessary."\(^6^8\) In a statement that would be echoed by many after him, Malcolm said, in an interview with a writer from *The Monthly Review*, "We are nonviolent only with nonviolent people. I’m nonviolent as long as somebody else is nonviolent -- as soon as they get violent they nullify my nonviolence."\(^6^9\) Malcolm did not simply reject white Americans and the United States as a whole. Rather, Malcolm clearly sought black inclusion in American life, but not on white terms. "Brothers and sisters, always remember this," Malcolm told a Harlem audience. "When you’re inside another man’s house, and the furniture is his, curtains, all those fine decorations, there isn’t too much action he can put down in there without messing up his furniture and his house. And you let him know that when he puts his hands on you, it’s not only you he puts his hands on, it’s his whole house, you’ll burn it down."\(^7^0\) This was not a man seeking separation, but instead his rightful piece of the whole. His metaphor of the house illustrated this change, stressing a collective destiny above and beyond race, though still firmly rooted in racial differences that white society would not look beyond.

\(^6^7\) Tyson, *Radio Free Dixie*, 205, 344.
\(^6^9\) Ibid., 32.
Malcolm began to take tentative steps toward linking the civil rights movement with liberation movements abroad, as many before him had done. Malcolm told a New York audience, “All the king’s horses and all the king’s men haven’t enabled them to put North and South Vietnam together again. Little rice farmers, peasants, with a rifle -- up against all the highly-mechanized weapons of warfare -- jets, napalm, battleships, everything else, and they can’t put those rice farmers back where they want them. Somebody’s waking up.” Malcolm decried the American involvement in Vietnam, as King had done, and he also celebrated the resistance to American militarism, which had so often been used against African Americans in the past. This is not to say that Malcolm sought a similar liberation struggle in the United States, but that he “needed only look at the fact that black Americans had fought bravely in two World Wars, in Korea, and now in Vietnam only to find themselves treated as less than full citizens in many parts of the nation,” to connect American militarism with many of the unresolved inequalities of African American life.

In closing his Autobiography, Malcolm stated that he did not expect to live to see its publication. He knew that he had stepped on too many toes in his rise from common criminal to religious and political leader. In his death, however, Malcolm’s message, through his memory and his autobiography, came to be a symbol of hope and constructive rebellion for many. He had risen from the lowest depths of society, and only death stopped his ascension. He had shown how an individual could gain self-respect, not by

---

71 See Plummer, Rising Wind, 257-328; Sitkoff, Struggle for Black Equality, 61-87, 184-209; Williams, Negroes with Guns.
72 Malcolm X, Malcolm X Speaks, 148.
asking his oppressors for it, but by taking it through sheer force of will. As Elijah Muhammad had been for him, Malcolm X became the savior of many poor and imprisoned African Americans, as will be seen in the prison writers examined below, who would see in his teachings the route to individual self-respect, but more importantly, to a method of bringing the black community together through a common history and a collective ideology that sought to link the black struggle in America with the anticolonial struggle worldwide. In the months after Malcolm was murdered, the Watts rebellion erupted and turned the nation’s attention away from struggles in the South and toward the ignored urban black population, for whom Malcolm had spoken for years. The “black social dynamite” had finally exploded, and the mythologized figure of Malcolm X would become intertwined with these urban uprisings. 7

A bookstore owner in Harlem said, after his death, “It’s things like the murder of Malcolm X that drive the masses closer together. He died in the same manner as Patrice Lumumba met his death in the Congo. . . We must unite, not fight.” 75 This was the lesson that many would draw from the life and death of Malcolm X, though some would not be quite so conciliatory as this bookstore owner.

* * *

The prison writers examined in this thesis wrote at the intersection of these various cultural and social trends in American life. From within prison, they reflected on the violence of American society, the growing prominence of liberation movements around the world, the increasingly militant nature of the civil rights movement, the


75 Louis Michaux, as quoted in Malcolm X, Autobiography, 443.
repression and assassination of black leaders from Fred Hampton to Martin Luther King, and the increasing radicalization of other black prisoners. From this intersection of factors a literature of combat arose, which not only questioned the bases of American society, but sought to replace the oppressive society entirely. Beginning with Eldridge Cleaver, these writers illustrated the pervasive nature of American military power throughout the world, its oppressive uses at home and abroad, and the necessity of the opening of a new front in the war for colonial liberation within the United States.
Chapter 2: Literary Combat -- The Prisoner Creates Politics

Rephrase Justice Taney's dictum so it reads, "The weak have no rights that the strong are bound to respect." Its universal applicability, its continuing force as law in the workings of our society becomes clear. Inscribe it in a slightly different form over the entrance to Western Penitentiary -- Prisoners have no rights that the keepers are bound to respect -- and you've generated the motto of the prison. Lots of words and much blood have been spilled attempting to justify, destroy, or sustain democratic institutions in America. An unresolved paradox remains always at the core of the notion of majority rule. Minority rights exist only at the sufferance of the majority, and since the majority is ultimately governed by self-interest, the majority’s self-interest determines any minorities fate.

John Edgar Wideman

Amiri Baraka wrote that, after Malcolm X’s death, “[w]hatever [he] had laid out was now just in the wind to be grabbed on the fly.” In his journey from street criminal, to political leader, to martyr, Malcolm was seen as a model for many prisoners. In the words of Eldridge Cleaver, “Malcolm had a special meaning for black convicts. A former prisoner himself, he had risen from the lowest depths to great heights. For this reason he was a symbol of hope, a model for thousands of black convicts who found themselves trapped in the vicious PPP cycle: prison-parole-prison.” Historian Komozi Woodard has argued that “Malcolm X opened the door so that a new social stratum, the grass roots, would aspire to national leadership in the Black Revolt.” If by grass roots he means a leadership coming from the bottom of society, which prison most definitely is, then Eldridge Cleaver, Etheridge Knight, and George Jackson were just such a grass roots leadership. They attained this status through their writing. These were not merely works of autobiography, however. Jackson’s letters, Knight’s poetry, and Cleaver’s essays emerged out of the violence of prison as each tried to grasp his surroundings on an

---

4 Komozi Woodard, A Nation Within a Nation: Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones) and Black Power Politics (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 62.
intellectual level, viewing the outside world through the anger each felt from his own
treatment at the hands of American society, revealing much about each writer and the
culture against which they revolted.

* * *

From my prison cell I have watched America slowly coming awake. It is not fully
awake yet, but there is soul in the air and everywhere I see beauty. I have watched
the sit-ins, the freedom raids, the Mississippi Blood Summers, demonstrations all
over the country, the FSM movement, the teach-ins, and the mounting protest
over Lyndon Strangelove's foreign policy -- all of this, the thousands of little
details, show me it is time to straighten up and fly right. That is why I decided to
concentrate on my writings and efforts in this area. We are a very sick country. I,
perhaps, am sicker than most. But I accept that. I told you in the beginning that I
am extremist by nature -- so it is only right that I should be extremely sick.

Eldridge Cleaver

Published in 1968, Eldridge Cleaver's Soul On Ice rapidly gained national acclaim, with
the New York Times naming it “Book of the Year.” In a series of essays on topics from
the death of Malcolm X and Muhammad Ali’s fight against Floyd Patterson, to the
writings of James Baldwin and the socio-sexual makeups of white and black Americans,
Cleaver refused to let the reader forget that he was a black man in prison and that he laid
the blame for his incarceration and the incarceration of other African Americans, not on
any individual crime, but on the malevolence of the racist American society. Instead,
Cleaver dissected the basis of American ideology and pointed the way toward the path he
saw for reconciliation: in the rebellious youth of the sixties.

Cleaver was born in Arkansas, but his family moved to Los Angeles in 1946 when
he was eleven. Three years later, he was first sent to reform school. With only brief
periods of freedom, Cleaver spent the years from 1954 to 1966 in prison. All of the
essays in Soul on Ice were written in 1965 and 1966, and were circulated to literary

5 Cleaver, Soul on Ice. 27-8.
figures such as Norman Mailer and Edward Keating, the publisher of *Ramparts* Magazine. With the help of Mailer and Keating (who promised to give Cleaver a job as a writer at *Ramparts*), among others, Cleaver gained parole in 1966. The publication of *Soul on Ice* came a year and a half later in February 1968.

The earliest dated essay in *Soul on Ice* is entitled “Initial Reactions on the Assassination of Malcolm X.” According to literary historian Kathleen Rout, this was because “the personal crisis that led Cleaver to begin to write in order to ‘save’ himself may be dated by Malcolm’s assassination in February of 1965.” As Malcolm had done, Cleaver educated himself in prison. He listed Rousseau, Paine, Voltaire, Marx, Lenin, Bakunin, Nechayev, Machiavelli, LeRoi Jones, Thomas Merton, Kwame Nkrumah, and Mao as his primary reading material, but pointed to Malcolm as the most important thinker in his own conversion from criminal to revolutionary. As one of the many African American prisoners who converted to the Nation of Islam, Cleaver followed Malcolm after his split with Elijah Muhammad in 1963, circulating copies of his speeches to other inmates in California’s Folsom Prison. Cleaver recalled a feeling of liberation when Malcolm rejected the “doctrine of hate and racial supremacy” that he had been teaching for years in the Nation. “The onus of teaching racial supremacy and hate, which is the white man’s burden, is pretty hard to bear,” and Cleaver was glad to be rid of it. When Malcolm was killed in 1965, however, Cleaver was unprepared for the loss of the man whom he viewed as his savior: “Although I heard it blared over the radio constantly and read about it in all the newspapers, days passed during which my mind continued to

---

7 Cleaver, *Soul on Ice*, 62.
reject the fact of Malcolm's death." Cleaver and other convicts saw this as a turning point. If Malcolm could be killed, then anybody could be a target, and "the Negro convicts welcomed the new era." Clearly then, a radicalization was occurring within the prisons. The symbol of hope for escaping the cycle of prison recidivism had been eliminated, and rage replaced it. "He was stopped in the only way that such a man can be stopped, in the same way that the enemies of the Congolese people had to stop Lumumba, by the same method that exploiters, tyrants, and parasitical oppressors have always crushed the legitimate strivings of people for freedom, justice, and equality -- by murder, assassination, and mad-dog butchery." Their revolutionary leader was dead, and in his absence, these black prisoners "look upon themselves as prisoners of war, the victims of a vicious, dog-eat-dog social system that is so heinous as to cancel out their own malefactions." Agreeing with Ossie Davis that Malcolm was "our living, black

---

8 Ibid., 59.
9 Ibid., 60. Cleaver would further outline this revolution in thought in Post-Prison Writings and Speeches (New York: Random House, 1969), 38: "For the black revolutionary youth of today, time starts moving with the coming of Malcolm X. Before Malcolm, time stands still, going down in frozen steps into the depths of the stagnation of slavery. . . . Malcolm mastered language and used it as a sword to slash his way through the veil of lies that for four hundred years gave the white man the power of the word. Through the breach in the veil, Malcolm saw all the way to national liberation, and he showed us the rainbow and the golden pot at its end. Inside the golden pot, Malcolm told us, was the tool of liberation. Huey P. Newton, one of the millions of black people who listened to Malcolm, lifted the golden lid off the pot and blindly, trusting Malcolm, stuck his hand inside and grasped the tool. When he withdrew his hand and looked to see what he held, he saw the gun, cold in its metal and implacable in its message: Death-Life, Liberty or Death, mastered by a black hand at last! Huey P. Newton is the ideological descendant, heir and successor of Malcolm X. Malcolm prophesied the coming of the gun to the black liberation struggle."
10 Cleaver, Soul on Ice, 65.
11 Ibid., 64.
manhood,” Cleaver leveled a warning at white America: “We shall have our manhood. We shall have it or the earth will be leveled by our attempts to gain it.”¹²

At the time of the writing of Soul on Ice, Cleaver was in jail for rape with intent to kill. He began in the ghettos raping black women, which received no attention from the police because crime was expected there. After enough practice, Cleaver moved across the tracks and sought white victims. He did not make clear how many victims there were, and there is no clear evidence as to the numbers, but reading between the lines, it appears as though there were many, white and black.¹³ Cleaver rationalized these brutal actions, writing, “Rape was an insurrectionary act. It delighted me that I was defying and trampling upon the white man’s law, upon his system of values, and that I was defiling his women.”¹⁴ Cleaver recognized the inhuman nature of these crimes, and he wished to be absolved of them, but not by the white American system of justice, whose criminality he compared with his own in the most famous, and infamous, passage of Soul on Ice:

I’m perfectly aware that I’m in prison, that I’m a Negro, that I’ve been a racist, and that I have a Higher Uneducation. I never know what significance I am supposed to attach to these factors. But I have a suspicion that, because of these aspects of my character, “free-normal-educated” people rather expect me to be more reserved, penitent, remorseful, and not too quick to shoot off my mouth on certain subjects. But I let them down, disappoint them, make them gape at me in a sort of stupor, as if they’re thinking: “You’ve got your nerve! Don’t you realize

¹² Ibid., 66. It is interesting to note the similarity of much of Cleaver’s writing in Soul on Ice to a statement made by Malcolm X while in England in late 1964: “And in my opinion the young generation of whites, blacks, browns, whatever else there is, you’re living at a time of extremism, a time of revolution, a time when there’s going to be a change. People in power have misused it, and now there has to be a change and a better world has to be built, and the only ways it’s going to be built is with extreme methods. I for one will join in with anyone, I don’t care what color you are, as long as you want to change this miserable condition that exists on this earth.” Malcolm X, By Any Means Necessary, 205.
¹³ Cleaver, who would be the authority for such a number, does not give a figure in either Soul on Ice or any of his later writing.
¹⁴ Cleaver, Soul on Ice, 26.
that you owe a debt to society?" My answer to all such thoughts lurking in their split-level heads, crouching behind their squinting bombardier eyes, is that the blood of Vietnamese peasants has paid off all my debts; that the Vietnamese people, afflicted with a rampant disease called Yankees, through their sufferings -- as opposed to the "frustration" of fat-assed American geeks safe at home worrying over whether to have bacon, ham, or sausage with their grade-A eggs in the morning, while Vietnamese worry each morning whether the Yankees will gas them, burn them up, or blow away their humble pad in a hail of bombs -- have canceled all my IOUs.15

Cleaver’s personal absolution, then, was achieved through the aggression of the government which held him captive. The nature of his own violence was comparable only to the violence of the American government. By trying to twist assumptions and values in this manner, Cleaver forced the use of what Michael Denning referred to as "grotesque imagination" that "realigns our categories of allegiances" in an attempt to create a revolutionary consciousness.16

Cleaver’s discussion of Vietnam did not end here, however. He viewed the war as just another in the series of American attacks on non-white people around the world, and in this fight, black Americans would be best served by a Vietnamese victory. Only when dignity and freedom were gained by people of color in Asia, Africa, and Latin America, would African Americans "be safe and secure and free to live in dignity and self-respect."17 In this war, the Americans were turning black soldiers against those with whom they shared a common goal: "By turning her black troops into butchers of the Vietnamese people, America is spreading hate against the black race throughout Asia. . . . Black Americans are considered to be the world’s biggest fools to go to another country to fight for something they don’t have for themselves."18 He warned that while the eyes

15 Ibid., 30.
16 Denning, The Cultural Front, 123.
17 Cleaver, Soul on Ice, 118.
18 Ibid., 120.
of white America were trained on the Vietnamese during the war, when the war was over
the focus would again be African Americans and the abuses of the past would begin
anew. If blacks were organized in opposition, however, Cleaver indicated that they could
create a “Black Trojan Horse” within the heart of the nation to stop its aggressions against
the rest of the world, and against the non-white inhabitants of the United States.19

This black opposition force was gaining strength throughout the nineteen sixties,
according to Cleaver, as the black community watched how they were treated by the
police and other agents of the government. “The police are the armed guardians of the
social order,”20 and African Americans presented the largest threat to this order. Within
this structure, the police were only following instructions that came from those who paid
them, and therein lay the problem: “a trigger-happy social order.”21 To illustrate this,
Cleaver took the example of the Watts riot in August 1965. Set off by police brutality,
the riot was put down savagely by the National Guard. In the aftermath of this violence,
however, the mood of the black population changed. “Too many people saw that those
who turned the other cheek in Watts got their whole head blown off.”22 If senseless
slaughter was the outcome of nonviolence, why shun defensive violence? Linking the
plight of African Americans and the Vietnamese once again, Cleaver asked rhetorically:
“Why not die right here in Babylon fighting for a better life, like the Viet Cong?”23

Despite this call-to-arms, Cleaver did indicate a path toward reconciliation
between the races. As the black revolt gained momentum and power, whites, and

19 Ibid., 119.
20 Ibid., 126.
21 Ibid.
22 Ibid., 124.
23 Ibid., 129.
especially young whites, began to examine the past as it truly was, not just as it had been taught to them:

What has suddenly happened is that the white race has lost its heroes. Worse, its heroes have been revealed as villains and its greatest heroes as the arch-villains. The new generations of whites, appalled by the sanguine and despicable record carved over the face of the globe by their race in the last five hundred years, are rejecting the panoply of white heroes, whose heroism consisted in erecting the inglorious edifice of colonialism and imperialism; heroes whose careers rested on a system of foreign and domestic exploitation, rooted in the myth of white supremacy and the manifest destiny of the white race. . . . Slave-catchers, slaveowners, murderers, butchers, invaders, oppressors -- the white heroes have acquired new names.24

These white youth, aware of the past misdeeds of their race, represented the possibilities for change. Elvis Presley and the beatniks had begun this transformation by “consort[ing] on a human level with the blacks.”25 Next came Chubby Checker with the Twist: “The Twist was a guided missile, launched from the ghetto into the very heart of suburbia. The Twist succeeded, as politics, religion, and law could never do, in writing in the heart and soul what the Supreme Court could only write on the books.”26 Intellectually and spiritually, then, the white youth had been stripped of the racial assumptions of their parents, and in this new awareness lay the hope for the future. “There is in America today a generation of white youth that is truly worthy of a black man’s respect, and this is a rare event in the foul annals of American history. . . . The sins of the father are visited upon the heads of the children -- but only if the children continue in the evil deeds of the fathers.”27 Cleansed of the capitalistic, colonialist notions of their parents, the New Left stood as a beacon of hope to Cleaver as he sat in prison.

24 Ibid., 71-2, 73.
25 Ibid., 179.
26 Ibid., 181.
27 Ibid., 84. This sounds remarkably like Malcolm’s sentiment in his autobiography: “The young whites, and blacks, too, are the only hope that America has. The rest of us
The reviews of *Soul on Ice* varied. William F. Buckley dismissed it as a “searing book of hatred” and called the New Left’s acceptance of Cleaver and his book “a venture in ideological onanism.”

Max Raferty, the California School Superintendent under Ronald Reagan, banned the book from the state’s public schools, claiming that it was “filthy.” The reviewer for *Catholic World* had a much different view, writing that “each memory is a chunk of impressionistic information which crystallizes Cleaver’s soul, which in itself is an image of the black revolution.” Cleaver’s view of the United States “diverges widely from the one we saw on Huntley-Brinkley or Cronkite.” Similarly, Julian Mayfield wrote in *The Nation* that “[h]e throws light on the dark areas that we wish he would leave alone.” The most interesting of the reviews was undoubtedly Richard Gilman’s in *The New Republic*. Arguing that *Soul on Ice* was the product of a purely black consciousness, Gilman wrote that he had no basis for judging the book; it was not about the “human condition” but the “condition of Negroes.” Gilman could not grasp what Cleaver wrote, he claimed, because “Negro suffering is not the same kind as ours.”

Gilman was alone in making this argument, but the fact that he made it illustrated the shocking nature of what Cleaver wrote. While not the first to do so, Cleaver forcefully connected American militarism abroad with violence within the United States, comparing

---

31 Szanto, 281.
34 Ibid.
his own rapes to the wholesale murders of the Vietnam War. *Soul on Ice* sold two million copies within a decade.\(^{35}\)

Cleaver did not retain these ideas of a possible peaceful change of society after he left prison, however. His post-prison writings and actions as the Minister of Information for the Black Panther Party were much more confrontational, concerned only with fomenting revolution. "The genie of black revolutionary violence is here, and it says that the oppressor has no rights which the oppressed are bound to respect," Cleaver wrote in 1968. "The genie also has a question for white Americans: which side do you choose? Do you side with the oppressor or with the oppressed? The time for decision is upon you. The cities of America have tested the first flames of revolution. But a hotter fire rages in the hearts of black people today: total liberty for black people or total destruction for America."\(^{36}\) Cleaver went into exile in Algeria after a shoot-out with Oakland Police two months after the publication of *Soul on Ice*. While there, he broke with Newton and the Black Panthers, who sought a more revisionist line, while Cleaver was interested only in immediate revolution. After several years of exile, Cleaver returned to the United States as a born-again Christian, repudiating all of his past radicalism.\(^{37}\)

With *Soul on Ice*, Eldridge Cleaver produced another model for the black prisoner in the tradition of Malcolm X. Like Malcolm, he attained freedom through knowledge. Many later writers held up *Soul on Ice* as their inspiration for writing, as Cleaver had done with Malcolm, and many referred to it as a major influence.

---


\(^{36}\) Cleaver, *Post-Prison Writings*, 38.

While Cleaver was receiving this acclaim for his writing, another black convict was writing in the Indiana State Penitentiary and receiving critical appreciation, if not quite as enthusiastic a popular response.

* * *

Rehabilitation & Treatment in the Prisons of America

The convict strolled into the prison administration building to get assistance and counseling for his personal problems. Inside the main door were several other doors proclaiming: Doctor, Lawyer, Teacher, Counselor, Therapist, etc. He chose the proper door, and was confronted with two more doors: Custody and Treatment. He chose Treatment, went in, and was confronted with two more doors: First Offender and Previous Offender. Again he chose the proper door and was confronted with two more doors: Adult and Juvenile. He was an adult, so he walked through that door and ran smack into two more doors: Democrat and Republican. He was democrat, so he rushed through that door and ran smack into two more doors: Black and White. He was Black, so he rushed — ran — through that door — and fell nine stories to the street.38

Etheridge Knight was born in Mississippi in 1931. During the Korean War he served as a medical technician and was severely wounded. While recovering, he became addicted to pain killers. To pay for his addiction, he turned to petty crime. Knight was sent to the Indiana State Penitentiary in 1960 for armed robbery with a sentence of ten-to-twenty-five-years, of which he eventually served eight. "People who are in prison out of necessity become philosophers," Knight said years later.39 His incarceration led him to write poetry, which was an extension of his life outside of prison as a "toast-teller."40 This creative process made Knight more aware of his environment: "you

40 Ibid., 4.
are aware of the insanity and the pain and the suffering all around you and inside you.”

In 1963 he began a correspondence with Gwendolyn Brooks, who encouraged his writing and helped him publish Poems from Prison and Black Voices from Prison. Through these publications, Etheridge Knight emerged from his cell in Indiana as one of the foremost writers of the Black Arts movement. “I died in Korea from a shrapnel wound,” Knight wrote, “and narcotics resurrected me. I died in 1960 from a prison sentence and poetry brought me back to life.” In his poetry and prose, he depicted a life in and out of prison in which African Americans endured a continued mental enslavement by a malevolent white society. Only a collective black consciousness, including a distinct black aesthetic, could overcome this environment.

Knight did not deal with his own crime in his poetry. Instead, he focused on the world around him. For Knight, American society represented a “violent space.” From his perspective, whether in prison or the ghetto, African Americans had yet to escape cultural enslavement: “From the time the first of our fathers were bound and shackled and herded into the dark hold of a ‘Christian’ slaveship -- right on up to the present day, the whole experience of the black man in America can be summed up in one word: prison.” Oppression was plainly practiced by this white society on black inmates of the ghettos and the prisons: “Prison is the ultimate in oppression. And as with black people in the larger prison outside, the keepers try to hold the black inmates’ minds in chains along with their bodies by making full use of a white educational system, a white

---

41 Ibid., 2-3.
42 Essential Etheridge Knight, 115.
communications system, a dead white Art, and the white law.”

Knight further illustrated this insight in his poem, “The Warden Said to Me the Other Day”:

The warden said to me the other day
(innocently, I think), “Say, etheridge,
why come the black boys don’t run off
like the white boys do?”
I lowered my jaw and scratched my head
and said (innocently, I think), “Well, suh,
I ain’t for sure, but I reckon it’s cause
we ain’t got no wheres to run to.”

Why run, when the outside world held only more of the same? In this system, the ghetto was simply a feeder for the prison, with the former doing nothing more than preparing the black victim for the latter. The difference between the ghetto and prison was one of degree, not of kind. There was no safe personal space for an African American, but only the violence and depredation of a state of mental enslavement; this was the space that Knight sought to uncover in his writing.

