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The Voices of Prison

Prisons and the literature that emerges from them occupy a grey space in American society. Prisons exist both within and strangely isolated from society as a whole. An example of this in the physical world is that even though the majority of criminals from the United States hail from urban areas, most prisons are located in rural areas (Huling 197). Even the country's most famous former prison, Alcatraz, is located on an island off the coast of San Francisco, away from the rest of the population. This physical separation from large segments of the population can be justified in numerous ways, safety, punishment, convenience, etc. However, this manifestation is a natural representation of how prisons are thought of and treated in the dominant main stream discourse. Additionally, the construction of prisons, with their classic barbed wire fencing, watchtowers, and high walls creates a clear boundary between inside and outside. These barriers and isolation represent the attempt to differentiate prisoners and make them separate from main stream society.

Of course the physical locations and physical properties of prisons are not the only ways in which prisoners occupy a separate status from main stream society. Many fundamental rights, like the right to vote, vanish officially when a person enters prison. Unofficially, a variety of other rights disappear as well, such as rights to personal property, privacy, and often, safety. The loss of rights then follow ex-convicts out of prison and back into society. The loss of rights excludes prisoners from participating in even basic parts of society and can make it nearly impossible to reintegrate after being released. For example, felons in many states lose the right to vote or be on a jury. Again, unofficially they continue to be punished in even more ways after paying their debt to society, like having to identify as a felon on job applications.

The existence of this second, relatively unknown, world within society has created, over the last 30 years, a substantial subset of American citizens with second-class rights and

social status within society, a subset that is often ignored and exploited for political and economic gains.

Prisoners are forced to balance between these two separate, but intricately connected worlds. For them, surviving and thriving in prison can be in direct contrast to being successful in mainstream society. The laws and skills needed to survive are vastly different in these two distinct but overlapping worlds. Additionally, attention given to the prison world is scarce. Prisoners are out of sight and out of mind for the majority of citizens, who do not have to see the damaging effects of prison and are able to justify their existence through the guilt of the prisoners. This friction of identity and place however, has created beautifully insightful voices that shed light onto both prisons and society as a whole.

In this paper I will focus on three authors who have produced works of literature in prison since the formation of the prison-industrial system was concocted in the 1970's. These authors, Donald Goines, Piper Kerman, and Mumia Abu-Jamal, represent different levels and stages of the prison system, from minimum security for a one year sentence to solitary confinement for life. Through an analysis of both the rise of the prison-industrial complex in America and a comparison to historical protest writers, I will demonstrate how prisoners who are treated as second-class citizens in society use their voices to combat an abusive, oppressive, and normalized system from within and bridge the communication gap between prisons and the rest of society. Additionally, I will investigate how effective these tactics are and how these pieces of art fit into a larger history of protest writers rebelling against established systems of control in America, mainly slavery and Jim Crow.

The aim of this paper will be to illustrate how prison culture has become a normalized and inevitable part of America's societal thinking, despite being in direct contrast to many of its founding principles and how those inside the prison system use their words to fight back. As Michelle Alexander states in *The New Jim Crow*, "Those affected know firsthand...." By

thinking about the United States prison system in this framework, as a socially prejudice and corrupt entity, I will hope to recast prison writers as protest writers who are on the forefront of bringing critical change to society.

The timing for writing about this subject is also important. The United States seems to be suspended on the brink of large social change as more public dialogue around the topic of incarceration has begun to open up in the last years, planting the seeds of possible change. In 2015 President Barak Obama became the first American President to visit a federal prison (albeit an empty one). Additionally, he has spoken out vaguely about the need for prison reform and changed the rhetoric around being tough on crime (Horsley). This acknowledgment, along with the pardoning of over a thousand non-violent drug offenders serving long sentences, is a critical step in bringing this issue into the public discourse (Kozłowska).

Additionally, the largest prison strike in history took place across the United States in 2016. Prisoners across the country refused to work in protest of unsanitary conditions and the use of slave labor (Kutsch). This protests illustrates the large number of prisoners who are knowledgeable and who can articulate the abuses they are experiencing along with their ability to organize, even behind bars.

These events have added to the increasing amount of literature, documentaries, and other art protesting the inhuman treatment of prisoners. Unfortunately, the degree to which these events have changed the national dialogue and consciousness about prisons seems minimal. It is not difficult to see that prisons are thought of as dangerous and awful places in the public's mind; all one has to do is watch any television series involving the prison system to see sexual and physical violence and emotional distress dished out on inmates by both other inmates and guards. Why is that reality so often readily accepted without serious critique?

The answer to this question is associated with the guilt of and separation from society of prisoners. Most of their existence is invisible and much of their treatment is justified by their guilt before the law. However, guilt in the American justice system is not a straightforward matter. Inherent biases against race and class are laced into the very foundations of many laws and punishments. The writers discussed in this thesis bring these grey areas of the law into focus in a variety of ways to portray the flawed implementation of convicting a huge number of citizens for mostly non-violent crimes. They are at the forefront of social change and could be major voices in a growing social movement.

Michelle Alexander: The Formation of the New Prison in America

Before dissecting the ways in which prison writers challenge the current system of imprisonment, it is important to understand the system they are battling. A historical account of the evolution of the prison system both in America and globally is needed to study current writers in the appropriate context. The history of the American prison system is too complex and far reaching to do it justice here, however it is important to understand the basic information regarding its foundation, inception and execution, in order to properly evaluate and understand the critiques of prison writers.

Mention of prisons in Western society is available from the time of Ancient Greek Myths and the Book of Genesis. There is documentation of imprisonment in Ancient Greece, Ancient Egypt, Persia, as well as the Roman Empire. While imprisonment was only one of the many forms of punishment used in these cultures (sold into slavery, banishment, etc.) it nevertheless was present and common (Peters 3). Thus prisons, in one form or another have been within society for at least as long as the formation of modern states, accounting for their seemingly inevitable role in society.

In England references to prisons go back to 1166. For the centuries that followed there was not an overly organized manner of imprisoning criminals and it was not until the 18th century that imprisonment become a mainstay of punishment. Cellular confinement, the basis for many modern day prisons, was introduced in 1677 near Florence and in Rome. Here prisoners were kept together during the day and then slept in separate cells. Penal colonies were also used around this time, lasting until the early 20th century (Roth xxvi-xxvii).

In America leasing prisoners to private companies began in 1790. It was not until after the Civil War however, that a financially destitute South used convict leasing with greater

frequency. This practice fell out of fashion in the early 20th century when workers Unions began protesting due to unfair labor practices. (Alexander 29-30)

During the 18th century America began forming the foundations of the modern prison system. Two models became popular. The Auburn System, which was a natural evolution from the Italian cellular confinement, isolation at night and socializing while working during the day, and the Pennsylvanian System, which enforced constant solitary confinement. The Pennsylvanian System was developed from Quaker religious beliefs to provoke prisoners to focus on their crimes and develop discipline. This is evidence of a shift from concentration on the body to the soul in prisons. The Auburn System ultimately won out due to its cost efficiency (Roth 19).

Ironically, the creation of the modern prison developed largely from growing sentiments against physical punishments for criminals. While practices such as probation and parole became common substitutes in the 20th century, the 1980's were marked by a regression to more punitive forms of incarceration like maximum security prisons.

