

Introduction

Antipanoptic Expressivity and the New Neo-Slave Novel

As a slave, the social phenomenon that engages my whole consciousness is, of course, revolution. . . . Anyone who passed the civil service examination yesterday can kill me today with complete immunity. I've lived with repression every moment of my life, a repression so formidable that any movement on my part can only bring relief, the respite of a small victory or the release of death.¹

Exactly 140 years after Nat Turner led a slave rebellion in southeastern Virginia, the U.S. carceral state attempted to silence another influential Black captive revolutionary: the imprisoned intellectual George Jackson. When guards at California's San Quentin Prison shot Jackson to death on August 21, 1971, allegedly for attempting an escape, the acclaimed novelist James Baldwin responded with a prescience that would linger in the African American literary imagination: "No Black person will ever believe that George Jackson died the way they tell us he did."² Baldwin had long been an advocate for Jackson, and Jackson—as evident from his identification with the slave in the block quotation above—had long been a critic of social control practices in the criminal justice system reminiscent of slavery. Jackson was a well-read Black freedom fighter, political prisoner, Black Panther Party field marshal, and radical social theorist who organized a prisoners' liberation movement while serving an indeterminate sentence of one year to life for his presumed complicity in a seventy-dollar gas station robbery. He first exposed slavery's vestiges in the penal system in *Soledad Brother*, the collection of prison letters

Excerpt • Temple University Press

he published in 1970. *Soledad Brother*'s searing critique of an emerging prison-industrial complex would win Jackson an international, intergenerational readership, as Dan Berger has observed: "*Soledad Brother* . . . constituted a metacommentary on the growth and racialized expansion of the carceral state from the viewpoint of its victims. Writing from the shadows of society, in the wake of civil rights legislative victories, George Jackson was a voice of protest for a new generation. . . . From beyond the grave, [he] . . . inspire[d] prisoners to write . . . and organize."³ When Jackson was laid to rest on August 28, 1971—exactly eight years after the iconic Black activist-preacher Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. delivered his "I Have a Dream" speech at the nation's capital—it was clear that his literary voice and liberationist vision had done much more than ignite a groundswell of political activism behind bars. Jackson had also deeply moved people who lived hundreds of miles beyond the isolated terrain of mass-based racialized punishment to which he had been warehoused for years on end. Thousands of fist-raised mourners would pay homage to Jackson's life, literature, and legacy inside and outside St. Augustine's Episcopal Church in Oakland on that late August afternoon.⁴ Two weeks later, Jackson's assassination would spark the Attica prison rebellion in New York, yet his literary genius had already reframed the content and context of contemporary African American literature. Through *Soledad Brother*, Jackson had electrified the literary imagination of James Baldwin.

Baldwin was so impressed with *Soledad Brother* that he planned to turn it into a motion picture.⁵ Previously, in his bestseller *The Fire Next Time* (1963), Baldwin had declared that endemic racism in the justice system amounted to "a criminal power" and "another means of holding Negroes in subjection."⁶ Poring over the pages of Jackson's *Soledad Brother*, Baldwin encountered the racial-historical context of his famed statements anew, for Jackson had meticulously theorized Blacks' routine confrontations with racial bias, economic exploitation, police brutality, and prisoner abuse as constituting a "modern variety of chattel slavery."⁷ Baldwin also read about the years of solitary confinement, beatings, and unsubstantiated indictments that Jackson had endured after guards targeted him for radicalizing fellow imprisoned men and establishing political solidarity with readers around the globe. Outraged, Baldwin seized an opportunity to speak at a rally for Jackson in England four months before his death at the hands of the state. There, Baldwin decried a hyper-punitive logic of "law and order" in the United States that he linked to a long history of racial terror inside and outside the prison system: "*We are the victims* and we are the result of a doctrine called white supremacy, which came into the world God knows how many years ago."⁸ Baldwin's words seemed an anticipation of Jackson's in his posthumously published text, *Blood in My Eye*: "Born to a premature death . . . *that's me, the colonial victim*."⁹ Throughout the early 1970s, Baldwin continued to champion Jackson's cause, perhaps in



The funeral of George Jackson, the widely read imprisoned intellectual and Black Panther Party field marshal whose writings captured the interest of James Baldwin, was held at St. Augustine's Episcopal Church on August 28, 1971. Jackson's casket was wrapped in a Black Panther flag. (Photograph © 2016, Stephen Shames/Polaris Images.)

response to Jackson's unexplained and unprosecuted killing by prison guards at age twenty-nine. In 1974, Baldwin published *If Beale Street Could Talk*, a novel that revived both his admiration of Jackson and his prescient condemnation of the nation's (in)justice system. This intrinsically racist and abusive system of punishment would, after the turn of the century, lead the world in incarceration, imprisoning one in every ninety-nine U.S. adults and more Black men than had been enslaved in 1850.¹⁰

That Baldwin's *Beale Street* has yet to be explored in the context of his career-spanning critiques of the justice system and his engagement with the lives and literature of imprisoned intellectuals, activists, and writers such as Jackson, Malcolm X, Angela Y. Davis, Huey P. Newton, and Bobby Seale points to a blind spot in scholarship on prison in American studies, Black studies, and African American literary criticism. On the one hand, there are a growing number of scholars who study the complexities of narrative expression as they have emerged from the voices of men and women confined to the contemporary U.S. prison. In particular, Margo V. Perkins, Joy James, Michael Hames-García, Dylan Rodríguez, Dan Berger, Mechthild Nagel, and Lisa M. Corrigan have traced striking historical continuities between the institution of slavery and today's criminal justice system through their analyses of autobiographies authored by iconic imprisoned intellectuals such as Jackson, Davis, Assata