Knight engaged this theme again in his poem, “For Freckle-Faced Gerald.” A sixteen year old sent to prison, Gerald soon became little more than “pigmeat” for the older prisoners. He “didn’t stand a chance,/ didn’t even know that the loss of his balls/ had been plotted years in advance/ by wiser and bigger buzzards than those/ who now hover above his track/ and at night light upon his back.”

In Prison Literature in America, H. Bruce Franklin has noted that “[t]he fundamental punishment inflicted upon prisoners in America is the deprivation of normal sex. . . . All the other aspects of prison life -- the loss of the freedom of movement, the brutality of armed police, atrocious food and medical care, squalid surroundings, the arbitrary authority of the state in daily life --

---

44 Ibid., 9.
45 Etheridge Knight, Poems from Prison (Detroit: Broadside Press, 1968), 18.
46 Ibid., 14.
all these are common features of life in the ghetto, the barrio, and many poor white neighborhoods." Clearly, Gerald fell prey to forceful, nonconsensual sex within prison. Too young and inexperienced to defend himself, Gerald was a symbol of prison degradation, but Knight did not point all of the blame for these rapes on his attackers. These “buzzards” were merely the end result of a long line of attackers. Gerald was hounded into prison from the ghetto, and the fact that “the loss of his balls” occurred in prison is coincidental; it could have happened just as easily in the ghetto. This arrangement, created by the white capitalistic society, created and perpetuated the violent space, while Gerald was nothing more than one of its innocent victims.

If Gerald was trapped helplessly within the violent space, then the poem “Hard Rock Returns to Prison from the Hospital for the Criminal Insane” depicted a man who gained momentary freedom from the violent space through rebellion. Knight wrote that “Hard Rock was ‘known not to take no shit/ From nobody.’” Since rebellion was not allowed from those within the violent space, “the doctors had bored a hole in his head,/ Cut out part of his brain, and shot electricity/ Through the rest.” The other prisoners, waiting to see how the lobotomized Hard Rock would emerge, “wrapped [them]selves in the cloak/ Of his exploits: ‘Man, the last time, it took eight/ Screws to put him in the Hole.’” Hard Rock did not return as he had left. Instead of the irrepressible rage, he now “grinned and looked silly,/ His eyes empty like knot holes in a fence.” The last bit of rebellion had been erased from prison, and the inmates reacted with the distress of the defeated: “He had been our Destroyer, the doer of things/ We dreamed of doing but could not bring ourselves to do,/ The fears of years, like a biting whip,/ Had cut grooves too

47 Franklin, Prison Literature in America, 256.
deeply across our backs."48 These men lived vicariously through the personal rebellion of Hard Rock, and when he was defeated by the prison system, all of the inmates felt their own defeat more painfully. Through violence, Hard Rock had achieved some freedom while imprisoned, but the dominant culture would not allow this freedom to remain within the violent space. The only thing prison had left Hard Rock was his mind, so to erase his freedom, his mind was also taken away from him. Hard Rock’s freedom, like that of Bigger Thomas, was only temporary; the dominant culture would not allow such transgressions from those confined within the violent space. In the end, critic Patricia Liggins Hill wrote, “Hard Rock comes to symbolize the Black man inside and outside of prison walls who has been broken, eventually, by the overpowering forces in an oppressive society.”49 His rebellion came to nothing, and he was left, just like Gerald, helpless at the bottom of society.

Knight dwelled on the death of Malcolm X in several of his poems. In “For Malcolm, a Year After,” Knight vented the rage evoked by Malcolm’s assassination:

“Compose for Red a proper verse;/ Adhere to foot and strict iamb;/ Control the burst of angry words/ Or they might boil and break the dam./ Or they might boil and overflow/ And drench me, drown me, drive me mad/ . . . Make them empty anglo tea lace words --/ Make them dead white and dry bone bare.” Knight could hardly contain his own fury as he wrote these “empty anglo words”: “The verse will die -- as all men do --/ But not the memory of him!/ Death might come singing sweet like C,/ Or knocking like the old folk

48 Knight, Poems from Prison, 11-12.
say,/ The moon and stars may pass away,/ But not the anger of that day.”

Knight clearly strained to break out of the confines of white aesthetic strictures, and his anguish over the death of Malcolm X became more powerful for it. The only thing that Knight said would last was this anger, long after European ideas about art had vanished. He further displayed his feelings on Malcolm in the poem “It Was a Funky Deal”: “You made them mad, Malcolm. Same reason./ It was a funky deal./ You rocked too many boats, man./ Pulled too many coats, man./ Saw through the jive./ You reached the wild guys/ Like me. . . .”

For his actions, Malcolm became a hero to convicts like Knight, and it was for this that he was killed.

Knight also turned his attention to the penal system itself and pointed out many of its most glaring shortcomings and logical inconsistencies, drawing on newspaper accounts, notices, and other paperwork from the prison system itself. Could rehabilitation occur when inmates were made to live under crushing psychological and physical conditions? Knight answered no. “The queer reasoning seems to be that if a man can conform to the authoritarian routine of prison life, he will then be able to function positively in a free, competitive life on the outside.”

Still, it was this kind of spiritually broken inmate that was the goal of the prison system, while education and other efforts to help those in prison were discarded as impractical or unneeded. What was the outcome of such a system in which the people cried for harsher justice against criminals? “Men are put into prison for the protection of society, it is said, but is it being protected when-

50 Knight, Poems from Prison, 27.
51 Ibid., 27-8.
52 Knight, Black Voices from Prison, 139.
90 per cent of all the men in prison will at one time or another be released and when 75 per cent of them return to crime? Once again, he answered no.

In the death penalty, Knight saw another instance of the fallacy of rehabilitation in American prisons, and the most glaring example of the violence inherent in American society. Lumping the American public's demand for "human sacrifices" with the prison system's supposed benevolent societal goals, Knight declared pointedly:

So the question of capital punishment is merely rhetorical. It was never meant to deter crime, and the people who are pro-capital punishment on those grounds are hypocritical liars. No matter how sophisticated their argument, they are -- in their souls -- "eye-for-an-eye" fundamentalists. Because they, like everybody else, know that murders/homicides are committed under only two sets of circumstances: the man who kills deliberately and who doesn't think he's going to be caught, and the man who kills in a burst of passion/impulse without considering the consequences -- and who wouldn't give a fuck about the consequences even if he did think about them.

Death Row prisoners are depicted as "sacrificial lamb[s], soon to be strapped onto a weird altar/throne so that the blood lust of a barbaric society will be quenched." Further, Knight noted that "Indiana is like all the other man-killing states: it has electrocuted an unusually large number of black men." Looking at the number of death sentences in Indiana from 1913 to 1967, Knight showed that white prisoners were several times more likely to receive commutations and new trials than were black prisoners. The only explanation for Knight was the unquenchable, racist bloodlust of American society. Cleaver focused on its existence in the jungles of Vietnam; Knight chose a focus closer to home. Both were expressions of the American culture of violence, which both

53 Ibid., 140.
54 Ibid., 156.
55 Ibid.
56 Ibid.
57 Ibid., 157-9.
Cleaver and Knight had grown up with and been surrounded by while they were in prison.

Writing at the same time as Cleaver, Etheridge Knight espoused many similar ideas about American society and the place of African Americans within that society, but he did not point the way out as Cleaver did. The "violent space" followed African Americans wherever they went, and no simple adoption of black culture by white youth could solve this. In the end, Knight gave no instructions on how to make things better because he did not see any obvious ways to redress his grievances. Unlike Cleaver, and many of the later prison writers examined in this study, Knight did not focus on politics or the circumstances of his own crime and its punishment (such as the length of his sentence). His themes were more universal, trying to create poetry that would encompass the entire violent space. This goal can be seen clearly in two poems written after his release from prison. In "For Black Poets Who Think of Suicide," Knight declared: "For black poets belong to Black people. Are/ The Flutes of Black Lovers. Are/ The Organs of Black Sorrows. Are/ The Trumpets of Black Warriors./ Let all Black Poets die as Trumpets,/ and be buried in the dust of marching feet."58 In the second poem, "Feeling Fucked Up," Knight wrote: "fuck marx and mao fuck fidel and nkrumah and/ democracy and communism . . . fuck joseph fuck mary fuck/ god jesus and all the disciples fuck fanon nixon/ and malcolm fuck the revolution fuck freedom fuck/ the whole muthafucking thing."59 This poem was not simply a rejection of all of these thinkers and their philosophies, but rather, an outpouring of anger at the circumstances of the violent space. It is clear that Knight did not seek merely to influence the politics of his time, but

58 Knight, Essential Etheridge Knight, 52.
59 Ibid., 34.
instead to help create a new society through a new aesthetic. Talk of revolution meant little if it was on white terms.

After Cleaver and Knight had both been released from prison, this same anguish reemerged from the prisons of California in 1970 with the publication of *Soledad Brother*, but now the prisoner had a program for changing American society, beyond the simplistic nostrums of Eldridge Cleaver.

* * *

This monster -- the monster they've engendered in me will return to torment its maker, from the grave, the pit, the profoundest pit. Hurl me into the next existence, the descent into hell won't turn me. I'll crawl back to dog his trail forever. . . . I'm part of a righteous people who anger slowly, but rage undammed. . . . I'm going to charge them for this, twenty-eight years without gratification. I'm going to charge them reparations in blood. . . . This is one nigger who is positively displeased. I'll never forgive, I'll never forget, and if I'm guilty of anything at all it's of not leaning on them hard enough. War without terms.

George Jackson

Imprisoned in 1960 at age eighteen for stealing seventy dollars from a gas station, George Jackson was given an indeterminate sentence of one year to life. He would spend the next eleven years in California prisons, where he would die in 1971, shot in an alleged escape attempt, after receiving acclaim for his revolutionary prison writings. James Baldwin wrote, “No Black person will ever believe that George Jackson died the way they tell us he did.” Soledad Brother, a collection of letters written by Jackson to family and friends from prison, was published to wide acclaim. It “became an overnight international bestseller after it was published by Bantam in 1970. One day George Jackson was an anonymous black convict; the next he was being called the most powerful

---

60 Jackson, *Soledad Brother*, 222.
61 James Baldwin, as quoted in Ibid., x.
and eloquent writer since Malcolm X, the successor to Richard Wright."  

Soledad Brother was followed by a collection of essays, smuggled out of prison days before Jackson’s death and published posthumously in 1972, entitled Blood in My Eye. In these two works, Jackson exhibited much of the same anger at the prison system and American society as Malcolm, Cleaver, and Knight, but his was an undoubtedly revolutionary consciousness, rejecting all forms of reconciliation with capitalist white America and calling for a complete overthrow of the system. “War without terms” leaves little room for misinterpretation.

Throughout these two works, Jackson consistently attacked the tenets of the prison system which held him. “The ultimate expression of law is not order — it’s prison,” Jackson claimed. “There are hundreds upon hundreds of prisons, and thousands upon thousands of laws, yet there is no social order, no social peace.” This was because the prisons were little more than tools of class oppression. Jackson saw no wealthy people in prison with him. Most were like him — poor and black. The prison was simply one more place to house those whom the capitalist society could not use. The

---

63 Though I will discuss these two books together, it is important to point out that they are very different works. Soledad Brother was, by all accounts, heavily edited by Gregory Armstrong from letters which were not meant for publication, producing a work that displeased Jackson as overly sentimental. Blood In My Eye, on the other hand, was written by Jackson for the express purpose of publication, and reveals a much more hardened writer trying to project the rhetoric of a revolutionary. See Liberatore, Road to Hell; Jo Durden-Smith, Who Killed George Jackson?: Fantasies, Paranoia, and the Revolution (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1976); Gregory Armstrong, The Dragon Has Come (New York: Harper and Row, 1974); Eric Mann, Comrade George: An Investigation into the Life, Political Thought, and Assassination of George Jackson (New York: Harper and Row, 1974).
inevitability of prison was not due to any criminal impulses, but instead to the economic reality forced upon the black community. "After one concedes," charged Jackson, that racism is stamped unalterably into the present nature of Amerikan sociopolitical and economic life in general . . . and concedes further that criminals and crime arise from material, economic, sociopolitical causes, we can then burn all of the criminology and penology libraries and direct our attention where it will do some good. . . . All of those who can afford to be honest know that the real victim, that poor, uneducated, disorganized man who finds himself a convicted criminal, is simply the end result of a long chain of corruption and mismanagement that starts with people like Reagan and his political appointees in Sacramento.\textsuperscript{65}

In this chain of causation, it was the ghetto, created by American capitalism, that bred crime, feeding the capitalist prison system.