The question then is what accounts for this regression. What created the shift in prison policy and thinking which helped create the largest prison population in world history? First we must grasp the size and depth of the American prison system. The facts surrounding it are nearly unbelievable in their size and contrast to the rest of the world. Some statistics that help clarify the situation:

- The United States has 5% of the world's population, but 25% of the world's prisoners.
- The total incarcerated population in the U.S. is a staggering 2.4 million — a 500% increase over the past 30 years.
- One in 28 American children has a parent behind bars.
- At the end of 2007, 1 in 31 adults was behind bars, on probation or on parole (Dimon).
- Nearly 7 million Americans are under some form of correctional supervision (Total Correctional Population).

While these statistics tell a powerful story on their own, they are, like all numbers without context, somewhat empty. This dramatic growth in prison populations did not arise from some easily discernable source, such as a sudden increase in criminal activity or a massive population spike. Instead historians and scholars have traced the foundations of this system back to American slavery as a continuation by some of those in power to divide and control large swaths of the population, while exploiting a greatly marginalized workforce.

In the book *The New Jim Crow*, Michelle Alexander clearly outlines the rise of the modern prison system as simply another evolution of a system of exploitation. She begins her book with a passage illustrating the historical relevance of institutions like slavery on our modern society,

“Jarvious Cotton cannot vote. Like his father, grandfather, great-grandfather, and great-great-grandfather, he has been denied the right to participate in our electoral democracy. Cotton’s family tree tells the story of several generations of black men who were born in the United States but who were denied the most basic freedom that democracy promises—the freedom to vote for those who will make the rules and laws that govern one’s life” (1).

In each generation there has been some system in place to control and exploit the most vulnerable of our society. According to Alexander, each phase of this evolution has mimicked its predecessor in motive and techniques, but has worn a different mask to normalize its acceptance within a changing cultural landscape with shifting acceptable morals.

Slavery’s core profit was rooted in effectively free labor. But the choice of exploiting Africans as slaves was more calculated than common perception perhaps implies. Due to the common narrative surrounding slavery, it seems almost normal, as if it was preordained that Africans were to be slaves. However, race was originally not an issue with the large number of European indentured servants that were forced to come to

America, but after the unsuccessful Bacon's Rebellion in 1675 which consisted of both poor whites and blacks, as well as slaves, the ability to speak European languages and organize was seen as dangerous. Similarly, Native Americans were more inclined to fight and wage war because of their proximity. While slaves from the West Indies were far more likely to have been familiar with European languages and culture as well, thus making it easier for them to coordinate with oppressed whites.

Thus Africans, who were unexposed to European languages and customs became the most attractive choice. The diverse languages and cultures of the African people neutered possible alliances that could threaten the white elites. Additionally, future generations were born and raised in slavery, creating a clear social distinction which was reinforced on the petty privileges granted to poor whites over blacks, such as, "White settlers were allowed greater access to Native American lands, white servants were allowed to police slaves through slave patrols and militias, and barriers were created so that free labor would not be placed in competition with slave labor" (Alexander 24-25). Here we see a practice that will be repeated throughout American history. Poor whites are given small privileges that differentiate them from blacks, creating a feeling of superiority and division with a group that could be seen as an ally against elites, effectively telling people they are free by showing them what is denied to others.

As history progressed and social attitudes evolved this system of manipulation evolved with it. Instead of lasting social change, new, more flexible systems emerged. These systems were sold in defensible ways until they became social norms.

Between the breakdowns of these systems there occurred moments of possibility for lower class Americans of all races to bond together over shared concerns. Each time however, they were divided by elites, which helped reinforce the incoming

social structure aimed at suppressing lower class citizens, especially poor black Americans.

Shortly after slavery, one of these moments of possibility existed. The South was both financially and organizationally a mess following the Civil War. Elites and politicians quickly began reimagining ways in which to restore the former social order that had been in place under slavery (Alexander 27).

Their answer was to introduce what become known as the “Black Codes,” a set of laws which were reminiscent of slavery and foretold of the Jim Crow era. Under slavery, separation between races was not paramount because decisions such as the Dredd Scott Case and the clearly visible caste system established that blacks were inferior to whites. This relationship changed however with the Civil War. Now blacks were free from the bonds of slavery and public perceptions were adjusting to this reality.

Unfortunately, racial fears and the desire to keep poor whites and blacks from aligning led to the inception of the Black Codes. “While some of these codes were intended to establish systems of peonage resembling slavery, others foreshadowed Jim Crow laws by prohibiting, among other things, interracial seating in the first-class sections of railroad cars and by segregating schools” (Alexander 28). By implementing laws that separated blacks and whites the older social hierarchy was reestablished under a new guise.

The Black Codes did not stop at simply segregating races however. Vagrancy laws were introduced, which made it illegal to not work, heavily increasing the number of black prisoners and the practice of hiring out prison laborers to private companies. This created a new source of cheap, nearly free, labor on which to rebuild the South’s economy.

The Reconstruction period was marked by the end of the Black Codes and signaled a brief chance for possible lasting change after slavery. The passing of the Thirteenth Amendment, Fourteenth Amendment, Civil Rights Act of 1866, Fifteenth Amendment, and the Ku Klux Klan Acts, all helped reshape the political landscape of the South for former slaves and their heirs (Alexander 29). Additional other benefits accomplished under the supervision of federal troops, such as public education and voting for the first time, also began changing the social landscape of the South, “Literacy rates climbed, and educated blacks began to populate legislatures, open schools, and initiate successful businesses. In 1867, at the dawn of the Reconstruction Era, no black man held political office in the South, yet three years later, at least 15 percent of all Southern elected officials were black” (Alexander 29).

It was a beautiful sunset, but the pushback against these developments was swift and devastating. Violence from the Ku Klux Klan increased. Southern politicians gutted many of the successful social programs. “Vagrancy laws, and other laws defining activities such as mischief and insulting gestures as crimes were enforced vigorously against blacks” (Alexander 31). Debts for crimes were worked off in prisons for private companies again. The conditions of these workers were sometimes worse than during slavery because the contractors had no financial motivation to care for the health of the prisoners.

And here we see an inherent clue as to not just the state of prisoners during the late 19th century, but also today. The 13th Amendment, leaves out one group of people from its protection, "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” (Primary Documents in American History).

This seemingly small caveat has been exercised excessively by politicians and elites and became the foundation for reestablishing the social hierarchy of slavery. But another

movement emerged to challenge the new system of segregation. The Populist Party of the 1890's again reshaped the political landscape by focusing on common ground between working-class people of all races. They voiced the economic needs of the lowest levels of whites, who happened to hold the most prejudiced views on blacks. By focusing on the power of the white elites however, they were able to form the unlikely political alliance between these lower-class whites and blacks (Alexander 33-34).

Again however, the cycle repeated itself. The political success of the Populist Party was met with a harsh blowback from Conservatives. The same violent means were exercised as during the Reconstruction period. Additionally, segregation laws were proposed to fulfill the same purpose as the Black Codes before them, mainly to separate the black and white working classes and provide minimal but glorified cultural and economic incentives to lower-class whites over blacks (Alexander 34). These laws pitted lower-class whites against blacks and created a sense of superiority to an otherwise abused class of people, showing the social memory of racism from slavery still had a strong hold on the public. Thus began the era of lynching, exploitation, abuse, and legal suppression, otherwise known as Jim Crow.