Excerpt • Temple University Press

Shakur, and Mumia Abu-Jamal. Perkins, James, Hames-García, Rodríguez, Berger, Nagel, and Corrigan have thus begun the important work of critically translating carceral knowledges of the mass incarceration era: they have demonstrated how contemporary explorations of racialized state violence become more lucid when viewed through the literary lenses of some of the most socially isolated writers in the Black radical tradition.¹¹ Still, critical discourse has not yet explored the profound social commentary of non-imprisoned authors who write about prison—authors whose literary works are often indebted to the narrative techniques and critiques of the justice system of the aforementioned political prisoners and less well-known imprisoned writers. Moreover, while Tara T. Green importantly contextualizes her edited collection *From the Plantation to the Prison: African-American Confinement Literature* (2008) as “open[ing] new avenues of inquiry into confinement literature” in light of the past half century’s exponential rise in incarceration and its impact on the writing and reception of African American literature, there remains a scarcity of scholarship that considers the place of fiction in contemporary explorations of racial bias, police intimidation, prisoner abuse, and premature death in the justice system.¹² *From Slave Ship to Supermax* builds on Green’s work (even in its title), proposing that (1) mass incarceration is the most critically underexplored allusive framework for the contemporary African American novel; and (2) the increasingly repressive forms of mass-based bodily immobilization and incapacitation that a disproportionately Black population confronts while warehoused in contemporary U.S. prisons (perhaps seen most egregiously in today’s supermax prisons) are traceable to the state-sanctioned racial terror, gendered social control, and global capitalist greed that mass-produced slave ship social orders and slave plantation economies during the 1600s, 1700s, and 1800s.¹³ With the prison-industrial complex as its backdrop, this book examines how late twentieth-century African American novelists depict forms of discipline prototyped during the Transatlantic Slave Trade and slavery—including geographically withdrawn isolation, sexual intimidation, institutionalized rape and torture, indefinite solitary confinement, and public execution—as timeless practices of racialized social control.

In this book, I argue that the disciplinary logic and violence of the Middle Passage and slavery haunt depictions of the contemporary U.S. prison in African American fiction works authored by Baldwin, Toni Morrison, Charles Johnson, and Ernest Gaines. It is my contention that these African American novelists show us how social control practices that structured carceral life on slave ships and slave plantations have long, post-Emancipation afterlives that find their most pronounced manifestation in the hyper-policed Black ghettos, male-staffed women’s prisons, and disproportionately Black death row populations of post-Civil Rights U.S. culture. Accordingly, this book should

be understood as a nod to Avery F. Gordon's premise in *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* that haunting is "a way in which abusive systems of power make themselves known and their impacts felt in everyday life, especially when they are supposedly over and done with."¹⁴ I extendedly unpack Gordon's conception of haunting in relation to imprisoned women's routine confrontations with sexual abuse by male prison guards in Chapter 2. But for now, let me underscore that her critical understanding of haunting makes apparent not only how the white supremacist logic of an *institution* from the repressed past (slavery) has infiltrated an *institution* in our present (prison) but also how disciplinary continuities between captive life in the Transatlantic Slave Trade, slavery, and prison—as depicted in Baldwin's *If Beale Street Could Talk* (1974), Morrison's *Beloved* (1987), Johnson's *Middle Passage* (1990), and Gaines's *A Lesson Before Dying* (1993)—illuminate a heretofore un-theorized Black carceral aesthetic. This unique aesthetic constitutes, I argue, a new narrative tradition within the African American literary tradition. To clarify: since slavery was not entirely abolished by the Thirteenth Amendment but, rather, was recodified through its exception clause as a condition of rights-lessness, social isolation, and state-sanctioned punitive harm reserved for the prisoner (the amendment states, "Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, *except as a punishment for crime*, whereof the party shall have been duly convicted, shall exist within the United States, or any place subject to their jurisdiction"), the literary representation of this seamless continuity in legalized terror production before and after Emancipation, as it appears in works of fiction by Baldwin, Morrison, Johnson, and Gaines, historicizes captive characters' disturbing testimonies of prisoner abuse or carceral violence. Thus, during the final three decades of the twentieth century—decades in which the U.S. prison population soared and reports of prisoner abuse skyrocketed—these novelists cast a light on the centuries-spanning experience of Black captive *bodies in pain* (to invoke Elaine Scarry), pain that is institutionalized rather than inadvertent, disciplinary rather than aberrant.

This book aims to illuminate the extent of this centuries-spanning experience of carceral pain by building on recent scholarship in African American literary studies that focuses on the slave ship as a point of origin in a lineage of mass-based systems of white supremacist social control and corporeal constraint—a lineage whose current endpoint is the contemporary U.S. supermaximum-security prison, where disproportionately Black and mentally ill imprisoned populations are held in six-by-eight-foot cells that feature windowless, mattress-less, solitary confinement for 23½ hours a day, meals slid through cell door portals, and no human contact or mental stimulation. In particular, this book is in dialogue with Dennis Childs's recent study, *Slaves of the State: Black Incarceration from the Chain Gang to the*

Excerpt • Temple University Press

Penitentiary. Throughout the study, Childs conceives of the slave ship as a primal site in a genealogy of mass-based authoritarian control that stretches back beyond the birth of the modern penitentiary to the Transatlantic Slave Trade's system of large-scale racialized confinement, corporeally constricting architectures, and experimentalist forms of living death. Childs emphasizes the centrality of state-sanctioned racial terror in the making of carceral pain throughout his discussions of this "Middle Passage carceral model," which he conceptualizes as "a paradigm of racial capitalist internment that necessitates a shifting of white-subject-centered penal historiography. . . . [F]or the African and those of African descent, the modern prison did not begin with Jeremy Bentham's Panopticon, the Walnut Street jail, or the Auburn System, but with the coffles, barracoons, slave ships, and slave 'pens' of the Middle Passage."¹⁵ Resonating with Childs's interest in complicating a "Western philosophy of imprisonment" by "remapping . . . the carceral through the lens of epochal race terror," Chapters 2 and 3 show how the ubiquity of unpoliced and unpunished prisoner abuse in the increasingly geographically withdrawn prisons of our contemporary epoch is inextricably linked to the logic and impunity of white supremacist social control that led white slave ship captains and crewmen to routinely and sadistically restrain, beat, rape, torture, and debase African captives within the remote, maritime environment of the slave vessel.¹⁶ Moreover, as I illustrate in Chapter 2, with reports of sexualized state violence on the rise in increasingly male-staffed U.S. women's prisons, this book is interested not only in the centrality of racial terror in the mass-production of centuries-spanning carceral pain but also in how foundationally and relatedly terror is gendered on the slave ship and in today's women's prisons.