Within this prison system, the poor, uneducated guard acted as the proxy for the capitalist. Jackson betrayed little fondness in his descriptions of these guards: "United States prisons are the last refuge of the brainless. . . . The cop, as I've stated before, is a guy who can do no other type of work, who can feed himself only by feeding upon this garbage dump."\textsuperscript{66} Victims of the same economic situation as their charges, the guards had decided to protect the interests of the capitalists by brutalizing those at the bottom, giving them much the same feeling of superiority as the poor white in the Jim Crow South. In each case, the fact that the economic realities contradicted the perceived situation simply made the repression of the poor blacks that much worse. Racial violence in prison did not occur in spite of the guards; it happened largely because the guards played blacks against whites in a personal bloodlust indicative of that possessed by the society as a whole. In such a situation, rehabilitation was not possible, but it was clear to Jackson that this had never been the goal:

\textsuperscript{65} Jackson, Soledad Brother, 18.
\textsuperscript{66} Ibid., 220-1.
The apologists recognize that these places are controlled by absolute terror, but they justify the pig’s excesses with the argument that we exist outside the practice of any civilized codes of conduct. Since we are convicts rather than men, a bullet through the heart, summary execution for fistfighting or stepping across a line is not extreme or unsound at all. An official is allowed full range in violent means because a convict can be handled no other way.67

Clearly, Jackson’s letters were of a much more personal nature than the poetry of Etheridge Knight. In one letter, Jackson wrote a short autobiography, beginning with his early childhood on the west side of Chicago. He attended a Catholic school there until his family moved to Los Angeles when he was fifteen. Shortly after arriving on the West Coast, George was arrested for robbery and sent to the California Youth Authority. He would be in and out of Youth Authority camps until his arrest in 1960 for the gas station robbery.68 Jackson disdained the education he received while in school in Chicago, and like Malcolm, he used his time in prison to educate himself beyond what he had learned in the schools of white America. Referring to the thinkers he was exposed to in school -- Augustine, Jerome, Leibniz -- as the “lunatic fringe,” Jackson sought to reeducate himself as a revolutionary: “I met Marx, Lenin, Trotsky, Engels, and Mao when I entered prison and they redeemed me.”69 In his letters, he mentioned reading the works of Che Guevara, Ho Chi Minh, Frantz Fanon (both Black Skin, White Masks and The Wretched of the Earth), James Baldwin’s The Fire Next Time, Malcolm X, Fidel Castro, Mao Zedong, and Eldridge Cleaver, among others.70 This educational redemption, as Jackson saw it, made absolute revolt the only course.

67 Ibid., 24.
68 Ibid., 3-16; Liberatore, Road to Hell, 3-8, 14-19.
69 Jackson, Soledad Brother, 16.
70 Ibid., 16, 26, 110, 255, 258, 294, 300.
This self-education led him to write about the impossibility of nonviolent change for African Americans. This path of resistance might have worked if there was a level playing field for whites and blacks, but Jackson denied that this existed. The racism inherent in American society prevented it. In such a society, “nonviolence is a false ideal. It presupposes the existence of compassion and a sense of justice on the part of one’s adversary.”\textsuperscript{71} When white society obviously possessed no attributes of compassion, Jackson, in a letter written shortly after King’s assassination in 1968, found it hard to believe that Martin Luther King had appeared in the United States: “It is very odd . . . that so violent and tumultuous a setting can still produce such men. He was out of place, out of season, too naive, too innocent, too cultured, too civil for these times. That is why his end was so predictable.”\textsuperscript{72} Nonviolence produced a position of weakness, and no advances could be made from such a position. While some said that African Americans should be righteous and turn the other cheek, Jackson retorted that “I most certainly need both sides of my head.”\textsuperscript{73}

Having rejected nonviolence, Jackson turned to revolution as the only path to liberation for African Americans. He stated his intentions clearly: “We’ll take our mule and forty acres now, collectivize them, defend them, invite other revolutionary people to follow our example, make allies -- then leap to destroy the fascists’ pseudo-mass-culture from within.”\textsuperscript{74} The vanguard in this revolution would come from the prisons and the ghettos to destroy the system that had oppressed them for so long. These men had nothing to lose, and in Jackson’s mind, “you will find no class or category more aware,\textsuperscript{71} Ibid., 168. \textsuperscript{72} Ibid., 167. \textsuperscript{73} Ibid., 168. \textsuperscript{74} Jackson, \textit{Blood in My Eye}, 82.
more embittered, desperate, or dedicated to the ultimate remedy -- revolution. The most dedicated, the best of our kind -- you’ll find them in the Folsoms, San Quentins, and Soledads.\(^75\) This theory of lumpenrevolution was the only solution for Jackson. “We are the only ones (besides the very small white minority left) who can get at the monster’s heart without subjecting the world to nuclear fire,” he wrote. “We have a momentous historical role to act out if we will. The whole world for all time in the future will love us and remember us as the righteous people who made it possible for the world to live on. If we fail through fear and lack of aggressive imagination, then the slaves of the future will curse us, as we sometimes curse those of yesterday.”\(^76\) In Blood In My Eye, he wrote pointedly, “The outlaw and the lumpen will make the revolution. The people, the workers, will adopt it. This must be the new order of things, after the fact of the modern industrial fascist state.”\(^77\)

Jackson envisioned a new breed of black guerrilla, “the new nigger, with a gun and the eyes of the hunter, the hunter of men.”\(^78\) His model for this new soldier was his own brother, Jonathan, who was eleven years younger than George. On August 7, 1970, Jonathan entered a courtroom in San Rafael, California and, with three prisoners who were on trial at the time, took the judge, the assistant district attorney, and three other hostages from the courtroom. He sought to trade the hostages for the release of George and two other inmates, the Soledad Brothers, who were facing the death penalty for allegedly murdering a guard in the Soledad Prison. After leaving the courthouse, Jonathan and the others went to a rented van, but before they could escape, they were

\(^75\) Jackson, Soledad Brother, 26.
\(^76\) Ibid., 265-266.
\(^77\) Jackson, Blood In My Eye, 124.
\(^78\) Ibid., 42.
fired on by police and prison guards. Jonathan, two of the inmates, and the judge were killed. Later, talking with his editor, George Jackson said of his brother’s death, “That was the first real battle of the war. They made a terrible mistake there. They should have let that boy through.”

Jackson viewed his brother as the wave of the future. He was the true revolutionary, who would never stop fighting. If these guerillas were not successful and the revolt ended in nothing more than nihilistic violence in which the nation was leveled and Jackson and the revolutionary forces were dead, it would be an acceptable if regrettable outcome: “[W]e see a positive benefit for the majority of the world’s people in the reduction of this whole country to a vast wasteland, and a graveyard for two hundred million of history’s most damnable fools!”

Further, the threat of premature death, according to Jackson, should have had no psychological impact on African Americans because “we have always done most of the dying, and still do: dying at the stake, through social neglect or in U.S. foreign wars. The point is now to construct a situation where someone else will join in the dying. If it fails and we have to do most of the dying anyway, we’re certainly no worse off than before.”

Jackson did not fear revolutionary failure. “Some of the fear is an honest fear that revolution will be repressed entirely,” wrote Jackson. “These thinkers have historical references that roll them back to Europe to the time of Hitler’s Germany and Italy in the twenties and thirties. But I say that can never happen here. That was too long ago, too far away, and none of those European countries had thirty million irate niggers on their hands.”

---

79 George Jackson, as quoted in Armstrong, Dragon Has Come, 143.
80 Jackson, Blood In My Eye, 74.
81 Ibid., 6.
82 Ibid., 31-32.
to produce, animated his writing. He firmly believed in the transformative power of anger and violence, having spent much of his life in institutions that fostered little else. Jackson was in many ways the most fearsome product of Knight’s violent space, combining the individual rebellion of Hard Rock or Bigger Thomas with the collective ideology of Malcolm X. His own violence was derived from the violence of American and European culture. His was not an undisciplined, random, individual violence, however. He sought to “hurl” all African Americans “through Fanon’s revolutionary catharsis.”

Unlike Cleaver and Knight, Jackson was never released from prison. He knew that his indeterminate sentence was a death sentence. No parole board would ever release him. According to Jackson, authorities had learned from their release of Eldridge Cleaver and would not make the same mistake again. In a letter to lawyer Fay Stender, Jackson wrote, “I fell into this garbage can in a narcotic stupor and they just closed the lid for good.” While Cleaver was released in 1966 and Knight in 1968, Jackson remained in prison as the nation exploded in the aftermath of King’s assassination. He saw “Fat Rat Daley” and his gestapo tactics in Chicago in 1968.

He was still writing when Huey Newton was sent to prison, and during the Tet Offensive. He would not be so lucky as Cleaver, whose writing helped secure his release from prison. By the time he wrote Blood In My Eye, Jackson knew that escape was his only way out. The short letters to his family and friends were now replaced by treatises on how to wage urban guerrilla warfare. Jackson focused only on becoming “the focomotor, the dragon,” that could bring about revolution.

---

83 Jackson, Soledad Brother, 241.
84 Ibid., 221.
85 Ibid., 237.
86 George Jackson, as quoted in Durden-Smith, Who Killed George Jackson?, 114.
Cleaver’s or Knight’s: he viewed his writing as a means to his own liberation and the beginning of a social revolution, not as an outlet for artistic energy.

Shortly before his death, with gun in hand in the cell block, Jackson announced, “The dragon has come,” paraphrasing Ho Chi Minh’s warning that when the gates of the prison were thrown open, the dragon of the righteously indignant prisoner would take his revenge.\(^8^7\) He would be killed in the ensuing minutes, without his revolution.\(^8^8\) In the days after his death, prison rebellions broke out in San Jose, Boston, Dallas, and San Antonio.\(^8^9\) The largest outbreak after his death, however, took place the next month in the Attica uprising. An inmate who died in the National Guard assault on Attica wrote a letter describing inmate reactions to Jackson’s death: “A lot of reaction around George Jackson. . . . At the midday meal (the large meal in prison), not a man ate or spoke -- black, white, brown, red. Many wore black armbands. . . . No one can remember anything like it here before.”\(^9^0\)

Bruce Franklin has written that Jackson was the “leading

---

\(^{8^7}\) Liberatore, Road to Hell, 148.

\(^{8^8}\) No satisfactory explanation has yet emerged of what happened the day Jackson was killed. The books by Armstrong, Durden-Smith, Liberatore, and Mann each give a scenario, but since many of the participants were killed, it is impossible to fully recreate what happened in the San Quentin Adjustment Center. Jackson somehow obtained a gun, and three guards were killed. Jackson then ran out onto the yard and was shot twice, killing him. How exactly this all transpired is still unclear. What is clear, however, was that Jackson was killed two days before the Soledad Brothers trial would have begun, which would undoubtedly have been a highly-publicized expose of the California prison system. When the remaining Soledad Brothers went to trial, they were acquitted.


\(^{9^0}\) Sam Melville, as quoted in Franklin, Prison Literature in America, 273. This admiration for Jackson was not shared by all prisoners. Eric Cummins quoted a white convict who knew Jackson as saying, “He was the meanest mother I ever saw, inside or out.” About those on the outside who supported Jackson and the Soledad Brothers, this convict said simply, “They had their revolutionary meat to beat.” In Eric Cummins, The Rise and Fall of California’s Radical Prison Movement (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1994), 159.
theoretician of the prison movement,“ helping other prisoners apply the “Afro-American historical experience to their own experience.”91 In his writing, Jackson used his own reading of the violent past of the United States to reject the nonviolent methods of the civil rights movement and proposed aggressive revolutionary war against capitalist American society. While he was well-versed in the revolutionary writings of the twentieth century, Jackson’s rebellion was much like Robert Williams’s: more Nat Turner than whitey’s Marxism-Leninism. Drawing on the long lineage of African American resistance, he tried to achieve the social revolution that had eluded his predecessors. He was unsuccessful, but as the uprising at Attica showed, his ideas had spread. Clearly then, Jackson was able to inspire many prisoners throughout the nation to a level of class and revolutionary consciousness never before attained, but he was silenced as suddenly as he had first emerged from his cell.