The language and content of Jim Crow era laws put the racial relationship in the South at this time into perspective.

The officer in charge shall not bury, or allow to be buried, any colored persons upon ground set apart or used for the burial of white persons (Georgia).

All passenger stations in this state operated by any motor transportation company shall have separate waiting rooms or space and separate ticket windows for the white and colored races (Alabama).

The schools for white children and the schools for Negro children shall be conducted separately (Florida).

The state librarian is directed to fit up and maintain a separate place for the use of the colored people who may come to the library for the purpose of reading books or periodicals (North Carolina).

No person or corporation shall require any White female nurse to nurse in wards or rooms in hospitals, either public or private, in which Negro men are placed (Alabama).

Any instructor who shall teach in any school, college or institution where members of the white and colored race are received and enrolled as pupils for instruction shall be deemed guilty of a misdemeanour, and upon conviction thereof, shall be fined... (Oklahoma).

All persons licensed to conduct the business of selling beer or wine...shall serve either white people exclusively or colored people exclusively and shall not sell to the two races within the same room at any time (Georgia) (Jim Crow Laws).

The specific almost seemingly excessively detailed nature of these laws show how important it was for law makers at that time to keep the status quo and separate blacks and whites in every aspect of life. What is important to underline is that although these laws seem ludicrous from our current perspectives, they actually were part of an ongoing attempt to normalize a race based caste system. The biggest threat to this system is the integration and normalization of interactions between races. Thus, many laws that seem outlandishly detailed in their specificity exist. Such as, “It shall be unlawful for any amateur white baseball team to play baseball on any vacant lot or baseball diamond within two blocks of a playground devoted to the Negro race, and it shall be unlawful for any amateur colored baseball team to play baseball in any vacant lot or baseball diamond within two blocks of any playground devoted to the white race” *Georgia* (Jim Crow Laws). These laws were essential for Conservative lawmakers at the time. It was not only important to ban major interactions like marriage and schooling, but their devotion to the entrenchment of creating a manageable lower social caste went so far as to control even casual interactions between everyday people.

In addition to the official laws regarding segregation passed at this time, there were a number of social etiquettes that were enforced by police and citizens alike. These illustrate the level of social acceptance by whites that had taken hold in the South at this time. Some examples include:

A black male could not offer his hand (to shake hands) with a white male because it implied being socially equal.

Under no circumstance was a black male to offer to light the cigarette of a white female

Blacks were not allowed to show public affection toward one another in public, especially kissing, because it offended whites.

Blacks were introduced to whites, never whites to blacks

Whites did not use courtesy titles of respect when referring to blacks, for example, Mr., Mrs., Miss., Sir, or Ma'am. Instead, blacks were called by their first names. Blacks had to use courtesy titles when referring to whites, and were not allowed to call them by their first names.

White motorists had the right-of-way at all intersections (Jim Crow Etiquette)

These rules of etiquette further created distinctions between races and promoted the superiority of whites over blacks. They were also patrolled by the normal population, making everyone complicit in the racial caste system. Most of these etiquettes revolved around showing submission. To survive, blacks were often forced to play the role of dumber, emasculated, less honest, lower class, buffoons when interacting with whites. Black men's interactions with white women were especially controlled. There was no greater sin in the Jim Crow era than a black man showing any sort of intimacy with a white women.

As with slavery, where male slave masters often forced female slaves into being their mistresses, the masculine dominance of women played a significant role in the racial hierarchy. While white men could sleep with black women without consequence, the opposite

could result in the common occurrence of lynching. Even the suggestion of such a relationship was grounds for murdering a black man. Over 3,400 cases of lynching were documented against blacks between 1882 and 1951. The majority of these were done in response to assault and rape allegations (Gibson). While lynching was not part of an official law or openly supported by the government, officials did little to nothing to prevent it. In fact, some estimates state that over half of all lynchings were attended by law enforcement officers, the defenders of the state. Lower-class whites were often the perpetrators of the violence, showing a more aggressive role in exercising and reinforcing their membership to the superior race.

“When the sentiment of a community favored lynching the laws were difficult or impossible to enforce. State authorities often attempted to prevent lynchings, but seldom punished the mob participants. Because of the tight hold on the courts by local public opinion, lynchers were rarely ever indicted by a grand jury or sentenced. The judge, prosecutor, jurors and witnesses—all white—were usually in sympathy with the lynchers. If sentenced, the participants in the lynch mobs were usually pardoned. Local police and sheriffs rarely did anything to defend Negro citizens and often supported lynchings”. (Gibson).

A combination of violence and strategic political undermining not only suppressed basic rights like voting in the South, but it enhanced something that was much more lasting. Jim Crow normalized the racial caste system in America and further cemented the “us” vs. “them” mentality by pandering to it (Alexander 35).

Again, just as with previous forms of oppression, a shifting political landscape helped destabilize the established norms and challenge the injustices of Jim Crow. Several moments helped shape the Civil Rights movement and eventual death of Jim Crow which cannot be delved into in great detail here, but some of the more notable events include, The New Deal, WWII, the mass protests of the 1950’s, and Brown vs The Board of Education.

Firstly, The New Deal, which aimed to bring relief to both poor whites and blacks during the Great Depression created a voting alliance between the two groups which dominated politics throughout the middle part of the 20th century (Alexander 44). Additionally, black soldiers returning from fighting after WWII demanded more equal rights and pointed to the blatant contradiction between the American ideals that opposed Hitler's treatment of Jews and other minorities to American policies regarding blacks (Wormser).

Both of these events helped add fire to the Civil Rights protests in the South. Several landmark cases were won in support of Civil Rights in the 1940's but it was not until *Brown vs The Board of Education* in 1954 which "unanimously held that the racial segregation of children in public schools violated the Equal Protection Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment" (McBride). This "signaled the end of home rule in the South with respect to racial affairs" (Alexander 36).

The Supreme Court took power away from the South in this instance of legalized discrimination and created a legal pathway to challenging the concept of Jim Crow. The blowback from this was severe. Violence increased from the Ku Klux Klan and many politicians threatened to throttle any opposition to Jim Crow. Somehow in the face of all this hostility and violence the "largest mass movement for racial reform and civil rights in the twentieth century emerged. Between autumn 1961 and the spring of 1963, twenty thousand men, women and children had been arrested. In 1963 alone, another fifteen thousand were imprisoned, and one thousand desegregation protests occurred across the region, in more than one hundred cities" (Alexander 37).

This movement is directly responsible for bringing about The Civil Rights Act of 1964 and The Voting Rights Act of 1965, crumbling the foundations of Jim Crow. Not only that, but it led to the Poor People's Movement which reached across racial lines to encompass both

black and white poor and working class people. This movement, spearheaded by the likes of Martin Luther King Jr., was not only a unifying movement, but a unifying movement that had emerged from the civil rights movement with black leaders (Alexander 39).

Unfortunately, as with Bacon's Rebellion, Reconstruction, and the populism of the late 20th century before it, the civil rights victories were met by opposition that acclimated to the changing political climate and was once again able to harness the racial caste system to its advantage.