This book is also in conversation with scholarship in the emerging field of critical prison studies—particularly, Dylan Rodríguez's *Forced Passages: Imprisoned Radical Intellectuals and the U.S. Prison Regime*. I argue that Baldwin, Morrison, Johnson, and Gaines accomplish in fiction what Rodríguez reveals so many imprisoned intellectuals as having achieved in their autobiographical writings. Like Jackson, Davis, Shakur, and Abu-Jamal, the African American novelists I examine link the social control logic of slavery's past to the sadistic and routine violence that typifies post-slavery imprisonment. For this reason, I perform my analyses of the slavery/prison "hauntings" of Baldwin, Morrison, and Gaines in relation to their under-discussed engagements with imprisoned writers, activists, and survivors of prisoner abuse and thereby offer an interdisciplinary reframing of discourse on these novels. Thus, from this book's start to its finish, I read the racially codified enslavement-incarceration continuum in contemporary African American fiction in the context of critical prison studies discourse on imprisoned (radical) intellectualism. In addition, I make the case that, through their involvement in the intellectual and cultural production of imprisoned people and through their

depictions of racial terror as a formative rather than an exceptional dimension of U.S. culture, Baldwin, Morrison, Johnson, and Gaines expand free society's view of a contemporary prison system in which the institutionalization of secrecy has functioned to routinize the experience of prisoner abuse and mass-produce a condition of slavery behind bars. In a move similar to critical prison studies scholars such as Rodríguez, these novelists, by privileging the first-person testimonial perspectives of abused captive characters in their fiction works, have amplified the systemically muted voices of actual imprisoned men, women, boys, and girls who combat racially discriminatory sentences, prisoner abuse, and premature death and who literarily organize against these forms of state-sanctioned repression.

Finally, this book also intentionally intersects discourse on prison in African American literature with human rights scholarship. I show throughout the ensuing chapters how Baldwin, Morrison, Johnson, and Gaines appropriate fictional narrative as a viable form of social justice advocacy for imprisoned people and thereby challenge prevailing ideas regarding the mediation of narrative voice and victim representation in prisoners' rights discourse and human rights literature—an issue that Kay Schaffer and Sidonie Smith discussed in their 2004 study, *Human Rights and Narrated Lives: The Ethics of Recognition*. Moreover, this book tells the story of how these novelists create captive characters that craft narratives in crafty ways that illustrate what I discuss in ensuing sections of this Introduction under the rubric of “anti-panoptic expressivity”: a confined human being's unforeseeable act of speaking truth to unmediated institutional power while being held within a carceral locale premised on the dispossession of voice, racial terror, social isolation, and racialized premature death. Baldwin, Morrison, Johnson, and Gaines, that is to say, demonstrate the radical utility of the African American novel during our contemporary epoch in which prisoner abuse has been widespread and generally documented in ways that marginalize the voices of abuse-surviving imprisoned people. The most widely circulated stories of prisoner abuse appear in reports published in the human rights literature of advocacy organizations such as Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, and the Death Penalty Information Center. These mainstream narratives of prisoner abuse tend to shock and awe because they emphasize the harrowing reality of prisoner abuse over the subjectivity of abuse survivors. Despite their well-intentioned attempts to evoke affective appeal, human rights reporters generally depict men, women, and children who confront state violence behind bars as victims only, often eliding these abuse survivors' critical interpretations of their mistreatment. These reporters, in other words, ironically reinforce prevailing conceptions of imprisoned people as people who lack agency even as they insist on and appeal for their access to “human rights.” Throughout this book, I argue that novels by Baldwin, Morrison, Johnson, and Gaines sharply

Excerpt • Temple University Press

contrast with the truncated, victimization-focused narratives that typify the mainstream prisoner abuse stories appearing in the literature of human rights organizations. These contemporary African American novelists foreground the unabridged, resistance-laden, redress-seeking first-person testimony of abused captives and thus make apparent how actual imprisoned writers can and do offer narratives critical of the justice system in their own voices and thereby transform the exploitative environments to which they are confined into generative sites for reconstituting the self and refashioning ideas about community, freedom, and human rights. Moreover, this book demonstrates how Baldwin, Morrison, Johnson, and Gaines speak to and beyond the constraining representational parameters that surround “human rights” discourse more fundamentally: precisely because these novelists depict abused captives who articulate the insufficiency of pursuing justice within relatively narrow legal conceptions of “human rights,” they offer a fiction-framed portal into the “real” world of imprisoned intellectualism whose occupants constantly re-imagine alternative paths for achieving restitution and radical social transformation. It is in this way that—during the past half century in which the state has severely penalized imprisoned writers who have sought to call into question abusive practices in the justice system—the narratives and narrative techniques of Baldwin, Morrison, Johnson, and Gaines can be understood as amplifying their social critique and affirming their humanity at one and the same time.

