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### **Power, Prisons, and the Pen: Generating Solidarity and Activism Through Literature**

The evolution of my project began with my passion for fighting mass incarceration. In order to add something new to this conversation, I knew I had to approach it from a different angle. I didn't want to repeat or summarize existing research on the Prison Industrial Complex, but instead I wanted to highlight how fiction worked to evoke resistance. So, I thought about what fiction does- it reflects lived experiences. I looked at the primary sources we read both in Dr. Reed's African American literature class at Old Dominion University and at the Norfolk City Jail. Then, I realized the greatest piece of literature to emphasize the necessity of a critical intervention is prison writings themselves. So, the substantive changes from my draft to my final draft included providing more context to quotes from George Jackson who was a political prisoner whose prison writings were the reason he was brutally murdered. I also included more writing from people who are currently incarcerated because they spoke of freedom and capitalism, and I was waiting for permission from the authors. I also decided to take out Michelle Alexander's definition of mass incarceration as one of my key concepts because I figured anyone reading my paper would already know what mass incarceration is and its striking racial dimension.

My critical intervention project impacted my engagement on the class materials as a whole in that every piece of fiction we read, I looked for things that would speak to either mass incarceration or concepts that are significant in abolitionist literature. Since I was taking Dr. Reed's African American literature class in a jail, this project made me think critically about our class discussions and the insight people from the inside produced about these materials, and I compared them to class discussions on the outside. I also noticed that every text had themes that interconnected one way or another because they could all be traced to black freedom struggle, and that really is the heart of my paper. The power that exists in work of fiction that I realized while reading them for class, made me realize how crucial it is to harness that power and focus it on social movements, so I discovered how necessary it is that people understand their own personal responsibility to educate and empower themselves in order to join the struggle in solidarity and fight for it.

"Settle your quarrels, come together, understand the reality of our situation, understand that fascism is already here, that people are dying who could be saved, that generations more will die or live poor butchered half-lives if you fail to act. Do what must be done, discover your humanity and your love in revolution. Pass on the torch. Join us, give up your life for the people." - George Jackson

Literature functions in the world to elicit collective resistance to systematic oppression by reflecting the lived experiences of people affected by it. In an era where mass incarceration is the new form of racialized social control, no genre is more urgent for the vision of prison abolition than African American literature, and within that, prison literature. African American literature empowers everyone, in that it provides an accurate depiction of history, one not found in history

books, that is representative of lived experiences of oppression. Just as Slave Narratives evoked collective resistance to the institution of slavery, literary work produced in prisons and jails will evoke collective resistance to the institution of incarceration, with the ultimate goal of abolishing the Prison Industrial Complex.

It should be noted that I do not intend for this intervention to be a summary of already existing, careful and extensive research on the horrors of jails and prisons; however, I do deem it necessary to define a few key concepts for the overarching purpose of connecting these concepts to the significance of prison literature and community building. Primarily, the Prison Industrial Complex is defined by Critical Resistance as, “a term to describe the overlapping interests of government and industry that use surveillance, policing, and imprisonment as solutions to economic, social and political problems” ([criticalresistance.org](http://criticalresistance.org)). In Angela Davis’s book, *Are Prisons Obsolete?*, she expands on the relationship between the exploitation of prison labor by private corporations, the racialization of prison populations, the “dangerous alliance between the military and corporate worlds,” the link between universities and corporations, profits from health care, and media. All of these intersecting aspects of society create a web of structures that reinforce and maintain the prison as the primary form of punishment.

Most pertinent to the topic of this paper is the understanding of prison literature. In *Are Prisons Obsolete?*, Angela Davis focuses on the history and significance of prison writings. “During the twentieth century, prison writing, in particular, has periodically experienced waves of popularity. The public recognition of prison writing in the United States has historically coincided with the influence of social movements calling for prison reform and/or abolition” (Davis 54). Individuals that are incarcerated want to expand their minds and be made aware of the practices that deliberately put themselves and others in their situation. A perfect example of the necessity of prison writings is through the political prisoner, George Jackson, who was murdered by prison guards at San Quentin. Jonathan Jackson writes,

“George Jackson conveyed an intelligent yet accessible message with his trademark style, rational rage. He illuminated previously hidden viewpoints and feelings that disenfranchised segments of the population were unable to articulate: the poor, the victimized, the imprisoned, and the disillusioned” (4).