What has emerged in the wake of Jim Crow has been a special and more calculated form of control. The language and actions of the ruling class has become more nuanced and racially sensitive to adjust to the new racial norms of current society, while still exploiting the same racial prejudices and fears for their own gains.

Law and order began being leaned on after the Civil Rights Movement. In the 1950's and 1960's Conservatives began labeling Civil Rights protestors as criminals. Rises in crime rates during this time accompanied with riots in many black areas helped bolster this argument (Alexander 41). What these arguments foretold was the coming Tough on Crime movements of the 1980's. By masking pro-segregation sentiments with anti-crime laws Conservatives were able to pass seemingly race neutral laws that targeted blacks. Many civil rights advocates actually supported tough on crime bills to combat the rising crime rates in inner cities.

Perhaps even more importantly, Conservatives again divided poor white and blacks into competitors instead of a solid block with power. Images such as the black welfare cheats and casting poor people as lazy and deserving of their status began to emerge at this time, "The (alleged) misbehaviors of the poor were transformed from adaptations to poverty that had the unfortunate effect of reproducing it into character failings that accounted for poverty

in the first place” (Alexander 45). By flipping the script so to say, Conservatives could reframe poverty that held the poor, especially black poor, as deserving their plight because of some type of cultural or moral deficiency. Successful black citizens were even propped up in support of this notion as evidence that character and not situation were the hallmarks of poverty. And if poverty is someone’s fault, then the crimes that are directly linked to poverty are not seen as symptoms but as further evidence of the poor’s flawed conduct. “Just as race had been used at the turn of the century by Southern elites to rupture class solidarity at the bottom of the income ladder, race as a national issue had broken up the Democratic New Deal “bottom-up” coalition—a coalition dependent on substantial support from all voters, white and black, at or below the median income” (Alexander 47).

In this way, the table was set for the next incarnation of racial and class suppression in the United States. In the 1980’s Republicans, under President Reagan, came to power promising to get tougher on crime and lessen “handouts” for social programs. In 1982, the now fabled “War on Drugs” was officially declared, advancing former efforts from President Nixon in the 60’s and 70’s, creating a seismic shift in the allocation of funds.

“The Justice Department announced its intention to cut in half the number of specialists assigned to identify and prosecute white-collar criminals and to shift its attention to street crime.....Practically overnight the budgets of federal law enforcement agencies soared. Between 1980 and 1984, FBI antidrug funding increased from \$8 million to \$95 million. Department of Defense antidrug allocations increased from \$33 million in 1981 to \$1,042 million in 1991. During that same period, DEA antidrug spending grew from \$86 million to \$1,026 million, and FBI antidrug allocations grew from \$38 million to \$181 million. By contrast, funding for agencies responsible for drug treatment, prevention, and education was dramatically reduced. The budget of the National Institute on Drug Abuse, for example, was reduced from \$274 million to \$57 million from 1981 to 1984, and antidrug funds allocated to the Department of Education were cut from \$14 million to \$3 million”(Alexander 49-50).

The redistribution of resources was especially troubling for inner-city workers who were seeing their workplaces transform. Manufacturing jobs for workers with little education and less specialized skills began disappearing as the economy shifted from an industrial to service economy. “One study indicates that as late as 1970, more than 70 percent of all blacks working in metropolitan areas held blue-collar jobs. Yet by 1987, when the drug war hit high gear, the industrial employment of black men had plummeted to 28 percent” (Alexander 50). Thus, neighborhoods were struck by a combination of factors that set the stage for the prison-industrial complex to become the transfixed institution of American society that it is today.

The War on Drugs, was formulated in the 1970’s, began to take shape in the early 1980’s and blossomed in the late 80’s and 90’s under Republicans and Democrats alike. It transformed the magnitude of the prison system in the United States. This inflation of prisoners is simply dumbfounding and unprecedented in human history. The totals from the beginning of this chapter show the breadth of the prison system, but these numbers literally developed over the course of a few decades. The biggest promoter of these increases has been drug incarceration. “In 1972, 161 U.S. residents were incarcerated in prisons and jails per 100,000 population; by 2007, that rate had more than quintupled to a peak of 767 per 100,000” (Travis).

Unfortunately, these arrests are not just random encounters but tell the story of a carefully conducted system which attacks the most vulnerable members of society on every level. On the street level, policing techniques are used that deliberately target poor, usually black non-violent drug users, like stop and frisk and giving police nearly limitless liberty in claiming reasonable suspicion for searches. At the court level overburdened defense lawyers, racially biased laws and sentencing terms (like the 10 times longer sentence for crack vs cocaine), and mandatory minimums, work against defendants from receiving a fair hearing. In prison, people are used for forced labor, often live under the constant threat of violence, and

are separated from their friends and family. And after prison the social scorn, loss of civil rights, prison debt and discriminatory practices in housing and job applications create a cyclical effect that results in a recidivism rate of over 50% (Recidivism). The system, at its core is designed to catch as many people in its wide spreading net as possible, targeting those specifically with the least amount of political and social power, so as to not cause social outrage.

Instead of deescalating the war on drugs and dependence on the prison system, Democrats actually extended its reach. In politically motivated moves, President Clinton increased funding for fighting drug crime, disallowed access to state benefits for those convicted of a felony drug charge, and introduced a litany of mandatory minimum sentences for minor drug infractions, effectively taking control away from judges in accounting for situation and intended harm. These measures under Bill Clinton, “resulted in the largest increases in federal and state prison inmates of any president in American history” (Alexander 56-57).

The country had arrived at a place where the expected norm, again, was ludicrously out of moral context. As Michelle Alexander explains, “The law and order perspective, first introduced during the peak of the Civil Rights Movement by rabid segregationists, had become nearly hegemonic two decades later. By the mid. 1990’s, no serious alternatives to the War on Drugs and “get tough” movement were being entertained in the mainstream political discourse” (57-58).

The authors in this thesis explore both the specifics of these practices, but also the overarching themes which govern their motivation. Their voices, from inside this system, seek to break through the accepted norms that have settled over modern society and shake their foundations.

What is the point of creating such a complex system? What does it accomplish for those in power? Firstly, the prison system is a way of controlling and silencing oppositions. One recent example of this occurrence is the arrest of over 200 protestors at the inauguration of President Trump (Krieg). Using the police and prison system as a tool to threaten destabilizing facets of the populace is a legal and useful way in manipulating power and control. Secondly, the disenfranchisement of so many citizens, especially disproportionately blacks who traditionally vote liberally, 88% percent of voters who identified as black voted for Hilary Clinton and 93% for Barak Obama, is a current method of suppressing the vote and forbidding sections of the populace from participating in the electoral process. Finally, it provides private companies with a constant supply of cheap labor that has little to no rights and has almost no ability to organize. In this way the benefits of slavery and Jim Crow from an economic perspective are achieved and are morally justified because of the cry of law and order as cover. Additionally, prison has the added benefit of being isolated from society. While slavery and Jim Crow created legal and social barriers to interaction, there was still physical space between the two groups being shared. Most people, however, will never enter a prison. Most will never see what happens behind prison walls. The separation of inmates and the general society makes empathy and interaction almost nonexistent.