“I question America”: Hamer’s Testimony and the Prisoner Abuse Narrative in African American Literature

“She’s telling it like it is! She’s saying, prison is not *like* slavery—it *is* slavery!” I am having a moment of *déjà vu* as I listen to students in a Mississippi prison classroom articulate an interpretive framework that I had first witnessed imprisoned students at Orange Correctional Center in Hillsborough, North Carolina, introduce when they dissected a famous speech delivered by Fannie Lou Hamer. Hamer was a Black sharecropper-turned-civil-rights-orator from rural Mississippi whose liberationist struggle against Black disenfranchisement and white supremacy in June 1963 resulted in her subjection to sexual assault and jailhouse beatings by white patrolmen—acts of state violence that left her with permanent kidney damage, a lifelong leg injury, and a nearly blinded left eye. Interestingly, at both of these men’s prisons, the postsecondary students whom I had the privilege to teach and learn from emphasized Hamer’s evocation of enslavement as a critical lens for grasping the historical continuities that undergirded the racial terror that shaped her confrontations with prisoner abuse as she describes them in her oft-anthologized “Testimony Before the

Excerpt • Temple University Press

Credentials Committee.” Hamer, co-founder of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, delivered this oration at the 1964 Democratic National Convention in Atlantic City, New Jersey. On this particular in-prison teaching day, I am at Parchman, Mississippi’s plantation-style state penitentiary, which the Pulitzer Prize-winning historian David Oshinsky has described as “the closest thing to slavery that survived the Civil War.”¹⁷ The oldest prison in the state, Parchman is located less than fifteen miles from where Hamer lived. I am co-teaching a history and literature course with my friend Otis Westbrook Pickett titled “Justice Everywhere: The Civil Rights Stories of Martin Luther King Jr., Fannie Lou Hamer, and Barack Obama.” We have invited a number of students who are part of the University of Mississippi Prison-to-College Pipeline Program (PTCPP) to be as candid as they desire during a close reading discussion of Hamer’s oratory. The ensuing hours of textual analysis are so full of illuminating dialogue that neither we nor our students can find a fitting way to conclude class. Perhaps sensing this, several students cluster around me at the lectern as our time to bid farewell hastens. They urge me—with each reference they make to passages from Hamer’s testimony that they have highlighted in blinding yellow—to heed their assertions about slavery’s vestiges in the contemporary justice system. I am all ears.¹⁸

The most vocal PTCPP students argue that Hamer calls to mind the institution of slavery in her testimony through the emphasis that she places on incarcerated Black men striking her with blackjacks under the command and overseeing presence of sadistic white male authorities. The students insist that while these white men are obviously patrolmen, they act like nineteenth-century slave masters: they yank up Hamer’s dress and—as Hamer reveals in later speeches—fondle her without fearing the slightest threat of punishment. The students also remind Dr. Pickett and me of what they learned when they read *For Freedom’s Sake*, Chana Kai Lee’s seminal biography on Hamer. These white patrolmen were not only acquitted of conspiracy charges. They were also protected from *any* punishment by law, because state policemen had coerced Hamer, at gunpoint, to sign a confession stating that she had been harmed not by the patrolmen but by her fellow Black activists during their confinement in the Winona, Mississippi, jail. That the state so callously criminalized Hamer and other Blacks for white men’s abusive treatment of her was not a racist incident *like* slavery, the students remarked. It was a racist practice signifying slavery’s perpetuity. Other PTCPP students then chime in, making the case that Hamer testified of being punished by the state *like a slave* for her disturbance of Jim Crow society’s “peace.” As these students see it, while Hamer did not break any official laws on the books, she had transgressed the South’s unwritten law of white supremacy: she had refused to stay in her socially designated “place” of racial and gender inferiority. These students reiterate that Hamer’s mere interest in voting was a crime, an

Excerpt • Temple University Press

audacious assertion that she had a citizen's voice in a de facto segregation world that had labeled her a *sub-citizen*. Following this line of thinking, Jim Crow society's overseers—white patrolmen—were the first to discipline Hamer, the recalcitrant second-class citizen, by recovering two forms of punishment from the antebellum era: physical violence and sexual harm. Hamer thus exposed the justice system's reliance on slavery-era punitiveness nearly one hundred years *after* the abolition of slavery.

On my drive back to Oxford, Mississippi, that day, I could not stop thinking about the PTCPP students' perceptive perspectives on slavery's vestiges in the contemporary justice system. Indeed, Hamer had evoked the memory of slavery in her testimony to effectively incriminate the state before the eyes of the television-viewing U.S. public. Indeed, Hamer had exposed the disturbing hypocrisy of U.S. democracy. This was the hypocrisy of slavery's perpetual reinstatement "in the land of the free." This was the hypocrisy of routine, unchecked, state-sanctioned anti-Black violence and discrimination in the post-*Brown v. Board of Education* era—hypocrisy as old as the infamous exception clause in the Thirteenth Amendment. It was a hypocrisy that Hamer voiced most explicitly at the conclusion of her riveting, eight-minute testimony by way of one the most indicting rhetorical questions posed during the Civil Rights Movement: "All of this on account of we want to register, to become first-class citizens. . . . I question America. Is this America, the land of the free and the home of the brave, where . . . our lives be threatened daily, because we want to live as decent human beings, in America?"¹⁹

Hamer's oratory and PTCPP students' critical translation of it in the context of an increasingly repressive world behind bars inspired me to trace anew the beginnings of a distinct literary tradition. In this tradition, jailed and imprisoned orators, writers, and intellectuals draw from personal experiences of incarceration, the narrative form of testimony, and the long history of slavery (beginning with the Transatlantic Slave Trade and slavery, and continuing with the Jim Crow racial caste system and lynching) to condemn the existence and expansion of the prison-industrial complex. I had previously seen this tradition as having emerged from autobiographical writings published in the post-Civil Rights era by George Jackson and Angela Y. Davis, political prisoners who—as I discuss in Chapters 1 and 2—are very forthcoming in the parallels that they draw between racialized state violence and white slaveholders' infliction of terror on recalcitrant slaves. After a more careful retrospective glance, I began to see that Hamer actually preceded Jackson and Davis (and even Malcolm X and Alex Haley, with their publication of *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* in 1965) in literarily revealing and resisting the state's post-slavery practice of slavery-era discipline and punishment. It is my contention that Hamer's oratory (which I examine at length later in this Introduction), the slavery-allusive narrative frameworks

that Jackson and Davis incorporate into their autobiographical writings on prison life, and the profound associations between slavery-era terror and post-slavery imprisonment articulated by captive characters in the late twentieth-century novels of Baldwin, Morrison, Johnson, and Gaines point to two untheorized narrative traditions within the African American literary tradition: a tradition of prisoner abuse narratives, and a tradition of neo-abolitionist novels. I now turn our focus to these interlocking traditions.