Prison literature serves as a testament to refute the notion that jails and prisons are unique spaces in which critical intellectual work cannot be done.

The last key concept to understand is prison abolition, or abolition of the Prison Industrial Complex. Abolitionist organizations such as Critical Resistance and Humanities Behind Bars, work towards an alternative society that doesn’t rely on cops, cages, control, and surveillance. Abolition is a broad concept because prisons are not isolated entities, so a vision of abolition involves making steps to not only break down the existing systems of oppression, but to build a new world that practices humanity and radical empathy. As Humanities Behind Bars mission statement says, “Our volunteers are dedicated to serving the professional goals of students on the inside while developing transformative pedagogies that inspire healing and holistic visions of social life” ([humanitiesbehindbars.org](http://humanitiesbehindbars.org)).

Within African American literature, works of fiction tell complex stories that reflect lived experiences of people of color that are interwoven with overarching themes that are imperative to social movements. For example, *Sula* by Toni Morrison displays what collective care and community support look like through the story's multifaceted characters. One character named Tar Baby is depicted as a drunk who doesn't do much to contribute to the community. However, this does not cause members of the community to accept the injustice he gets subjected to. When the police came, they recognized the woman as the mayor's niece and arrested Tar Baby. Later, after the word got out, Ajax and two other men went to the station to see about him... When they finally got permission to see him in the cell, he was twisted up in a corner badly beaten and dressed in nothing but extremely soiled underwear" (Morrison 132).

Tar Baby, like every human being, has a complex personhood, and even though he struggles through personal issues, the members of the community still look out and show empathy towards him because he is part of the community. This concept of collective care is vital to Abolition literature, for we must assume the personal responsibility of caring for one another in the midst of a capitalist controlled society that chooses not to care.

I should note that in my experience of being a student in a class taught by Dr. Alison Reed at the Norfolk City Jail, this collective care is not limited to people on the outside. In the class, participation and collective respect for each other and each other's ideas are practiced. We collectively read literature and poetry produced by African American writers, and critically analyze the texts as a class. After reading Ta-Nehisi Coates's piece, "Between the World and Me," we had a class discussion about who the destroyers are, and one student pointed out that the destroyers are the Americans who continue to facilitate in this mythological discourse of perceived innocence. There is empowerment in knowing that the human being in a cage is not the criminal, but the societal and historical makers of perceived criminality are the true criminals. From class discussions to sharing personal writings, the collective care we each engage in and the sense of community we create within a carceral space is not to be under emphasized. Ta-Nehisi Coates writes to his son in "Between the World and Me" where he talks about the reality of living with systematic oppression. Coates writes,

To be black in the Baltimore of my youth was to be naked before the elements of the world, before all the guns, fists, knives, crack, rape, and disease. The nakedness is the correct and intended result of policy, the predictable upshot of people forced for centuries to live under fear. The law did not protect us. And now, in your time, the law has been used as an excuse for stopping and frisking you, which is to say, for furthering the assault of your body (17).

Coates depicts "street culture" and within this, illustrates the culture produced by deliberate practices of creating racialized space that is designed to put African Americans in jail. Coates elaborates on this notion of fear and rage that is present in inner cities. Since one cannot, in theory, kill a police officer or break down the system from their position, people find ways to secure the power of their own bodies. Coates talks about the 'crews' found in poor communities of color that he has observed in his own lived experience. He says, "The crews walked the blocks of the neighborhood, loud and rude, because it was only through their loud rudeness that they might feel any sense of security and power" (22). It is not a coincidence that the behaviors of people 'in the streets' that strive to obtain self-empowerment are the exact behaviors that are

criminalized. The legacy of slavery that persists to this day manifests itself in poor African American communities in which people that are designed to perish in a ghetto are doing what they can to secure power of their own bodies. This street culture is also represented in carceral spaces and is acknowledged by the people in them. A classmate of mine at the Norfolk City Jail writes,

I never looked at life in a liberated mindset until I got trapped in this situation. I was always conscious of it, but it never had an effect on me until I had to fight for my freedom... Physically they can enslave us but spiritually we're free... Its already hard to make it in today's society because of so much capitalism, people want to profit off of everything, even the things in life that are free... that's kind of the reason I got caught up in the web. Tryna find another source of income.