Michele Foucault: Building and Maintaining Power

Michele Foucault's insights regarding the rise of prisons and their evolution adds further insights into manipulation of prisoners by those in power. Although he speaks most often of prisons in general, his thoughts show the foundations of manipulation that are sown into the roots of prisons and their ideals at discipline and order. For him the elimination of spectacle as punishment, (public executions and torture) was not a humanitarian effort but a shift in political mindset that evolved with the Industrial Revolution. Monarchies reinforced their authority by killing people and conducting investigations in private. All the knowledge was kept from the citizens. But in modern society where the citizens theoretically make up the government, "A government for, by and of the people..." the citizenry must be complicit with the punishment, even the criminal, who is part of society. While many people were aiming to end torture and gruesome punishments, what resulted was not necessarily less punishment but more calculated punishment (Foucault *Discipline and Punishment* 257). By creating clear consequences for crimes, punishment was seen more as a breach of contract with the moral standards of that society, making the matter of punishment a moral discipline instead of a purely physical one. Here we see an example of how the prison system seems to be improving but is instead evolving, what he refers to as strategic coincidence, like slavery into Jim Crow and Jim Crow into the current prison system. These are not reforms so much as improvements on the efficiency of power to suit the current social and political climate.

However, as Foucault states in an interview with *The New York Times*, "It is common knowledge that laws are made by certain people for other people to keep." A clear example of this is drug use. If middle-class college students were being pulled out of their apartments and charged with smoking pot there would be outrage, even though their guilt would be apparent. Meanwhile, citizens of color in low-income areas are continually harassed by police legally through tactics like stop and frisk. Even though white people are more likely to be found

carrying drugs during a random stop, blacks are the major targets of these stops (NYC Stop-and-frisk Data). Repeatedly, people already marginalized and forgotten by the system become the victims of imprisonment. “About 70 percent of the prison inmates in the United States are illiterate. Perhaps 200,000 of the country’s inmates suffer from a serious mental illness. A generation ago such people were handled primarily by the mental-health, not the criminal-justice, system. Sixty to 80 percent of the American inmate population has a history of substance abuse” (Schlosser). This illustrates that the prison system is not in place exclusively or even primarily for protection, but to serve political and economic interests.

Foucault saw the inherent flaws in the modern prison system as intentional, in order to be easily manipulated by those in power. Additionally, the critiques of prisons that will be raised in this thesis by the authors are inherently ingrained into the concept of prisons. “For 200 years everybody has been saying, ‘Prisons are failing; all they do is produce new criminals.’ I would say on the other hand, ‘They are a success, since that is what has been asked of them’ (Droit). Foucault shows that the prison system as a weapon to control people is not unique to the United States, but is an established practice around the world.

“Well, to begin with, it makes it possible to break up the continuity of accepted lawbreaking. In effect, it isolates a small group who can be controlled, kept under surveillance, and thoroughly known. They become the object of hostility and distrust of the very classes from which they come. For the poor are the most frequent victims of most everyday crimes. The result in the final analysis is gigantic economic and political profit: Economic profit from the fabulous sums derived from prostitution, drug traffic, etc. Political profit in that the more criminals there are the more readily the population will accept police controls. Not to mention that this system provides a work force for the lowliest political jobs: putting up posters, poll-watching, strike-breaking. Under the Second Empire, the workers were quite aware that the “scabs,” as well as Louis Napoleon’s antiriot forces, were all ex-prisoners” (Foucault NYT).

Foucault’s work, generally focuses on how society sees itself as enlightened and advanced but there are things we discredit from history that can be extremely useful and

should be learned from. In essence there is a bias in the way we think about our history, institutions, and societies because we are so entrenched within them.

In regard to prisons, this static system is caused by the prison's carceral system.

“The carceral system combines in a single figure discourses and architectures, coercive regulations and scientific propositions, real social effects and invincible utopias, programmes for correcting delinquents and mechanisms that reinforce delinquency. Through the development of a controlled discourse and environment around prisons and prisoners, society has created a specific heterotopia” (Foucault 271).

Here, Foucault argues that we cannot abolish the prison, because our ways of thinking about and carrying out punishment will not allow it. The way we imagine prisons is so ingrained into our thinking that it is difficult to create alternatives. This creates a new space, with its own moral codes, architecture, and rules which do not align with social conventions, but are accepted. His term for these places is heterotopia.

Heterotopia, literally meaning ‘other places’, is a diverse concept that describes a world misaligned with respect to normal or everyday space. Foucault theorizes heterotopias as places where the technologies and disciplines of social orders are out of sequence or momentarily suspended, then re-sequenced or reconstructed to generate new spaces where microcosms of society are transformed and cosseted (Nelson).

Prisons are a heterotopia of deviation, a term from Foucault which means, “(a space) in which individuals are placed whose behavior is deviant in relation to the mean or required norm.” This develops into a normal vs abnormal relationship, with law-abiding citizens playing the role of normal and criminals being abnormal (Foucault, *Of Other Spaces* 18). Foucault traces what he refers to as the genealogy of prisons to reveal that what society accepts as knowledge about prisons is little more than the normalizing of working power. By showing alternative examples and differences in history that provide alternatives it gives the

abnormal a legitimate voice. The literature discussed in this thesis does just that. They critique the accepted dialogues around prisons, thus subverting the established working power.

In the main discourse around punishment however, only what is allowed in the discourse is acceptable and the prison is the center of the discourse. As long as the prison is the center of that discourse that has slowly developed over history, it is nearly impossible to imagine an alternative system because we don't have the language for it. This is the Carceral Network which spreads into all parts of society, starting from the criminologists, becoming not only accepted within the expert community but the society as a whole, making it a normal and accepted part of everyday life.

When punishment switched from overt control of the body to a more subtle version of control through the imprisonment of the body with a focus on the soul, this furthered the phenomenon. The thinking was still locked into the working power of the past and present but incorporated a moral code. In theory, prisoners were breaking a contract with society, which they were a part of. Prisoners were rewarded because of good behavior as judged by those operating the system. It corrected abnormal behavior and attempted to normalize prisoners. Through classes, psychological care, and punishment the system justifies its practices. Foucault saw these programs as a farce to help protect the legitimacy of prisons. "Criminal psychiatry and psychology risk becoming the ultimate alibi behind which the prevailing system will hide in order to remain unchanged" (Droit).

Through this moral mask prisons were able to develop and justify the necessity of their methods necessity, while influencing an enormous amount of socially accepted control and observation over a part of society. Control that can be used to extract free labor for example or that justifies taking away voting rights. Simultaneously, the prison system helps to keep a structured and controlling hand on illegal but necessary markets like the drug trade.

The source of the current stigma against prisoners can be viewed through the development of this moral code. In the past, criminals were rebels and celebrities, who died in public squares surrounded by a crowd. At that time, crime was considered something happening independent of class or race. Now criminals are dangerous, abnormal, and immoral people, and deserve to be locked away from society. As Foucault puts it, “It is not crime that alienates an individual from society, but that crime is itself due rather to the fact that one is in society as an alien, that one belongs to that ‘bastardized race’, as Target called it, to that ‘class degraded by misery whose vices stand like an invincible obstacle to the generous intentions that wish to combat it’” (*Discipline and Punishment* 276).