*Prisoner Abuse Narratives in Contemporary
African American Literature*

When a worldwide furor erupted after the abuses at Abu Ghraib, where members of a generation that grew up on electronic games gave vent to their sadistic impulses by humiliating prisoners of war, I, along with many African-Americans, wondered how long it would take for the public to become outraged by the Abu Ghraibs that exist in this country. Most telling in this scandal was that one of those involved in these abominable acts was a former American prison guard.²⁰

Although I have referred to Hamer's testimony at the Democratic National Convention as focused on *prisoner abuse*, that term did not begin circulating regularly in public discourse until the early 2000s in the wake of the notorious prisoner abuse scandals at U.S. war prisons in Iraq; Guantánamo Bay, Cuba; and Afghanistan—and, as the quotation from Ishmael Reed above reveals, in contemporary African American novelists' responses to them. In this book, I definitely intend to call to mind this prevailing conception of prisoner abuse because the widespread visceral reactions to it have ignited rare and vital discussions among writers, activists, and scholars in fields such as law, human rights, and critical prison studies. Along these lines, this book, as a whole, is a nod to the important legal studies work of Brenda V. Smith, Kim Shayo Buchanan, and Colin Dayan, for it takes as its premise the critical understanding that they and a growing number of scholars who study prisoner abuse abroad and at home have expressed: prisoner abuse is not an aberration—as news media coverage of the aforementioned prisoner abuse scandals seemed to convey—but a norm in U.S. jails, prisons, juvenile detention facilities, and immigration detention centers.²¹ Prisoner abuse is one of the state's most secret, *legally facilitated* practices of racial terror and gendered social control. Thus, I conceive of prisoner abuse, in the most fundamental sense, as the state's opportunistic and systemic incapacitation of people who are criminalized, arrested, jailed, imprisoned, or otherwise detained—including the physical, sexual, psychological, and medicinal exploitation of men, women, and youth who are held in some form of state custody by police officers and corrections

Excerpt • Temple University Press

employees (e.g., stop-and-frisk policing, beatings, and other forms of corporal punishment; rape, sexual abuse, and sexual intimidation; sensory deprivation and enforced nudity; the introduction of electric shock, stun belts, restraint chairs, indefinite solitary confinement, extraordinary rendition, and premature death on the body; medical neglect or harm; and the shackling of pregnant women under state supervision).²² Again, while most twenty-first-century discussions of prisoner abuse understandably evoke images of U.S. war prisoners who suffer attacks from snarling dogs and sexually abusive military personnel, or who find themselves hooded, robed, and “strung with electrical wiring” while standing atop boxes, this book refuses to think about abuse behind bars in such a reductive, exceptional, and allegedly “un-American” manner.²³ Instead, I talk about prisoner abuse as a persistent symptom of homegrown terror, which is how it has been discussed by the nation’s foremost scholar of literature from prison, H. Bruce Franklin (among others):

By the end of the twentieth century, when the prison had become a major political weapon of the corporate state, torture designed to dehumanize had become the norm. . . . Gone from the so-called “penitentiary” or “correctional facility” is any pretense of reformation or rehabilitation. *In the typical American prison, degradation, brutalization, and even overt torture are the norm.* Beatings, electric shock, prolonged exposure to heat and even immersion in scalding water, sodomy with riot batons, nightsticks, flashlights, and broom handles, shackled prisoners forced to lie in their own excrement for hours or even days, months of solitary confinement, rape and murder by guards or prisoners instructed by guards—all are everyday occurrences.²⁴

I add that this book aims to complicate the relative ease with which critical discourse has relegated the experience of prisoner abuse to the geography of the prison proper. Even by way of its title, *From Slave Ship to Supermax* insists on investigating prisoner abuse in a historical context that includes and is inflected by the Middle Passage and slavery. One need not be in prison, in other words, to be systematically isolated and abused in ways that are continuous with the state’s routine incapacitation of the contemporary U.S. prisoner or prisoner of war. Building on the pioneering critical prison studies scholarship of Dylan Rodríguez, I view prisoner abuse as a historically rooted, nation-defining, white supremacist practice of social control that begins with the racial violence of the Transatlantic Slave Trade and slavery and continues with lynching, the violent enforcement of the Jim Crow racial caste system, and, contemporaneously, extrajudicial execution by law enforcement, racialized mass incarceration, and capital punishment.²⁵ Thus,

Excerpt • Temple University Press

in this book I show how prisoner abuse must also be understood as the calculated immobilization, exploitation, debasement, debilitation, injury, and killing of confined people by agents of institutional power in *any* authoritarian regime—be it the physical and sexual violence to which white captains and crewmen subject the Africans they kidnap and confine on slave ships in Morrison and Johnson’s contemporary reimaginings of slavery; the violent premature death that white male proponents of Jim Crow justice expedite for the wrongfully convicted Black male protagonist in Gaines’s *A Lesson Before Dying*; or a racist police state’s collaborative efforts to incriminate and incarcerate a young Black father-to-be for showing race pride in Baldwin’s *If Beale Street Could Talk*. The disciplinary continuities between captive life in slavery and in prison that Baldwin, Morrison, Johnson, and Gaines depict in their novels fit squarely within this second conception of prisoner abuse, a conception that might be understood as conveying the “ghost of slavery” variety of racialized punishment that Colin Dayan speaks of in her important legal studies work *The Story of Cruel and Unusual*:

If the methods of punishment used in the United States today—the death penalty, prolonged solitary confinement, extreme force, and psychological torture—seem barbaric by our standards and by those of the rest of the so-called civilized world, this can be traced to the colonial history of the legal stigmatization and deprivation of a group considered less than human. . . . The ghost of slavery still haunts our legal language and holds the prison system in thrall.²⁶

Prisoner abuse narratives—whether they are autobiographical, like Hamer’s speech, or fictional, like Baldwin’s novel—are unabridged testimonial stories published from the Civil Rights era to the present that focus on experiences of incarceration burdened with the very “ghost of slavery” of which Dayan speaks. These narratives constitute a viable narrative tradition, and that tradition is entirely distinct from what has been broadly termed “prison literature.” On the one hand, the claim could be made that *any* narrative written from or about prison is a prisoner abuse narrative. As the contemporary African American writer John Edgar Wideman observes in his re-framing of Supreme Court Justice Roger B. Taney’s infamous opinion in the 1857 Dred Scott case (Taney states, “Blacks have no rights which the white man [is] . . . bound to respect”) in *Brothers and Keepers*—the acclaimed memoir he published in collaboration with his imprisoned brother Robby in 1984—the combination of prison employees’ access to near total impunity and the prison’s geographically withdrawn setting makes today’s facility a no-man’s land where state power is often administered abusively: “*Prisoners have no rights that the keepers are bound to respect* [is] . . . the motto of the

Excerpt • Temple University Press

prison. . . . [K]eepers run prisons with little or no regard to prisoners' rights because license to exercise absolute power has been granted by those who rule society. . . . You, the custodians, formulate whatever rules . . . you require to keep prisoners in captivity."²⁷ Removed from the immediate presence of judiciary oversight, the prison is a carceral locale whose isolation from free society often affords correctional officers unbridled discretion in their enforcement of law and order; thus, its very existence perpetually (re-)creates the possibility for imprisoned peoples' encounters with unchecked physical and psychological harm to be disturbingly ordinary. Indeed, *any* writing they produced from such a space could be termed a "prisoner abuse narrative."

Wideman's point notwithstanding, I make the case throughout this book that prisoner abuse narratives are defined not by their emergence from within hyper-punitive "correctional" settings so much as by their reference to the penal facility as an occasion for contesting a centuries-spanning experience of racialized social control. Put differently, I resist using the term *prison literature* in this book not only because literary works most commonly classified as "prison literature," "prison writings," or "prison narratives" were not conceived of as such by their authors but also because they might be better understood as "*anti*-prison narratives." Following Rodríguez's important assessment of "the problem of prison writing" in his work on imprisoned radical intellectuals, I submit that the uncritical categorization of many late twentieth-century imprisoned and formerly imprisoned writers' works that are critical of the justice system—such as *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* or *Soledad Brother*—as "prison literature" would likely make their authors turn over in their graves.²⁸ In the case of Malcolm and Jackson, such a slapdash categorization of their work would give them a reason to abandon their graves with indictments more scathing than they ever made while they were alive, for their autobiographical narratives (which I would most definitely term "prisoner abuse narratives") depict, but also decry, captive life in the correctional facility and in the larger U.S. carceral state. When read as prisoner abuse narratives, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* and *Soledad Brother* diverge sharply from the conventional history of American "prison writing" which, as Franklin has shown, beckons non-imprisoned readers to gaze on a prisoner voyeuristically, whether through (1) picaresque confessional narratives in which imprisoned authors plead with their audience to understand and forgive them for their pre-incarceration criminality; (2) sensationalist dramas in which unrepentant convicts glorify their past and present perpetuation of violence and drug trafficking; or (3) trite conversion narratives in which hardened criminals recount how the experience of punitive isolation has positively transformed them into law-abiding (unquestioning of the state) citizens.²⁹

Malcolm and Jackson reject these constricting narrative frameworks in their autobiographies. Their works testify to both the prevalence of state

violence behind bars and their tactical resistance of such abusive treatment. Narratives published by authors imprisoned in the late twentieth century, such as Rubin “Hurricane” Carter, Angela Y. Davis, Assata Shakur, Mumia Abu-Jamal, and Robert Hillary King, similarly adopt an oppositional discourse that reveals the contemporary U.S. prison to be a terrain of struggle and economic exploitation where poor Black and Brown people wrestle against discriminatory laws and political repression agendas that render them raw material for an ever-expanding system of mass incarceration.³⁰ Drawing on legal scholarship, court cases, historical studies of slavery, and the conventions of the fugitive slave narrative genre, Malcolm X, Jackson, Carter, Davis, Shakur, Abu-Jamal, and King all launch radical “anti-prison” critiques that critical prison studies scholar Joy James has discussed under the rubric of “contemporary insurrectionist penal-slave narratives”: “Contemporary insurrectionist penal-slave narratives, such as Abu-Jamal’s *Live from Death Row* or Assata Shakur’s *Assata: An Autobiography*, can question the very premise of rehabilitation, indicting the state and society and contextualizing or dismissing individual acts of criminality by nonelites, the poor and racialized, to emphasize state criminality or the crimes of elites.”³¹