* * *

Eldridge Cleaver, Etheridge Knight, and George Jackson produced very different pieces of literature. Taken together, however, several common themes emerge. First, each defined American society as a “violent space,” to use Knight’s phrase. Second, each looked to Malcolm X as the ideal of what a black prisoner could become. Finally, and most importantly, each of these men was initially radicalized by their prison experiences. Bruce Franklin wrote that “the dominant voices in this literature are those of ordinary criminals who have become literary artists through their prison experience.”92 This shared artistic awakening in prison is the essential connection among these three writers, as they reveal the emergence of a Fanonian literature of combat. These are not simply

91 Franklin, Prison Literature in America, 273.
92 Ibid., 234.
individual writings from prison, but the basis of a coherent body of literature. These works represent the beginnings of a literary reaction to American society at one of its most violently repressive stages.

Through the prism of both prison and the oppression of American society, Cleaver, Knight, and Jackson produced literature that sought to mold a revolutionary consciousness. These men did not argue that they were innocent of the crimes that sent them to prison. Instead, they pointed at the society that imprisoned them and revealed that the criminals were those at the top of society. All three drew upon the same sources of opposition as David Walker, Nat Turner, Robert Williams, and Malcolm X to define the nature of their own rebellion. At home and abroad, America sought to maintain the subjugation of colonized peoples. Cleaver, Knight, and Jackson wrote to instruct themselves and others on how to resist and overthrow this colonial aggression, not simply on a personal level, but on a collective level. They sought the rebellion of Frantz Fanon, not Bigger Thomas.
Chapter 3: The Personal for the Political -- Politics Creates
The Prisoner

If somewhere in this whirl and chaos of things there dwells Eternal Good, pitiful yet masterful, then anon in His good time America shall rend the Veil and the prisoner shall go free.

W.E.B. Du Bois

This second group of prison writers, unlike the first, were politicized before they went to prison. In fact, it was their political activities that resulted in their incarceration. Angela Davis, Huey Newton, Bobby Seale, Rubin Carter, and the New York 21 wrote about American society in ways similar to Cleaver, Knight, and Jackson, but their writing also focused on their individual circumstances. Each denied committing the crime for which he or she was confined. While this denial assumes greater importance in some of the works than others, it is present throughout each of these works. Each of these authors was targeted by the government, whether Angela Davis’s expulsion from UCLA by the state of California, COINTELPRO’s campaign against the Black Panthers, or the Paterson Police Department’s harassment of Rubin Carter, and thus, experienced the aggression of American society firsthand. Each writer criticized the culture of violence, just as the earlier prison writers had done. Unlike the earlier writers, however, these writers truly were political prisoners. They were imprisoned for their political activities, whether overtly or under some thin judicial guise. As such, they represent the second wave of the literature of combat, which both expanded the body of prison literature and helped to define it.

* * *

Historically the prison system has been an integral part of our lives. Black people emerged from slavery only to encounter the prison labor system as one element of the new apparatus of exploitation. Arrested for trivial or falsified offenses, Blacks were leased out to politicians, planters, mining firms, and Northern syndicates for up to thirty years. A remnant of that era can still be detected, for example, in Arkansas' notorious Cummins' Prison Farm where prisoners work for no pay in cotton fields five and a half days a week. While more insidious forms of slave labor have persisted in the prisons, this broader social function of maintaining the existing socio-economic order has achieved monstrous proportions.

Angela Davis

Angela Davis first attracted national attention in 1969 when the University of California at Los Angeles hired her as an assistant professor of sociology. An informant told the University Regents that Davis had been a member of the Communist Party, and the university used a state law from the McCarthy era, stating that no Communist could hold a teaching position in a state university to fire her. Because of her ties to the New Left, including the leadership of the Black Panther Party and Herbert Marcuse, she immediately became a cause celebre on the Left. She used her celebrity to publicize what she called the "legal lynching" of George Jackson and two other inmates in the Soledad Brothers case. This campaign led to her acquaintance with Jonathan Jackson, as well as further scrutiny from the FBI. According to Ward Churchill and Jim Vander Wall, the FBI was launching a program "through which to neutralize both [George] Jackson and as many of his supporters as possible." The guns that Jonathan Jackson brought into the courthouse in San Rafael were registered to Angela Davis, so she was charged with murder as an accessory who had full knowledge of what was planned. After

---


3 Davis worked with Marcuse as an undergraduate at Brandeis University, and also as she worked on her M.A. and Ph.D. at the University of California at Santa Cruz.

several weeks as a fugitive, during which time Richard Nixon stated that her arrest could be used as an example to "all other terrorists," she was apprehended, and while in prison she and others wrote If They Come in the Morning. A disjointed work, it included essays by Davis about the American prison system and other political prisoners and a series of essays by activists and intellectuals calling for the release of Angela Davis and other radicals believed to be wrongly imprisoned. Very different from the other writings examined thus far, If They Come in the Morning consciously tried to evoke sympathy for the plight of the political prisoner, exchanging the personal for the political. In this way, Davis's book could be seen as a return to the style of prison writing of Marcus Garvey and Angelo Herndon, whose political activity caused their incarceration.

In one of the first essays, James Baldwin wrote to Angela Davis about the importance of her case. "The enormous revolution in Black consciousness which has occurred in your generation, my dear sister, means the beginning or the end of America." It is this consciousness that was put on trial, and which had to be defended, for "if they take you in the morning, they will be coming for us that night." It was not merely Angela Davis's freedom that was at stake, then, but all of black America's and all who had evolved the consciousness that Baldwin celebrated. This battle for freedom, Davis indicated, required new tactics. The liberal could no longer be counted on, according to Davis, because liberals resided within the system and would look only to legal paths toward change: "redress through electoral channels is the liberal's panacea." The

---

5 Richard Nixon, as quoted in Davis, If They Come in the Morning, 176.
7 James Baldwin, as quoted in Davis, If They Come in the Morning, 17.
8 James Baldwin, as quoted in Ibid., 18.
9 Ibid., 19.
government had no interest in helping African Americans, and even black self-defense “is twisted and distorted on official levels and ultimately rendered synonymous with criminal aggression.”\textsuperscript{10} If white America were in the same situation, economically and otherwise, as black America, Davis believed that things would have been much different: “The unemployment rate among Black youth has presently skyrocketed to 30 per cent. If one-third of America’s white youth were without a means of livelihood, we would either be in the thick of revolution or else under the iron rule of fascism.”\textsuperscript{11} With this as the stated and understood reality, Robert Chrisman, editor of \textit{Black Scholar} declared menacingly, “For in the racist words of Judge Taney’s Dred Scott Decision, Blacks ‘had no rights which a white man was bound to respect.’ As long as this racist attitude obtains, then the reverse follows: ‘A white man has no laws a Black man need respect.’”\textsuperscript{12}

Prisons existed within this society as a means to control those who threatened the power structure. Davis claimed that most criminal offenses were not committed against individuals, but against property, and that “this type of crime is at once a protest against society and a desire to partake of its exploitative content.”\textsuperscript{13} Prisons were little more than “instruments of class domination,”\textsuperscript{14} and prisoners were not criminals, but victims. Davis and the other writers made a further distinction between this hapless victim who attacked the rights of property and was caught, and those who were sent to prison for trying to bring about social change -- political prisoners. Unlike Cleaver, who said that all black inmates were political prisoners, Davis clearly stated that the “offense of the political

\textsuperscript{10} Ibid., 25.
\textsuperscript{11} Ibid., 31.
\textsuperscript{12} Robert Chrisman, as quoted in Ibid., 260.
\textsuperscript{13} Ibid., 27.
\textsuperscript{14} Ibid.
prisoner is his political boldness, his persistent challenging — legally or extra-legally — of fundamental social wrongs fostered and reinforced by the state.”15 She cited Nat Turner and John Brown as the revolutionary antecedents to the political prisoners of her time, and George Jackson the latest martyr. A martyr could only do so much good, however, and Davis saw the ever-increasing list -- Jonathan Jackson, George Jackson, Malcolm X, Fred Hampton -- as an ominous sign: “The very fact that political prisoners are rapidly increasing in number and are emerging as a central focus around which masses of people are mobilizing is indicative of the fascist tendency of the time.”16 If these prisoners were not freed, then the repression would continue, and possibly grow worse. For this reason, Davis exhorted her readers to become involved in freeing political prisoners, for without public outcry, “we, the people, must hold ourselves accountable for a new era of uncurbed terror and official barbarism.”17

Like Cleaver, Knight, and Jackson before her, Davis knew well the lengths to which the American government would go to silence dissent. The object of a nationwide manhunt following the shoot-out at the San Rafael Courthouse, she was arrested in New York and brought to California without extradition. She spent more than a year in jail before she was acquitted of the murder charges.18 Davis did not write with the same anger as Cleaver or Jackson, but she had not lived much of her life in prison as Cleaver and Jackson did. She was an intellectual, receiving her education in Frankfurt instead of Folsom. She was not sheltered, however. Davis grew up in Birmingham, Alabama, where she became well acquainted with the violence of white racism. Her childhood

15 Ibid., 23.
16 Ibid., 183.
17 Ibid., 135.
18 Churchill and Vander Wall, COINTELPRO Papers, 364.
home was located in a neighborhood known as “Dynamite Hill” because of frequent Ku Klux Klan attacks against black families in the previously white area of the city. She knew the four young girls who were killed in the terrorist bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in Birmingham in 1963, though she was in Europe at the time. She was fully acculturated to American violence, as Cleaver, Knight, and Jackson had been. Like them, she looked at the outside world from within prison and attacked the society that incarcerated her, claiming that her captors were the true criminals.

Angela Davis represented the return of the prison writer in the mold of Marcus Garvey, Angelo Herndon, and Martin Luther King Jr., who were sent to prison because of their prominence, unlike Malcolm, Cleaver, Knight, and Jackson. Taking the plight of the political prisoner as her subject, she produced a work much different from the revolutionary tracts of George Jackson but focused on the same deficiencies in American society in constructing her argument. Davis’s writings represented the introduction of the political prisoner into the literature of combat. She would not be the last.

* * *

At the same time that the American government is waging a racist war of genocide in Vietnam, the concentration camps in which Japanese Americans were interned during World War II are being renovated and expanded. Since America has historically reserved the most barbaric treatment for non-white people, we are forced to conclude that these concentration camps are being prepared for black people who are determined to gain their freedom by any means necessary. The enslavement of black people from the very beginning of this country, the genocide practiced on the American Indians and the confining of the survivors on reservations, the savage lynching of thousands of black men and women . . . And now the cowardly massacre in Vietnam, all testify to the fact that toward people of color the racist power structure of America has but one policy: repression, genocide, terror, and the big stick.

Executive Mandate Number One of the Black Panther Party

19 Joy James, “Introduction” in Angela Y. Davis Reader, 3-4.
20 Executive Mandate Number One of the Black Panther Party, as printed in Bobby Seale,
Formed in 1966 under the leadership of Huey Newton and Bobby Seale, the Black Panther Party became one of the most vocal and controversial groups in the country, earning the J. Edgar Hoover seal of approval as the number one threat to American internal security. The Black Panthers sought, as pronounced in the Party’s Platform and Program, to “determine the destiny of our black community,” full employment for African Americans, “an end to the robbery by the capitalist of our Black community,” decent housing, “education that teaches us our true history,” exemption from military service for all African Americans, an end to police brutality, freedom for all African Americans in jails and prisons, trials for African Americans with juries made up of their peers, and a UN-supervised plebiscite “for the purpose of determining the will of Black people as to their national identity.”

The aggressive manner in which the Panthers confronted the Oakland Police and other government agents led to many violent encounters. The most notorious of these, in 1967, ended in the death of a police officer and the imprisonment of Huey Newton, who was shot in the encounter. Bobby Seale would follow Newton to prison, first for contempt of court in the Chicago Eight trial in 1969 (during which, according to Bruce Franklin, he was “transformed . . . into a living symbol of Black imprisonment, his arms and legs bound, his mouth gagged and taped shut”), and again during a murder trial in New Haven, Connecticut in 1971. Newton spent more than three years in prison before his conviction was overturned, but the greatest expansion of the Party occurred while he was incarcerated. As Bobby Seale


22 Franklin, Prison Literature in America, 246.
wrote in 1991 in an introduction to a new edition of *Seize the Time.* “Before Huey went
to jail in 1967, there were only seventy-five Black Panther Party members and two
chapters, Los Angeles and Oakland, California. When Huey left prison in 1971, there
were over forty-five chapters and five thousand dedicated and politically educated Black
Panther Party members.” Newton’s status as a political prisoner helped to mobilize this
support for the Panthers. Like Angela Davis, Newton in *Revolutionary Suicide* and
Seale in *Seize the Time,* wrote as self-conscious political prisoners attempting to
exonerate themselves; they also used their writing to tell the story of the Black Panther
Party and the violent repression they had endured at the hands of the government.