It is not difficult to see why those wishing to maintain the status quo of power and control of knowledge, naturally turned to this institution after the break down of slavery and the Jim Crow era. The system of control was already in place, it only needed the surviving segregationist ideologies to be applied to morally justify already held beliefs. The black criminal fulfills the expected stereotypes of many people, thus perpetuating the seemingly endless cycle of conflict which the intentionally flawed prison system encourages.

This is how two existing ideologies of discrimination were combined.

“Racial resentments are inextricably intertwined in public punitiveness,” write the researchers, who describe a process in which racially prejudiced people meld their fear of crime with their resentment of a group they dislike. This results in an “inability of Americans to empathetically identify with those who will be caught up into mass-incarceration movements,” since the people being imprisoned are those they instinctively dislike anyway” (Jacobs).

The link between racial ideologies and criminal ideologies have been proven beyond the enormous differences between black and white arrest rates and sentencing lengths. But understanding how those ideologies mix explains why the arguments about prison reform cannot exist without conversations about race. One study that researched the link between

people's lack of trust in police and courts, moral social decline, need for punishment, and racial animosity, reinforced this idea.

“Our findings reveal that punitive sentiments can emerge from diverse sources,” they write. A sense that crime is getting out of control (which is reinforced by so many nightly local newscasts) compels people to support harsh punishment of perpetrators, as does the belief that society is in a state of moral decline. But even after taking those two factors into account, racial animus is “one of the most salient and consistent predictors” of support for strict punishment for criminals. To the researchers, this suggests “a prominent reason for the American public’s punitiveness....The research “clearly documents that public opinion about crime and its control is driven by racial animus,” the researchers write. They add that, for decades (perhaps since the race riots of the 1960s), when many Americans think about crime, “the picture in their head illuminates a young, angry, black, inner-city male who offends with little remorse.” That’s not the mental image of a kid who made some bad choices and can be rehabilitated. Rather, it’s the reinforcement of a pre-existing set of prejudices” (Jacobs).

Foucault is important to this thesis because his work helps describe the system into which America’s racial prejudices are being projected. Prisons are a normalized tool of people in power and they are used to normalize a new version of control that focuses primarily on black people to maintain the status quo, provide cheap labor, and supervise an entire community that is seen as threatening to destabilize that power.

The Prison-Industrial-Complex

In the current American system we see the most blatant exposition of prison manipulation in human history, with the historic population numbers and seeming acceptance as a necessary evil.

These factors combine to set the stage for the formation of the prison-industrial complex, which is so ingrained within our society that an alternative is difficult for many to imagine. In fact, the genius of its functioning is that most victims and implementers of it are either partially or totally unaware of its existence. They are simply cogs in the process, which continues to spin.

Angela Davis in her landmark book, *Are Prisons Obsolete*, describes it as thus,

“The term “prison-industrial complex” was introduced by activists and scholars to contest prevailing beliefs that increased levels of crime were the root cause of mounting prison populations. Instead, they argued, prison construction and the attendant drive to fill these new structures with human bodies have been driven by ideologies of racism and the pursuit of profit” (84).

The clear connection with the military-industrial complex cannot go unnoticed. The concept is similar, the link between corporations and politics with a seemingly neutral entity corrupts it in unseen ways and capitalizes on its uses for economic and political gain. Davis actually sees these two complexes as symbiotic. She sees the de-escalation of the cold war and the rise of the war on drugs as not coincidental, but as a new source, drug crime, replacing a diminishing one, Communism (Goldberg, Evans 6).

Davis, echoing Foucault, argues that the link between crime and punishment has become so normalized that it is accepted without critique, masking the political, social, and economical forces contributing to its existence. By only accounting for the individual crime, we miss the broader mechanisms at work which involve much more complex and differing motives than simply protecting society or punishing wrongdoers. “The fact, for example, that many corporations with global markets now rely on prisons as an important source of profit

helps us to understand the rapidity with which prisons began to proliferate precisely at a time when official studies indicated that the crime rate was falling” (85).

The relationship between many seemingly random businesses with either the maintaining and building of prisons or the cheap labor offered by prisoners, demonstrates how prisons have become incredibly profitable. And unsurprisingly, when a prison is operated like a business, the most important aspect becomes the bottom line.

“The building and maintenance of prisons are big business. Investment houses, construction companies, architects, and support services such as food, medical, transportation and furniture, all stand to profit by prison expansion.....defense industry giants like Westinghouse are re-tooling and lobbying Washington for their share of the domestic law enforcement market....equipment once used by the military, are now being marketed to the criminal justice system. Communication companies like AT&T, Sprint, and MCI are getting into the act as well, gouging prisoners with exorbitant phone calling rates” (Goldberg, Evans 6).

These are just a handful of the businesses that profit, and do not include anyone rewarded government contracts to run different prison services. The combination of a largely marginalized prison population, loss of prisoners’ basic rights, privatization, and profit driven motives, have combined to greatly decrease the safety and humanity of prisons across the country.

In addition to all of this, prison laborers can earn as little as 12 to 40 cents per hour. As mentioned before, the Fourteenth Amendment does not apply to prisoners. With so few rights, there are few tools with which to fight back. “For private business, prison labor is like a pot of gold. No strikes. No union organizing. No unemployment insurance or workers’ compensation to pay. No language problems, as in a foreign country” (Goldman and Evans 11). With so much to lose, it is no wonder that private for-profit prison companies have spent \$35 million on lobbying since 1989 (Eisen).

In September of 2016, prisoners across four states were, against all odds, able to coordinate the largest prison strike in American history. The rhetoric used by the group reflects the conditions from which this system emerged and has grown.

“This is a call for a nation-wide prisoner work stoppage to end prison slavery,” it said. “They cannot run these facilities without us. ‘Work is good for anyone,’ Melvin Ray, who is incarcerated at the WE Donaldson correctional facility in Bessemer, Alabama, told Mother Jones on Friday. ‘The problem is that our work is producing services that we’re being charged for, that we don’t get any compensation from’ (Kutsch).

While the largest prison strike in American history was happening, little news coverage was provided from popular media outlets. As Mumia Abu-Jamal states, “The press ignores prisoners, as a rule. Most of what happens in prisons are never or rarely reported in the press” (Mumia Abu-Jamal on Mass Incarceration). Protest writers such as the ones presented here, are working in conjunction with these movements, not in isolation from them. Unfortunately, herein lies the point of why it is so useful for prisons to be isolated and cut off from the majority of society. The things happening in prisons are often invisible. Most of the information coming from prisons is manipulated through a dehumanizing lens. Thus the prisoner is struck with several obstacles in communicating the injustices of their world to the rest of society. An inability to access each other’s worlds is the most obvious obstacle, both literally communicating from one world to another, Mumia-Abu Jamal, for example, gives radio interviews on illegally smuggled cell phones, and in translating the experience. Additionally, the demonization of their guilt sets prisoners up as deserving of their plight, while the business and political profits that multitudes of powerful people are willing to protect, and the normalization of prisons as necessary evils within society all keep the status quo from undergoing major changes.

These writers face the added challenge of having limited allies with little exposure on their side. This is changing however, which is why these works are so important in this moment. As previously stated, Barack Obama became the first ever, sitting president to visit an American prison. It was an empty prison, but the symbolism is not mute. He acknowledged, “We have to consider whether this is the smartest way for us to both control crime and to rehabilitate individuals” (Horsley). Additionally, Obama commuted the sentences of over 1000 non-violent drug offenders, a historic number for any president (Kozlowska). While these actions should not be ignored or delegitimized, having literally transformed the lives of 1000 families, the system that ensnared those individuals stands untainted.