My classmate's insights demonstrate his awareness of the system that attempts to lock up his mind, but his agency negates this. Furthermore, he is aware of the corrosive effects of capitalism and notes that he is incarcerated because he was trying to find alternative ways to survive in a society that already works against him.

Coates writes to his son and says, "You still believe the injustice was Michael Brown. You have not grappled with your own myths and narratives and discovered the plunder everywhere around us" (21). This quote amplifies how America consistently mythologizes history. This directly connects to Jackson's analysis of United States history as he writes about the dissonance between the values America claims to believe in, and how these values have been and are continuously completely disregarded in America's actions. Jackson says, "This dissonance, evident within the nation's structure from the beginning, informs the state's first function: to oversimplify and minimize immoral events in order to legitimize history and the state's very existence simultaneously" (5). With regard to what Jackson says is the state's first function, the prison industrial complex is designed to infiltrate the public consciousness with oversimplified and binary ideas of "good" and "bad", so that people genuinely believe criminals are bad people. Thus, prison writings are essential to the social consciousness because the truth must be exposed in its entirety as it relates to the oppressive practices in the so-called criminal "justice" system. These truths, uncensored, should be making people uncomfortable, not just the statistics that demonstrate the striking racial dimension of imprisonment, but the lived experiences of being inside a cage.

People who are for the abolition of prisons and jails understand the horrifying nature of these institutions; however, I argue that every person who is for this movement must assume the personal responsibility of amplifying the voices of people incarcerated. Angela Davis powerfully discusses the history of prison education programs and their disestablishment. She writes, "The contemporary disestablishment of writing and other prison educational programs is indicative of the official disregard today for rehabilitative strategies, particularly those that encourage individual prisoners to acquire autonomy of the mind" (57). Literature produced on the outside thus empowers people on the inside and is essential. Furthermore, literature produced on the inside educates and empowers people on the outside.

From personal writings about everyday experiences in a carceral setting to critical intellectual writings, prison literature reflects the authority of lived experiences and has the potential to cultivate a collective understanding of injustice and African American suffering in order to elicit action-based initiatives focused on social change. In *Soledad Brother*, Jonathan Jackson says, “Prison serves not only as a physical barrier, but a communication restraint. Prisoners are completely ostracized from society, with little or no chance to break through” (8). Anyone that is committed to the struggle for freedom needs to be committed in amplifying the voices of people incarcerated. An incarcerated friend of mine, whose alias I will use in order to maintain his privacy, Mellow, writes

“I’ve been doing the best one can do while locked up. I spend most of the day asleep and playing poker. They wake us up at 4 a.m. to eat breakfast then I go back to sleep. Lunch is around 12:00, and then I watch T.V. with my homeboy till dinner at 4:00 pm. After dinner we work out until 7:00 p.m., and then 6 of us play poker. We usually play until about breakfast, but we may stop a few hours before. And then I repeat the cycle everyday.”

This writing speaks to the community people build while incarcerated in order to cope with the mundanity of day to day to life. My friend’s words, “And then I repeat the cycle everyday,” speaks to the sinister monotonous reality that is his life.

As Jonathan Jackson writes, “How does a person — inside or outside prison — confront the cultural mindsets, the layers of misinformation propagated by the capitalist system?” (9). If history is written by the “conquerors” and literature is written by the “conquered,” then the answer to Jackson’s question is literature. No other task is more urgent than putting mass incarceration at the forefront of the social justice agenda; therefore, magnifying the diversity of intellectual works produced from people on the inside is paramount. Even for people who are not affected by the Prison Industrial Complex must understand the necessity to ensure this systematic racialized social control is America’s last. Only by understanding the complexity of mass incarceration and the people who are targeted, and have been targeted throughout history, can we elicit activism and collective radical empathy to work towards an alternative reality.

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