Like the earlier prison writers, Newton and Seale each recognized Malcolm X as
their model and saw his death as a turning point in their own consciousness and the
consciousness of the black community as a whole. “A new militant spirit was born when
Malcolm died,” wrote Newton. “It was born of outrage and a unified Black
consciousness, out of the sense of a task left undone.” Seale recalled his reaction to
Malcolm’s death in *Seize the Time,* in which he ran around crazed, throwing bricks and
breaking windows, screaming, “Fuck it, I’ll make my own self into a motherfucking
Malcolm X, and if they want to kill me, they’ll have to kill me.” After founding the
Black Panthers, Newton and Seale both thought they had found the second-coming of
Malcolm in a recently released convict who joined the party — Eldridge Cleaver. Seale

---

23 Seale, *Seize the Time,* ii.
24 For Seale’s and Newton’s stories of the Black Panther Party, see Seale, *Seize the Time,*
59-285; Newton, *Revolutionary Suicide,* 110-197, 273-331. For their prison experiences,
see Seale, *Seize the Time,* 289-361; Newton, *Revolutionary Suicide,* 201-270.
25 Newton, *Revolutionary Suicide,* 185.
26 Seale, *Seize the Time,* 3.
remembered that “Huey related to Eldridge as a Malcolm X, coming out of prison.”

Though the relationship would end in a few years, the mystique of the black prisoner as revolutionary, begun by Malcolm and continued by Cleaver, clearly enthralled Newton and Seale. The state of California and the federal government would soon give them the chance to try out this school for revolutionaries for themselves.

Drawing on the tactics and ideologies of people such as Robert Williams, Che Guevara, and Frantz Fanon, Newton and Seale preached armed self-defense within black communities, much as had been done in Monroe, North Carolina, a decade earlier. Like George Jackson, they viewed the lumpenproletariat as the revolutionary vanguard. Bobby Seale gave one of the more interesting explanations for this reversal of Marxian ideology:

Huey wanted brothers off the block -- brothers who had been out there robbing banks, brothers who had been pimping, brothers who had been peddling dope, brothers who ain’t gonna take no shit, brothers who had been fighting pigs -- because he knew that once they got themselves together in the area of political education . . . Huey P. Newton knew that once you organize the brothers he ran with, he fought with, he fought against, who he fought harder than they fought him, once you organize those brothers, you get niggers, you get black men, you get revolutionaries who are too much.

In this formulation, much as in the writing of George Jackson, the prisoner plays a large role, as the most downtrodden of all, the lumpen of the lumpen.

29 Seale, Seize the Time, 64.
Newton and Seale portrayed the prison system and those who controlled it in the same way as the writers who came before them. Like George Jackson and Eldridge Cleaver, Newton characterized the prison officials as the true savages: “The administrators and guards who run prisons are like George Orwell’s brutes in 1984 who are chosen as policemen on the basis of ignorance, physical strength, and their predisposition to follow orders without question, however stupid or brutal.”

Their only function, for Newton, was to keep the prison divided along racial lines, so that the inmates were kept fighting each other and did not see the class exploitation to which they had all fallen victim. In this class-based system, the guards, though they wielded some power, were little more than tools for the capitalists. Newton used the uprising at Attica to illustrate this. When the National Guard arrived to put down the rebellion, they did not carefully attack only prisoners, but instead fired indiscriminately into the masses of people, killing nine guards along with thirty-one prisoners, leading Newton to write that Richard Nixon, in calling in this attack, “not only killed the prisoners at Attica but he also murdered his exploited workers, the prison guards.”

Newton and Seale depicted their struggle in terms of anticolonialism. Newton wrote, “Mao and Fanon and Guevara all saw clearly that the people had been stripped of their birthright and their dignity, not by any philosophy or mere words, but at gunpoint. They had suffered a holdup by gangsters, and rape; for them, the only way to win freedom was to meet force with force.”

---

30 Newton, Revolutionary Suicide, 248-9.
31 Huey P. Newton, To Die For the People (New York: Random House, 1972), 205. Though Newton blames the deaths at Attica on Nixon, it was Governor Nelson Rockefeller of New York who sent the troops to the prison.
32 Newton, Revolutionary Suicide, 111.
prophets of revolution were viewed as the intellectual forebears of an inevitable revolution in America against the oppressors. Guevara’s “many Vietnams” would begin within the black colonies of America: those places that Etheridge Knight called the violent space.\(^3\) This life within the violent space was beginning to produce a new consciousness within African Americans in and out of prison:

Most blacks are now more aware of the political than the criminal nature of their incarceration. They have learned to see themselves as political prisoners in the classic, colonial sense: they were not tried before juries of their peers or a cross-section of the community, but by juries wholly unfamiliar with any aspect of their lives. Many activities defined by the ruling class as criminal are the acts of poor and exploited people, desperate people, who have no access to the channels of opportunity.\(^4\)

Both Newton and Seale clearly defined the forces that oppressed the black community. The principal agents of this oppression were the police, whom Newton described as “the military arm of our oppressors.”\(^5\) Further, “they are inhuman madmen who see the Black community as a place of aberrant behavior and who therefore feel ‘justified’ in killing us in the dark of night.”\(^6\) The solution to what Seale described as the government’s “oink[ing] in the faces of the masses of the people of the country,”\(^7\) was revolutionary resistance. Seale warned that only rapid change could avoid “civil war in America, because it’s at that point right now.”\(^8\) Seale went on to say that the solution was similar to that proposed by Cleaver in *Soul on Ice*: “The only way that the world is ever going to be free is when the youth of this country moves with every principle of

\(^3\) Guevara sought to export revolution to all of Latin America, creating “many Vietnams” to tie down the United States with multiple guerrilla wars as they fought in Vietnam. See “Message to the Tricontinental” in Guevara, *Guerilla Warfare*, 161-175.

\(^4\) Newton, *Revolutionary Suicide*, 260.

\(^5\) Ibid., 120.

\(^6\) Ibid., 142.


\(^8\) Seale, *Seize the Time*, 422.
human respect and with every soft spot we have in our hearts for human life, in a fashion that lets the pig power structure know that when people are racistly and fascistically attacked, the youth will put a foot in their butts and make their blood chill.”

Newton, echoing the sentiments of George Jackson, wrote, “Considering how we must live, it is not hard to accept the concept of revolutionary suicide. In this we are different from white radicals. They are not faced with genocide.” For Bobby Seale, there was only one logical response: “The time is now to wage relentless revolutionary struggle against the fascist, avaricious, demagogic ruling class and their low-life, sadistic pigs.”

In his recent book, The Shadow of the Panther, journalist Hugh Pearson described the Black Panther Party and its leadership as little more than glorified pimps, calling them the “rudest, most outlaw element of black America” who were celebrated by the “left-liberal media” as the “true keepers of the flame in all it means to be black.” Pearson’s most stunning argument, however, is that Newton’s “enigmatic behavior had something to do with his carrying the name Huey.” It is hard to know where to begin discussing the problems with these assessments, beyond the unexplainably bizarre foray

---

39 Seale, Seize the Time, 429.
40 Newton, Revolutionary Suicide, 6.
41 Seale, Seize the Time, 429.
43 Pearson, Shadow of the Panther, 347.
into amateur psychologizing. Pearson combines an obnoxious elitism with conservative paranoia about the liberal media, while asserting that African Americans were tricked into supporting the Panthers. Further, he ignores any of the positive programs established by the Party in black communities, which distributed, among other things, free breakfasts and vaccinations to children. Pearson argued that Panther violence was unprovoked, ignoring the enormous body of evidence of police and FBI harassment. Panther offices were attacked by police throughout the nation. Party members were murdered in cold blood, most notably Fred Hampton and Mark Clark, who were shot while sleeping by Chicago police. Information that was later released by the FBI showed that the police who killed Hampton and Clark had a detailed floor plan of the apartment, and knew where each slept.\footnote{For reprint of the FBI’s floor plan of Hampton and Clark’s apartment, see Blackstock, COINTELPRO, 36.} Ninety-four bullets were fired into the apartment. This all occurred at the same time that the American military was fighting in Vietnam and the National Guard and Chicago police attacked protesters in the streets of Chicago.\footnote{See Tariq Ali and Susan Watkins, 1968: Marching in the Streets (New York: Free Press, 1998), 139-153; Anderson, Movement and the Sixties, 183-238; Norman Mailer, Miami and the Siege of Chicago (New York: Primus, 1968), 85-223.} The Panthers clearly held no monopoly on the use of violence, though Pearson chose to overlook this.

Seize the Time and Revolutionary Suicide depicted this culture of violence within which Seale and Newton lived. As political prisoners, both men accused the American government of indiscriminate violence against African Americans and colonized people throughout the world. Social revolution was their cure for the disease of an American society based upon violence and oppression. They combined the revolutionary rhetoric of Cleaver and Jackson with the focus on the political prisoner as seen in Angela Davis’s
work, to continue the tradition of an American literature of combat. While these books focused, in part, on the individual trials of Newton and Seale, they connected these trials with both the anticolonial revolution throughout the world and the tradition of African American resistance to white aggression. Newton and Seale would not be the only members of the Black Panther Party to add to this literature of combat, however.

* * *

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.

Marcus Garvey

When Marcus Garvey wrote this from his prison cell in Atlanta in 1925, he was predicting that, one day, retribution against racist European and American society, in the name and spirit of those who were killed to enrich it, would finally come, and he promised to be among its vanguard. By taking Look For Me in the Whirlwind as the title of their book, the New York 21 pledged themselves to follow the same course, bringing judgment down upon the system that incarcerated them. Charged with conspiracy to detonate bombs in department stores, police stations, and rail terminals, the twenty-one defendants, members of the Black Panther Party, were arrested in April 1969. They were a disparate group from very different environments, with very different educational and economic backgrounds, but by telling their life stories they revealed a number of

---

47 The New York 21 were Kuwasi Balagoon, Joan Bird, Cetewayo, Robert Collier, Dharuba, Richard Harris, Ali Bey Hassan, Jamal, Abayama Katara, Kwando Kinshasa, Baba Odinga, Shaba Ogun Om, Curtis Powell, Afeni Shakur, Lumumba Shakur, and Clark Squire.
48 All twenty-one were found innocent.
constants in the lives of African Americans that led each of these individuals into the Black Panthers, and toward the revolutionary change it sought.

For many of these prisoners, radicalization occurred early in life, as the inherent inequality within American life became readily apparent. Abayama Katara, growing up in Harlem, watched the violent final days of Jim Crow in horror, as George Wallace and Bull Connor tried to hold back the oncoming tide of desegregation. As she later wrote,

I remember thinking if President Kennedy wanted to help black people in the South he should give them all submachine guns to protect themselves. My father used to show me his army discharge papers and a medal he got, and I knew all my uncles had fought too. Pops said he fought the Germans because they were killing people who hadn’t done anything to them and I saw those white people as being just like the Germans and I wished that they would come up to Harlem and try that stuff on 135th Street, because I knew if they did we would have something for them.\textsuperscript{49}

Kwando Kinshasa told a similar, if more personal story, of his early radicalization when a childhood friend named Clayton Brooks spent a summer in New York, then returned to the rigid caste system of segregated Georgia: “I tried to talk Clayton’s aunt into keeping him here in the city. I wish I had succeeded, because two months after he went back to Georgia he was lynched and castrated by a mob of crackers. His crime was touching (maybe just looking at, it didn’t matter) some cracker female in his home town. . . . His death will be avenged. And those who should have been dealt with a long time ago will be dealt with.”\textsuperscript{50} Kinshasa later told another story about his continuing radicalization while in the Marines: “A few days later I arrived in Guatemala City, and the Guatemalans were in the middle of a revolutionary war, a war that is still going on. Right on to the Guatemalan revolutionaries! . . . I entered the country a very apolitical Negro marine, and

\textsuperscript{49} Abayama Katara, \textit{Look For Me in the Whirlwind}, 13.
\textsuperscript{50} Kwando Kinshasa, Ibid., 46.
came out a dedicated black revolutionary."51 While, undoubtedly, both of these recollections were heavily colored by later experience, they reveal the nature of the societal forces that drove each of these twenty-one prisoners toward their revolutionary stances, and further, they reveal the desire for vengeance that animated much of the writing of these later-exonerated Panthers. They each dwelled on violence as a determining factor in their radicalization. Further, the American military and its role in the war against Germany, and the much different effort to overthrow the democratically elected government of Guatemala in 1954, were depicted by these two writers as central to their formation of a radical consciousness.52

The fact that this radicalization led to prison should not be surprising, nor should the fact that much of Look For Me in the Whirlwind dealt with the prison experiences of the twenty-one. Their feelings toward the prison system were best summarized by Joan Bird’s assertion that “prison’s outstanding character is complete disregard for humanity, human life.”53 Clark Squire put this another way when he wrote, “It is said that ‘The degree of civilization in a society can be judged by visiting its prisons.’ By that criterion, America is without a doubt the most barbaric nation in the world today, bar none.”54 Once again, then, these prisoners pointed toward their accusers as the true criminals and savages. The incarcerated did not create the prison within which they lived, nor did they create the social system that drove them toward this prison.