“It is a tragedy that we’re now counting down the days of the first African-American—accent on “African”—president in the history of the United States, and when he leaves, you will still have the greatest incarcerator on Earth at work, and growing and continuing to divest and destroy and diminish the lives of millions of people. The fact that you could have a black presidency and not put a dent in that hellhole (prison system) is startling, is tragedy, you know, on a grand stage” (Mumbia Abu-Jamal on Mass Incarceration).

The recent election of Donald Trump all but insures that the federal government will put no priorities on dealing with any of the issues facing the rising prison populations.

“Trump’s victory was “nothing short of a game changer for the beleaguered private prison contractor industry,” said CNBC. Stock prices for the nation’s two largest private prison corporations rose dramatically; since Election Day, CoreCivic (formerly known as Corrections Corporation of America) shares were up by over 70 percent and GEO Group shares have climbed more than 50 percent” (Eisen).

All of the minimal progress done under Obama, and perhaps more importantly, the change in rhetoric he introduced to the issue of prison reform will likely be undermined by Trump and his appointees.

Real hope remains however, as the outrage and organized protests against Trump and his policies have seemed to energize a new era of American political action. The long-term stamina and effects of such movements as The Women's March, Black Lives Matter, and other groups remains to be seen, but the foundation of a new collective coalition of lower-income citizens, progressives, and people of color is beginning to take shape. Prisoners' rights and prison reform should be included under the umbrella of this possible movement and if it is, the books studied here, along with the multitude of other writers, artists, politicians, and civil rights activists who have continued to shed light on this atrocity will be the ones responsible for bringing the stories and realities of prisons out of this isolated world and into society. These works, like the slave memoirs, protest fiction, and essays from slavery and Jim Crow will be instigators for change and part of the slow process of reimagining normalized beliefs that largely go unquestioned.

Protest Literature

Defining protest literature is difficult because of the various definitions it runs under. Definitions as broad as “rebellious expression,” are contrasted with definitions that demand more from the text to warrant said definition, “text that not only criticizes and protests society, but that suggests, either explicitly or implicitly, a solution to society’s ills.” With an entire smattering of definitions in-between from the vague “one of those things where you know it when you see it, but you can’t necessarily define it,” to thought-out detailed responses, “it (protest literature) does not necessarily have to invoke or demand a change in intellectual currents, often merely articulating extant societal sentiments. It engages social issues immediate to the moment, in order to reshape the audience’s consciousness” (Rubin).

The murkiness of protest writing is likely the result of its wide range of topics and modes. For example, most if not all satirical work could be put under the heading of protest writing because of its very nature, but satirical writing obviously ranges from the overtly political to that which is more concerned with comedy than message.

The most thorough and clearly defined definition of protest literature comes from Harvard University’s John Stauffer.

“Stauffer stated three requirements for protest literature: empathy, shock value, and symbolic action, in which empathy encourages, shock value inspires emotions and desires, and symbolic action promotes interpretation. Even though almost all literature can be called protest literature in a sense that they all portray a point of view or theme, protest literature has to be specifically written for change. In other words, the author needs to have specific goals for change in society or individuals from the very start. Therefore, the outcomes of protest literature cannot simply be spontaneous or by accident. In addition, protest literature cannot be judged by how effective it is. That is to say, even if protest literature fails to persuade or “convert” even one individual, the literature is still a success because a point has been made which results in acknowledgement. It is this initial acknowledgement that starts change” (Yi).

This definition requires something from the book beyond consequence of its subject but an intent in its undertaking. That being said, protest literature has been around for almost as long as mass writing.

“The half millennium since Gutenberg first inked his press has produced a torrent of print that had its origins in protests of one sort or another. Printing originally developed to serve the State and the Church, but it soon thereafter became the medium of choice for those who opposed one or the other, or both. Fueled by a growing literacy, protesters used print to create networks and to disseminate their views. Ink on paper added stature and heft to such protests, just as it allowed the protesters’ views to be shared beyond the local” (Baughman x).

Protest literature can be both for and against reform. The Southern Press during Reconstruction was largely influential in bringing that era to an end. Originally, protest literature in America was largely limited to preexisting groups with an established market and backing,

“Printers might choose sides in political disputes, but only if they believed a substantial number of people shared the sentiment. For example, on the eve of the American Revolution, most printers concluded that a majority of Americans (or their patrons) opposed continued British rule. And their publications consisted mainly of criticisms of Great Britain....A printer’s caution had its logic: a New York mob suppressed efforts to publish a rebuttal to Paine’s tract” (Baughman 3).

But alongside this more main stream medium, a new protest literature movement arrived. “The tradition of protest owes much to the early 18th century pamphleteers, whose arguments Thomas Jefferson repeated, in elegant form, in the Declaration of Independence” (True 20). Protest works developed into poems, novels, and other writing that follow in their footsteps “reflect and respond to the political pressures of the moment.” One of the most famous early example of this is *Leaves of Grass* by Walt Whitman.

Resist much, obey little,

Once unquestioning obedience, once fully enslaved,

Once fully enslaved, no nation, state, city of this

earth, ever afterward resumes its liberty (True 19).

From the beginning of independence through its history, American writers have continued to write back against systems and societal norms. The topics of these writings reflect the crisis of the times, including national vs states' rights, abolitionists texts, escaped slave memoirs, the women's suffragist movement, the Jim Crow era, the Vietnam War, the Civil Rights Movement, the LGBT movement, and immigration reform. All have had inspirational writers that fought for their causes by planting the seeds for the movement, instigated momentum for it and demanded action. Additionally, more broad topics such as Marxism, anti-capitalism, environmentalism, anti-war, as well as countless other more overarching themes of protest against society in general have existed throughout history, taking the form of their contemporary setting and situation.

If we take the work of Alexander and Davis and trace the links between slavery, Jim Crow, and the modern prison system, than perhaps we can also find a link between the protest writing that existed earlier in America's history against these oppressive systems and the new protest literature against prisons.

In the late 17th, early 18th centuries, slave narratives became an important means of opening a dialogue between blacks and whites about slavery and freedom. They highlighted the barbarity of slavery and moral injustices that black slaves suffered, appealing to a wider hopefully more sympathetic audience outside of the South. Reaching those outside the normalized world of slavery was key. Writers such as, Frederick Douglass, William Wells Brown, and Harriet Jacobs, became widely read and sold thousands of books about their experiences, drawing attention to slavery from all over the world. Often these memoirs focused on the obvious separation between the lofty ideals of the American Constitution and Dream with the reality of the slave and slave owner.

“For in the antebellum era black writing was driven by abolitionist zeal, and in the years after the Civil War it served what the writer Charles Chesnutt called "the high holy purpose" of advancing the recognition and equality of the race” (The Making of African American Identity).

As this movement ended a new desire to accommodate the broadening voices of black writers developed. “With the advent of the New Negro Movement critics asserted that black writing should be free to abandon its explicit social and political purposes in favor of more aesthetic goals. In the 1920s this debate was conducted mainly between W. E. B. Du Bois, who argued, "All art is propaganda," and Alain Locke, who argued that "Propaganda perpetuates the position of group inferiority" (The Making of African American Identity).