I make the case in this book that the accounts of “state criminality” authored by jailed orators such as Hamer or political prisoners such as Jackson and Davis and enslaved or incarcerated characters in novels by Baldwin, Morrison, Johnson, and Gaines all constitute prisoner abuse narratives. What I term a *prisoner abuse narrative* is a testimonial story that a confined human being creates and selectively circulates to expose (1) the ordinariness of unchecked physical violence, sexual exploitation, or state-sanctioned premature death within a site of mass-based captivity; and (2) the racial-historical precedents for such practices (especially the Transatlantic Slave Trade and slavery). Importantly, a prisoner abuse narrative is not a victimization narrative that catalogues harm and emphasizes subjugation; rather, it is an account of utter defiance that illustrates how confined people resist authoritarian torment, reclaim their wounded bodies and psyches, establish desired community and political solidarity, and thereby undermine the asymmetries of power characteristic of carceral environments governed by a white supremacist disciplinary logic.³² Resonating with what James calls Abu-Jamal’s and Shakur’s “contemporary insurrectionist penal-slave narratives,” and what Margo V. Perkins has classified as “political autobiography” in her study of Davis’s and Shakur’s texts, prisoner abuse narratives—whether they emerge in autobiographical, oratorical, or fictional form—combat and subvert individual and institutional attempts to silence the confined “non-citizen” and thus alter, even if only temporarily, those geographies of containment fraught with punishment practices that are reminiscent of slavery and what the social theorist Michel Foucault has famously described as a

panoptic gaze.³³ Such antipanoptic expressivity, I argue, can be traced (at least) to Hamer's oratory.

*Antipanoptic Expressivity in Contemporary
African American Literature*

Prisoner abuse narratives defy panoptic logic. I now wish to reveal how this defiance happens, for it is my contention throughout this book that the antipanoptic expressivity that Hamer and other abused captives evoke in their meditations on Black confinement cast long shadows on contemporary novels by Baldwin, Morrison, Johnson, and Gaines—the fictional prisoner abuse narratives that I examine in the ensuing chapters of this book. In *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (1975), Foucault investigates the disciplinary function of institutional power in modern European and American prisons and in free society; free society, he argues, has become increasingly carceral. One of Foucault's more famous discussions in *Discipline and Punish* focuses on an architecture of surveillance that is also a system for routinizing large-scale social control: the British philosopher Jeremy Bentham's Panopticon. Even at the level of structure and spatial arrangement, the Panopticon ensures prison guards' perpetual visual objectification of confined people. As a disciplinary edifice, the Panopticon is constituted by an "annular building" with many rows and levels of cells and a centralized watchtower with "windows that open onto the inner side of the ring" out of which unseen seers oversee cell dwellers with an uninhibited line of vision.³⁴ Confined people are so fixated on the intensity of this all-seeing panoptic gaze that they anxiously police their behavior as if a guard were actually keeping watch over them in their solitary cells. Yet the Panopticon is not only a mechanism of institutional power that aims to facilitate self-governance within prisons (or hospitals, asylums, and so forth); it is also the state's chosen method for dispossessing confined human beings of voice—and thus a means whereby the state perpetuates a climate in which mass-based domination and prisoner abuse can occur in secret. In Foucault's words, a prisoner is totally objectified by this panoptic gaze, for "he is seen, but he does not see; he is the object of information, *never a subject in communication*. . . . And this invisibility is a *guarantee of order*."³⁵ We must remember that, given the size of the employee population at a jail or prison, innumerable prospective unseen seers are working at any given facility. Panoptic gazers need not be standing within an observation tower at Stateville Correctional Center in Illinois—which currently houses the only architectural panopticon in the United States—to enforce panoptic repression. The contemporary facility's employees/unseen seers can and do exploit the geographically withdrawn nature of their unsupervised supervision of imprisoned people to suppress

Excerpt • Temple University Press

voices and abuse bodies they deem a threat to the institutional status quo. It is this second, more covert system of panoptic silencing—the state’s simultaneous institutionalization of secrecy and dispossession of voice—that prisoner abuse narratives fundamentally undermine.

Prisoner abuse narratives subvert some of the state’s most routine practices of voice dispossession, such as its censorship of imprisoned writers and its increased outlawing or hyper-surveillance of interviews with them. The journalist Cristina Rathbone has compellingly revealed the prevalence of these practices—practices that I see as panoptic in every way. Rathbone confronted frequent opposition from the Massachusetts Department of Corrections (DOC) when she attempted to interview women imprisoned at MCI-Framingham for her book *A World Apart: Women, Prison and Life Behind Bars* (2005). In the book, Rathbone discusses the great lengths to which prison administrations across the nation go to dispossess imprisoned populations of voice:

Almost every major periodical in the country has had to shelve prison stories because access was denied. Despite attempts by press organizations to rally against such restrictions, the trend to exclude media from prisons continues to grow apace with the system itself. In 1998, for example, California, which has the nation’s third-largest prison system, banned all face-to-face interviews with, as well as confidential correspondence to, every inmate in its system. Arizona followed suit. Pennsylvania maintains a blanket ban on all news-media contact with inmates, as does South Carolina. . . . Alaska insists on officials monitoring interviews. . . . Mississippi states that consideration will be given only to media requests to develop stories “portraying rehabilitative efforts.”³⁶

Rathbone adds that in the case of Massachusetts, the DOC permitted her entry into the prison only after the intervention of the American Civil Liberties Union and nine months of waiting. Still, that did not stop MCI-Framingham staff from putting up administrative barriers: “For the first couple of months, correctional officers routinely kept me waiting for hours before allowing me into the visiting room. Sometimes they wouldn’t let me in at all, citing failure on my part to provide . . . previously unnecessary paperwork. . . . [P]eople at the DOC were determined to do all they could to keep me from discovering the worst of their practices.”³⁷ In light of Rathbone’s observations and what I have discussed throughout this Introduction regarding the well-concealed practice of prisoner abuse in domestic U.S. penal institutions, it is important to note that legal efforts to keep justice-seeking media representatives and activists outside of prison have greatly