51 Kwando Kinshasa, Ibid., 219.
53 Joan Bird, Look For Me in the Whirlwind, 318.
54 Clark Squire, Ibid., 169.
For those who were already radical, this prison experience only increased their radicalization, as all social ills were magnified by the abusive system of punishment. The two-class system of Marxism was perfectly recreated in prison, and thus Marx’s revolutionary solution made perfect sense. “There’s a lot to be learned from being in jail,” wrote Curtis Powell, “because, as Trotsky said, ‘Jail is the university of a revolutionary.’ These jails, filled with non-white, oppressed, innocent people, must be opened. . . . We of the 21 know we are innocent, and we know what the pigs are trying to do to us. . . . We hadn’t begun to really serve the people as we wanted to. We were just getting started. We don’t ask for sympathy. We ask for vengeance.”

This cry for revolutionary change and revenge would be echoed by each of the writers as they looked through their bars at American society, bloated in its racist, reactionary complacency. In the words of Kuwasi Balagoon, there are “some sick motherfuckers at the controls” whose crime is “first-degree genocide and conspiracy to commit genocide.” Curtis Powell could see only one solution for this, explicitly connecting his own opposition with that of anticolonial movements around the world:

The only answer is revolutionary action with the right revolutionary, political ideology. The Black Panther Party is the closest to that ideal. The spirit of the Black Panther Party is not new, but it was put into a modern, relevant perspective. Like Malcolm put into words, Fanon put it on paper, and the Party put it into action. . . . Given the present condition, if I were Chinese -- I would have been with Mao; if I were Cuban -- I would have been with Fidel; if I were Vietnamese -- I would have been in the NLF; I am an African American -- I am a Black Panther.

These were exactly the beliefs that sent the New York 21 to prison, and it was this revolutionary fervor that eventually led to their expulsion from the Black Panther Party.

55 Curtis Powell, Ibid., 312-313.
56 Kuwasi Balagoon, Ibid., 270, 329.
57 Curtis Powell, Ibid., 283.
After *Look For Me in the Whirlwind* was written, a split in the Panthers became more explosive, as Newton and the Oakland leadership revised their revolutionary tactics, looking instead to legal modes of change. This tactical change angered Eldridge Cleaver and many of the eastern Panther chapters who sought a more immediate revolutionary solution. When the New York 21 sent an open letter criticizing Newton, he expelled all of them, just as he had done to Cleaver. This was, in many ways, the end of the Black Panthers as the two warring factions each faded into irrelevance, with quite a bit of help from the FBI, which was able to exploit factional tensions through disinformation programs.\textsuperscript{58}

The New York 21 were acquitted of all charges after their case was thrown out for lack of evidence, lending added credence to the belief that their prosecution was nothing more than a malicious attempt to break apart the Black Panthers. *Look For Me in the Whirlwind* detailed the radicalism that made them political prisoners. Like the writings of Davis, Newton, and Seale, this book, while it focused primarily on a single case, tied African American radicalism to the rebellion of colonized people around the world. Like Cleaver, Jackson, Newton, and Seale, they looked to revolution as the solution to the endemic violence against African Americans in American society.

The New York 21 had to spend many months in prison before they were acquitted. The final writer examined here was not so lucky. In a gross example of racial injustice, Rubin Carter spent nineteen years in prison for murders he did not commit.

\* \* \*

The public couldn’t see the forest for all the trees. They were simply too blinded by these periodical flashes to understand the Hurricane’s constant fight against a society that didn’t necessarily benefit poor people. They were brainwashed into thinking that he was just a crazy punch-drunk nigger. The cops didn’t want the people to listen to me, didn’t want the people to become aware of the genocide that was heading their way in the name of the law. Because -- shit! -- if the poor, black masses could be educated against the acceptance of violent death, that would mean self-protection -- destroying their enemy. But destroying the poor people’s enemy would mean destroying the government -- the cops! And they couldn’t go for that. . . . So the Hurricane had to go.

Rubin Carter

The son of a preacher in New Jersey, Rubin Carter was an Army paratrooper, a highly successful professional boxer, and would spend much of his life in prison, beginning with reformatories as a child and continuing through state penitentiaries as a convicted murderer. Three white people were killed in Paterson, New Jersey, two black men had committed the crime, and Carter was the highest profile troublemaker in the city. In response to reports of rampaging police during urban riots of the mid-sixties, Carter jokingly said to a friend, in the presence of a reporter, “Let’s get our guns and go up there and get us some of those cops. I know I can get four or five before they get me. How many can you get?” With this, Carter became public enemy number one for the Paterson police, and the triple murder became little more than a means to their end. The prosecutors and the police fabricated evidence, and the state had their man. His murder trial in 1967 was compared with the Scottsboro trial by the NAACP, and his plight would

60 Ibid., 226.
be taken up by Bob Dylan and Hollywood. After nineteen years in prison for a murder he did not commit, he would finally be released. Eleven years before his release, however, he published The Sixteenth Round, a book that seethed with rage at a life spent in and out of the criminal justice system for the crime of being black and unafraid.

The Sixteenth Round began with Carter’s Acknowledgments:

On this page I would like to mention the least first -- the ungodly nemeses in my life who have made it necessary for me to write this book: the corrupt and vindictive officials who played their roles to a T in this tightly woven drama to bury me alive, aided and abetted by laws which simply do not protect the sovereign rights of the individual, as the Bill of Rights requires, but the blatant wrongs of a select few.

In what should by now be an obvious theme of all of these prison writers, the criminals were not those in prison, but the political and economic elites who controlled American society. Carter wrote later in his book, “I didn’t need this penitentiary’s kind of rehabilitation, which only meant giving up my manhood, anyhow. I had never been debilitated. I had never committed any crime. The crimes were committed against me. I was the victim of all the shit!”

Carter was well acquainted with the state’s attempts to rehabilitate him and other juvenile delinquents who were caught within the criminal justice system. “When these white bureaucrats looked at me,” Carter wrote about his early incarcerations, “they saw a horror that they themselves had created, compelling them to remove me from their sight.”

Focusing on the racial nature of this delinquency and incarceration, Carter

---

62 Hirsch, The Hurricane, 118; Bob Dylan wrote and recorded a song called “Hurricane” in 1975. A motion picture entitled The Hurricane was released by Universal Studios in 1999.
64 Ibid., 330.
65 Ibid., 42.
wrote, "Most of the Jamesburg kids had only committed the same violations of rules as had endeared Huckleberry Finn to millions of people, but in us society found these deeds intolerable." Carter's portrayal of his experience in this youth prison was filled with graphic recollections of violence, whether guards brutalizing prisoners, or prisoners attacking each other. This was the reality within which Carter grew up, where societal benevolence was a farce, and violence was a necessary mode of existence, not simply a way of life.

After escaping from this juvenile prison, Carter enlisted in the Army and served as a paratrooper, where he received further affirmation of the malevolence of American society while riding on a bus across the segregated South with other troops:

America, the dirty white racist bitch! I seethed, as the buses stopped for food and drink. The white soldiers were allowed to go into the chophouses while the rest of us were forced to remain where we were, eating cold bologna sandwiches. America, the lowdown stinking bastard! I reflected bitterly as I sat there in shame, gnawing on dried-up bread and drinking the lukewarm water that was sold to us as coffee. . . . I was burning up inside just thinking about the total disregard that the Army was displaying for my people. Every nook and cranny of my body raged at the hypocrisy of it all -- at the dirty white lies that I had been indoctrinated with all my life. I was mad at my mother, at my father, at all the niggers who held themselves in contempt of their color. But most of all, I was mad at the world for sending me down South to learn the truth about myself.

Freedom brought no satisfaction for Carter, as he was forced to confront his second-class citizenship, which evoked the same rage as his incarceration. After returning from his humiliating military experience, Carter was once again sent back to prison to finish the time left on his sentence when he had escaped. After emerging from prison once again, he enjoyed considerable success as a boxer, rising as high as the number one middleweight contender, before being arrested for the triple murder.

66 Ibid., 77.
67 Ibid., 119.
As Carter returned to prison, he saw that those who were responsible for his incarceration had gained from it: the prosecutors in both his first and second trials were appointed county judges, the judge in his first trial was appointed to the state appellate court, and the police detective who oversaw the murder investigation was promoted to the position of Chief of County Detectives.\(^{68}\) Thrown back once again into the criminal justice system, Carter now lashed out at the society that he called “a penitentiary with a flag,” but this time with his pen and not his fists.\(^{69}\) Looking back on the supposed progress made in the sixties, Carter once again saw no vestige of benevolence in American society and its dealings with African Americans: “Almost from the moment President Johnson stepped in front of the television cameras and signed the 1964 Civil Rights Act, the disorders began. Policemen throughout the country began using lethal persuasion to contain the now supposedly emancipated niggers.”\(^{70}\) Every apparent step forward became another step back, as “every time that President Johnson signed some kind of legislation that would benefit the black masses, black people died in the streets. It was Harlem after the Civil Rights Act of 1964, and now it was the Voting Rights Bill of ’65, signed only days before the Watts Riot jumped off.”\(^{71}\) All legitimacy was gone for Carter as the “judges, lawyers, and educators of the world all spoke reverently of honor, justice, and truth, but these were merely glib words spewed out of plastic pigs.”\(^{72}\)

For affirmation of this belief, Carter needed to look no further than his own murder trial. As Carter himself wrote, “It appeared that all the witnesses who testified

\(^{68}\) Chaiton and Swinton, Lazarus and the Hurricane, 154.
\(^{69}\) Carter, Sixteenth Round, 164.
\(^{70}\) Ibid., 231.
\(^{71}\) Ibid., 240.
\(^{72}\) Ibid., 314.
were now changing the substance of their original statements . . . to conform with the prosecutor’s theory.”73 As for the all-white jury in the case, Carter felt that they were merely a part of the same system that had unfairly charged him with a murder he did not commit, and now looked to exterminate him:

It took them about an hour and a half . . . to reach a verdict. Six whole weeks of legal arguments, crying, pleading, tearing, picking, digging, demanding some mother-fucking justice, and these crackers had their shit together within two hours . . . Their verdict was guilty as charged on all three counts, but with a recommendation of mercy, or life imprisonment. Life? That only proved to me that they still had doubts. If they had truly thought us guilty of triple murder, how in the world could they have twisted their mouths up to give us life? It would have been more merciful to shoot me down on the spot. Mercy, my black ass! . . . In a sense, they killed me right then.74

With this as the nature of the system and the society, Carter asked the same question that Malcolm X had asked, “So where was the justice? In a ballot, or a bullet?”75

Prison was little more than the logical conclusion of this system, where unwanted segments of society were warehoused out of the view of white America. Once inside, the sickness of the society at large was magnified exponentially: “The little racist guards . . . controlled the jail with an iron fist of brutality, a minimum of compassion, and a maximum of security. The deliberate execution of each inmate’s personality seemed to be their favorite pastime. First they wiped out his mind, his name, and his manhood, and then they drew him into their subtle web of institutionalization.”76 This was exactly the “machine for elimination” that Foucault mentioned in his discussion of Attica.

73 Ibid., 267. In Carter’s second trial, after the first conviction was thrown out, the state tried to convince the jury that Carter and his codefendant John Artis viewed themselves as avengers of the black race who sought to indiscriminately kill white people. The verdict was guilty once again.
74 Ibid., 307.
75 Ibid., 234.
76 Ibid., 309.
Carter was in the midst of a prison riot at Rahway in 1971, just a few months after Attica, so he knew the potential for rebellion that lay within prisoners. Although he said that he hated the “half-ass revolutionary attitudes” of some of his fellow inmates, he once again pointed his finger at the society as a whole as the root cause of this situation, and warned what it would bring in the future: “There will always be a next time, à la Attica, West Virginia, Oklahoma, Holmesburg, or Leavenworth. As long as there are frustrated men and women jammed into prisons like sardines in a can, with their backs pressed against the wall, there will definitely be a next time.” For Carter, Attica illustrated the hostile disregard society had for those in prison. “When some unfortunate mother’s sons, fathers, husbands, and brothers cried out in Attica for peace and understanding,” Carter wrote, “the community around them bared their fangs and slaughtered every nigger in sight, even killed some of their own, and then turned to the rest of the world and lied in the name of law and order.” Prisons emerged as by-products of a mentally destructive system. The society needed to change if the prisons were going to change, but nobody on the outside seemed to understand.

In some of the most powerful passages of *The Sixteenth Round*, Carter turned his anger away from white America, and focused it on African Americans. Instead of fighting for justice, the black population was largely complacent and unwilling to effect any change beyond what was handed to them by such meaningless acts as the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. Recalling a discussion with a Sudanese national with whom he had served in the Army, Carter wrote that “when a people without

77 Rubin Carter, as quoted in Hirsch, *The Hurricane*, 100.
79 Ibid., 336.
any knowledge of themselves blissfully take their individual liberties as indisputable facts -- as his countrymen did for such a long period of time, and as the black man in America was still doing -- they ultimately built the iron foundations of their own prisons. Ball-and-chain type prisons which, later on in life, would force them to shed precious blood in order to escape the constraints.\(^80\) These constraints only became more binding when nonviolence replaced self-defense for African Americans. Carter saw this in the aftermath of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, about which he wrote: "For the many black people who felt no pressing need to protect themselves from being mutilated under the Jim Crow-foot of their ungodly albino God, there would be death in abundance."\(^81\) This would be seen again in Watts, where "[t]here were fifteen thousand National Guardsmen and a thousand policemen occupying the neighborhood, killing off black folks in a turkey-shoot, and they still didn’t dig it. Goddamn! Black people just refused to defend themselves, unless it was against another black."\(^82\) As for a belief that prisoners could be the vanguard in a coming revolution, Carter shared little of the enthusiasm of George Jackson or the Black Panthers, writing that "Black people had gotten so goddamn proud of themselves outside on the streets that they had completely forgotten about the poor brothers still in jail."\(^83\) The blame for this, in Carter’s mind, lay firmly with those on the outside, whose continued complacency guaranteed more of the same for future generations.

Sitting in prison on three life sentences, Carter wasted no time on sentimental pleas for forgiveness, but instead spewed venom at everyone on the outside whom he

\(^{80}\) Ibid., 124.  
\(^{81}\) Ibid., 231.  
\(^{82}\) Ibid., 240.  
\(^{83}\) Ibid., 318.
viewed as responsible for his predicament and the predicament of all African Americans. He concluded his book, however, by writing, "For the first time in my entire existence I'm saying that I need some help. Otherwise, there will be no more tomorrow for me: no more freedom, no more injustice; no more State Prison; no more Mae Thelma [wife], no more Theodora [daughter], no more Rubin -- no more Carter. Only the Hurricane." As Etheridge Knight wrote about the death of Malcolm X, after freedom and hope were gone, there remained only anger. This growing anger was the animating force in Carter's writing, though this was a much more personalized rage than those who had written before him. Like Cleaver and Jackson, he spent much of his childhood in and out of juvenile detention centers, and like Davis, Newton, and Seale, he was sent to prison as an adult largely because of his politics. His joking comment about retaliating against police violence brought the force of the state crashing down upon him. Having survived the violence of youth prisons and military service, and then thrived in the controlled violence of boxing, Carter was unwilling to passively accept the injustices of American society. The Sixteenth Round was his attempt to come to terms with his own situation and to define the nature of American society as a whole. It represents the convergence of the convict radicalized by his experience in prison, and the political prisoner incarcerated for acts of political opposition, and reveals the continuation of a literature of combat.

* * *

Fanon wrote that "the gangster who holds up the police set on to track him down for days on end, or who dies in single combat after having killed four or five policemen, or who commits suicide in order not to give away his accomplices -- these types light the

---

84 Ibid., 336-337.
way for the people, form the blueprint for action and become heroes." The political prisoner could be seen as just such an individual, one whose resistance to the state, and subsequent repression, are viewed as heroic. This could surely be said of the incarceration of Huey Newton, which was in large part responsible for the rapid nationwide growth of the Black Panther Party. The same could be said of all of these writers. While each was prominent before prison, their imprisonment and writing made them more prominent. Through their writing they were able to overcome their imprisonment and confront the forces that confined them. In doing this, they extended the revolutionary critique of writers like Malcolm X and sought to change their reality.

Part of this reality for the second group of writers was their own wrongful incarceration. Each related this to the "fascistic" tendencies in American society, where force was employed instead of reason. As Fanon wrote, "colonialism is not a thinking machine: . . . It is violence in its natural state, and it will only yield when confronted with greater violence." These writers expressed this same belief in their calls for revolution. As political prisoners, they felt that they were opposing a mindless society which could perpetuate itself only through force; their only recourse was to destroy it. Even though the circumstances of their imprisonment were different than those of Cleaver, Knight, and Jackson, both groups sought the same result: the creation of a new society. Their writings were the first steps on this path, and as such, are a literature of combat.

85 Fanon, Wretched of the Earth, 69.
86 Ibid., 61.
Conclusion

It’s time to fight back, that’s what Huey said.
Two shots in the back now Huey’s dead....
And still I see no changes,
Can’t a brother get a little peace.
There’s war on the streets and a war in the Middle East.
Instead of war on poverty they got a war on drugs so the police can bother me.

Tupac Shakur, “Changes” -- son of Afeni Shakur of the New York 21

Today politicians and the media purposely turn a blind eye -- and indifferent spirit -- to the social damage done by a prison system with a monstrous appetite and no sense of its original mission of reforming criminal behavior. But as eyes open to the reality that the prison industry feeds on lives, the seeds of social revolution are taking root. The start of another social movement is boiling in the cauldron of this terrible social wrong.

Juan Williams¹

Reform came about in 1964 and 1965 with the passage of the Civil Rights Act and the Voting Rights Act, but the reality of American society had not changed for any of these authors. African Americans still existed in a state of second-class citizenship, and the colonial nature of black communities remained. Reform was no longer sufficient, because it dealt in half measures. American society was bankrupt and decayed to the point that it could only maintain itself through indiscriminate violence. Democracy had failed because it was never truly enacted: racism and a tragically unequal social system saw to that. The only solution was the destruction of this system and construction of a new one that would correct the glaring social wrongs perpetrated by the American culture of violence.

Each of these prisoners produced writings that reflected this belief in the moribund nature of American society and culture. They created an alternative political discourse that not only differed from the mainstream, but sought to destroy the

---

mainstream. Even Cleaver’s pronouncements that the New Left might be able to lead the
nation away from revolution were based on a belief that the society as it then existed
would have to be erased, with a new social and political system constructed in its place.
Etheridge Knight’s insistence on a new aesthetic divorced from the European past did
much the same, though in less violent terms than Cleaver or Jackson. They adopted what
Martin Luther King called the “view that American society is so hopelessly corrupt and
enmeshed in evil that there is no possibility of salvation from within.”

All of this did not occur in a vacuum. The era of the Black Panthers was also the
era of George Wallace. As Wallace and his race-baiting did not speak for all whites, so
did the Panthers not speak for all African Americans. These prison writers were surely
the radical fringe, but that does not mean that they spoke only for a small group of
disaffected radicals. While it is dangerous to try to deduce ideology from group action,
the recurring urban rebellions of the late nineteen sixties illustrate that many living within
the violent space of urban ghettos had come to similar conclusions about the nature of
American society. Similarly, the rebellion at Attica in 1971 put the words of George
Jackson into violent, revolutionary action. In all of these situations, police and the
national guard crushed insurgents violently, for as journalist Tom Wicker wrote,
“America was intself a prison whose occasional flaring D-Yards could no more be
tolerated than Attica’s.” Psychiatrists William Grier and Price Cobbs characterized this
pattern of violent reactions as a “welling tide risen out of all those terrible years of grief,
now a tidal wave of fury and rage, and all black, black as night.” Revolution was not the

2 Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., as quoted in Sitkoff, Struggle for Black Equality, 199.
path sought by all, but a vocal minority did point to redirected violence as the only solution.

While this does not mean that all of black society had been pushed to the point of rebellion, it does reveal that the ideas expressed by these prison writers were acted out by many. These were short-lived rebellions to be sure, but they were too widespread and frequent to be dismissed as random rioting. Thus, these writers revealed as much about Black America as they did about the nation as a whole. They came from different areas of the country, had different economic and educational backgrounds, but they each expressed a clear and forceful desire to effect change.

This begs the question, why have none of the forecasts of revolution been fulfilled? Rebellion has not entirely left American culture, as the Los Angeles riots of 1992 reveal, but this could hardly be considered a step toward bringing down the entire American social system. A look at the later lives of these writers can help to answer this. George Jackson is dead. Huey Newton was murdered by a gang member in Oakland in 1989. Eldridge Cleaver became a born-again Christian, invented his own religion called Christlam, was briefly a Moonie, and is now an arch-conservative. Bobby Seale left the Black Panther Party in 1974 and has since worked at Temple University. He published two books: an autobiography and a barbeque cookbook. Etheridge Knight continued his life as a poet until his death in 1991. After his release from prison, Rubin Carter moved to Canada. Angela Davis continued her distinguished academic career while working for political causes such as prison reform. With the exception of Angela Davis, they have all

---

left radical politics behind them. There are several reasons for this. One is the toll that police and government repression took on these radicals. Assassination attempts and prison time simply sapped the strength of some. Another reason is the turn to the right of the political discourse in the United States. Eldridge Cleaver is a perfect example of this, as are former white radicals turned conservatives like David Horowitz. This does not mean that the problems that created the radicalism of the sixties have disappeared, it just means that they are now ignored. Economic inequality has increased. The prison system is worse, with more overcrowding, an even larger non-white captive population, and harsher sentencing laws. Yet the radical voices of the past remain silent. I do not say this to condemn them, but to point out that their radicalism was part of a particular time and place. They wrote in the midst of world-wide anti-colonial struggle. They believed that their own struggle was intimately tied with liberation struggles elsewhere. For these writers, the fight for black liberation became analogous with the war fought by the Vietnamese people against American invaders. As this international ferment died away, so did the radicalism that it inspired in the United States.

Still, these writers have not been entirely forgotten. For anyone who doubts the lingering importance of these documents, the example of Angela Davis is illustrative. In January 1995, Davis was named to the University of California Presidential Chair. This appointment was immediately attacked by conservatives, including one state senator who charged that Davis “was part of trying to create a civil war between whites and blacks.”

---


7 Bill Leonard, as quoted in Manning Marable, *Black Liberation in Conservative*
The appointment was further attacked by Peter Collier, one-time *Ramparts* editor turned arch-conservative, who asked, “Would those who think she deserves to be honored with a Presidential Chair also agree that someone such as Tom Metzger or David Duke should be given a tenured position? Is hiring a Stalinist such as Davis to teach social policy any less disgusting than finding a Nazi to teach eugenics?”

Similar attacks followed the release of the motion picture *The Hurricane*, about the case of Rubin Carter. These prison writers clearly frightened a large portion of white America, and that fear has not disappeared.

In the end, these works all revealed the convergence of an ideology of anticolonialism with the African American tradition of opposition to white oppression. As Nat Turner and Robert Williams had done before, these writers refused to allow white America to trample on the human rights of African Americans. If their second-class citizenship was enforced by violence, then violence would be used to overthrow it. The example of the Vietnamese opposition to American control was not lost on Eldridge Cleaver, or any of the other writers.

Their revolution did not occur, but that does not take away from the importance of these texts. Taken together, they reveal the existence of an acute opposition which sought to turn the violence which pervaded American society against the government and culture that upheld it. In the end, however, it appears that Fanon was wrong, and violence was not a cleansing force. It only brought down more oppression.

---

*America* (Boston: South End Press, 1997), 63.

8 Peter Collier, as quoted in Ibid., 64.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


Szanto, George H. “A Soul Crystallized.” *Catholic World* (Sep 1968).

Taibo, Paco Ingacio, II. *Guevara, Also Known as Che*. New York: St Martin’s Griffin, 1997.


VITA

John William Weber III