Excerpt • Temple University Press

diminished the possibility of imprisoned people's testimonies of routine guard-on-prisoner rape, sexual assault, and torture—and their resistance against such state violence—from ever reaching free society. Franklin has spoken to this point quite powerfully: “The prison’s walls are designed not only to keep the prisoners in but to keep the public out, thus preventing observation or knowledge of what is going on inside. Unknowable to all but prisoners and guards, the prison thus becomes a physical site where the most unspeakable torture can continue without any restraint.”³⁸

Prisoner abuse narratives destabilize this panoptic enforcement of voice dispossession within and among imprisoned communities. The authors of prisoner abuse narratives find ways, often clandestinely, to speak truth to power. In so doing, they counteract their carceral condition of systemic silencing. Their intentional creation of oppositional speech and an in-prison literary counterculture affords them, if only temporarily, the opportunity to be something other than the object of an immobilizing, panoptic gaze. The literary scholar Michael Collins has made a case for conceptualizing this literary counterculture as an “antipanopticon” in the context of his work on the formerly imprisoned Black Arts Movement poet Etheridge Knight:

Knight act[s] as an antipanopticon surveilling United States society and justice to look into the souls not only of prisoners but also of the whole tradition that locks them in. To power his redefinitions [of crime and criminality], Knight borrows authority from . . . the black-power and black-arts movements and their project of redefinition and counterhegemonic communication. . . . At least in his stanzas, the poet can defeat the panoptic apparatus.³⁹

From Collins's vantage point, the imprisoned Knight—who, while confined, regularly exchanged correspondence with and was visited by the Pulitzer Prize-winning poet Gwendolyn Brooks—turned to literary expression critical of the justice system as a way to join his voice with revolutionary Black speakers outside Indiana State Prison who astutely passed judgment on the unseen seers (especially in the U.S. carceral state) who had passed judgment (and enforced racially discriminatory confinement) on him and other men held there. Knight and the other imprisoned contributors to his edited collection *Black Voices from Prison* (1970) moved people outside of prison literarily while removing themselves from the panoptic discipline of a maximum-security facility designed for their immobilization and silencing. Thus, through improvisational literary expression, Knight and his carceral writing team actualized what was arguably unforeseen and unforeseeable speech: imprisoned men's published critique of racial bias and the abuses of power they witnessed and experienced in the justice system. This otherwise

Excerpt • Temple University Press

unknown community of writers locked away in a high-security Indiana prison not only spoke in a way that received a hearing; they also exuded—in their testaments, poetry, and essays—the mass-based, unlicensed movement and antipanoptic expressivity that I argue is characteristic of the prisoner abuse narrative.

Throughout this book, I build from Collins's ideas about Knight's antipanopticon in my theorization of prisoner abuse narratives and antipanoptic expressivity. I define *antipanoptic expressivity* as a confined person's unanticipated act of speaking truth to power while he or she is dispossessed of voice and contained within any site premised on a white supremacist disciplinary logic, authoritarian rule, gendered social control, or premature death. Thinking back to Knight, at one level, he and his mostly Black carceral writing team unpredictably undermined the maximum-security prison's ever-present panoptic gaze by their very creation of a literary movement within a space whose power dynamics were designed to prevent the mobilization of their bodies *and political-intellectual voices*. But at another level, Knight and the contributors to *Black Voices from Prison* succeeded in insurrectionist communal writing within and against an even larger system of deindividuation and social control that traces its roots to the slave ship holds of the Transatlantic Slave Trade era—a system of *racialized* carceral power that predated and has always outstripped the regulatory force of the Foucauldian panoptic gaze. When Knight's work is (re-)read in this context, many of his most famous poems in *Black Voices from Prison*, such as "The Idea of Ancestry," "Hard Rock Returns to Prison from the Hospital for the Criminal Insane," "Cell Song," and "He Sees Through Stone," shatter the seeming invincibility of a panoptic gaze because the content and style of these works evoke the signal-song duplicity, mass-based recalcitrance, and political solidarity that effuse from (supposedly silenced) enslaved men and women in their spirituals and work songs. Knight's poems thus reflect his carceral expressive consciousness of Blacks' long history of covert resistance to unchecked state power and a panoptic gaze that Joy James rightly defines as having been shaped as much by racial terror and gendered social control as by architectural design: "Panopticism and the policing gaze are also informed by racial and sexual bias. . . . Ignoring disenfranchised ethnic minorities policed by both the state and dominant castes, Foucault . . . allows the representative [disciplined] body, which [he] bases on a white male model, to appear as universal."⁴⁰ Indeed, because Foucault makes no reference to the prevalence of *racialized* punishment or the history of *racialized* carceral power (e.g., the Transatlantic Slave Trade, slavery, the Jim Crow racial caste system, lynching, or the prison system as an emerging prison-industrial complex) in his study of the modern prison's disciplinary development, he also fails to consider the possibility that those people who confront a panoptic

Excerpt • Temple University Press

gaze find (and have always found) ways—small and large—to evade or undermine its impact. In the words of Dylan Rodríguez: “For all his profound insight . . . Foucault never quite examines whether and how the captive body/subject also, perhaps inevitably, attempts to dissipate, appropriate, resist, absorb, and rearticulate [the panoptic apparatus’s] power relations.”⁴¹ Frustrating *racialized* carceral power relations is rich, antipanoptically expressive work—and it is that work, I argue, that distinguishes prisoner abuse narratives, whether they are autobiographical, as we see with the published works of Malcolm X, Davis, Jackson, Shakur, Abu-Jamal, and King; oratorical, as we see with Hamer’s 1964 testimony; or fictional, as we see with the character Caleb Proudhammer’s recollection of life on a prison farm in Baldwin’s novel *Tell Me How Long the Train’s Been Gone* (1968).