Both positions have valid reasoning and the debate has changed with the contextual social happenings of the time.

“In the 1930s and early 1940s, as the nation struggled with economic depression and world war, many writers—black and white—embraced proletarian literature and social realism, bringing the Du Boisian position into prominence. One sees this trend manifested vividly in Richard Wright's novel *Native Son*, published in 1940. During the late 1940s and throughout the 1950s, the nation's increasingly conservative political climate and the integrationist goals of the civil rights movement re-established the ascendancy of Locke's approach. To illustrate this change in direction, critics generally point to Ralph Ellison's novel *Invisible Man*, published in 1952. As the civil rights movement became more assertive in the 1960s and as African American intellectuals insisted that black art must be part of a revolutionary struggle, Du Bois's stance once again came to the fore. Since the late 1970s, with the rise of critical theories that focus on language and structure, one can say that, in general, a rather Lockean view prevails” (The Making of African American Identity).

Currently it seems that Locke’s views are more widespread in modern writing, which is positive in the sense of freedom that artists have to explore ideas and forms without the constraints of an imposing, dominating discourse. But Du Boise’s view is also alive in the protest writing of our time. As the crushing burden of the prison system continues to gain

momentum in the national dialogue, more and more writers seem obligated to discuss it in their work.

Prison protest writers are attempting to plant the seeds of a larger movement and gain momentum for the advancement of their cause. Prison literature has “its roots that reach back through the Middle Ages and into the classical world,” and is a rich genre of writing (The Rise). Just a few of the numerous notable works are *Fanny Hill* (1748) by John Cleland, *The Consolation of Philosophy* (523) by Boethius, *Civil Disobedience* (1849) by Henry David Thoreau, *The Enormous Room* (1922) by E. E. Cummings, *The 120 Days of Sodom* (1785) by Marquis de Sade, and *De Profundis* (1897) by Oscar Wilde (Woodsmall). Both Cervantes and Dostoyevsky wrote in prison as well, along with Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr. Prisoners have produced works across a broad range of genres including, the autobiography, novels, poems, erotica, histories, philosophies, and letters to name a few. The very essence of prison literature is a protest, however, similar to a slave learning to read or a black person in the Jim Crow South becoming educated, because it gives a voice to people who are supposed to be silent.

“(Prison writing comes) with the stipulation that whoever enters it must have suffered to an extent, and in a way, for which practically no one would volunteer. No prison writing is professional, but nor is any of it exactly recreational; it comes, by definition, from environments where (as Dostoyevsky himself said) “any self-willed display of personality ... is considered a crime” (Nelson).

In this way we can say that those writing from prison fall under the Du Boise model because their situation is so overwhelming that it cannot be ignored and must be addressed. It is in fact the life force behind their writing.

The books discussed in this thesis do this. Similar to the slave memoirs of the early 19th century, which used graphic retellings to force the nation to look at slavery, and the literature of the Jim Crow and Civil Rights eras, which argued for equality and change in an

unjust system, these writers hope through their realism and arguments to force a more aggressive and serious discourse about the prison system in America. This in turn may change the perception of the prison system from a part of society that people passively accept to one of the defining moral issues of our time.

Piper Kerman: *Orange is the New Black*

Piper Kerman, the author of the memoir *Orange is the New Black: My Year in a Women's Prison*, is the most widely known of the authors in this thesis. *Orange is the New Black* is a #1 New York Times Bestseller and has currently finished four seasons as a Netflix original series. Its cultural reach has been widespread, especially the television show, but my focus is the book

Kerman was arrested for international money laundering and drug trafficking in connection to an international drug ring. In her own words, she describes herself as a young, naïve person in search of a unique adventure. “I had chafed within the safe confines of Smith, graduating by a narrow margin, and I longed to experience, experiment, investigate. It was time for me to live my own life” (5). In brief, she did something dumb when she was young, without fully realizing the implications of her actions.

Kerman however, was not arrested during her single criminal act. Five years after the fact, she was charged after the drug organization's bust. By this time, she had moved on completely from her past life and was shocked to be hurled back into it. Not only this, but because of further complications, she was not imprisoned until almost a decade after the actual crime. She was sentenced to a minimum security prison for 15 months and served 13.

Kerman is a white, blonde, college educated female, from an upper-middle class background. Throughout the memoir she stresses these characteristics in order to punctuate how rare her situation is.

“Most of the women in the Camp were poor, poorly educated, and came from neighborhoods where the mainstream economy was barely present and the narcotics trade provides the most opportunities for employment. Their typical offenses were for things like low-level dealing, allowing their apartments to be used for drug activity, serving as couriers, and passing messages, all for low wages.....It was hard for

me to believe that the nature of our crimes was what accounted for my fifteen-month sentence versus some of my neighbors' much lengthier ones. I had a fantastic private attorney and a country-club suit to go with my blond bob" (138).

Kerman is quick to differentiate between "real" prison and the "camp," a minimum security prison, where she is imprisoned. Even the nature of her crime, which involved over \$10,000, sounds more like a movie thriller than the cases that land the majority of people in prison. Here in lies both the benefit and deficit of this book as a work of political activism. She aligns herself with the audience, who she projects as white, middle-class, educated and without any first-hand experience of the prison system, like herself, but who probably can relate to the experience of doing something dumb when young. Kerman takes on the role of an embedded anthropologist more than an actual prisoner because of how much she differentiates herself and because of her unique situation.

However, she really had to go through the psychological, emotional, financial, and multiple other difficulties that prison inflicts upon people. Her experiences are real and touching. She has the unique position of being able to straddle both worlds at once. But because of the uniqueness of her situation she reflects the hardships through a very specific lens that does not align with the majority of the people in prison or the other people in her story. While Kerman attempts to emphasize the benefits of her situation because of her social position, solid social structure, financial security, private lawyer, among many other things, the story is still her memoir, told through her perspective and the book fails to give voice to the other women in the story. There are few lines of dialogue from other people and only rarely are back stories relayed. The story often ignores the situations of the people who more accurately represent the multiple ways prisons suck people into their system, instead giving broad, surface level descriptions of their character and path to prison. Kerman is the fringe,

the outlier, and while her story is more exotic and flashy it does not cut as sincerely at the roots of the prison problem in America than other works.

That being said, Kerman's ability to humanize a group of people that are often dehumanized through stereotypes and figures is remarkable. She reminds the reader that prisoners are mothers and daughters, showing the pain of giving birth in prison and having your baby taken away the next day for example (133). She brings those stories into new social environments. In one scene Kerman's lawyer points out her biggest strength for facing the judge, "'That's the one,' said Pat, pointing at the skirt suit. 'We want him to be reminded of his own daughter or niece or neighbor when he looks at you'" (29). Likewise, one of the blurbs of praise on the back cover reads, "This book is impossible to put down because Kerman could be you. Or your best friend. Or your daughter" (*Orange is the New Black*).

Kerman's goal with the reader and judge, who play similar roles by listening to her story and judging her, are the same. She wants the reader to see themselves or their loved ones as her. It helps build trust and comradery between the reader and narrator. The reader sympathizes with her, the criminal, and so when Kerman walks into this very foreign world and reveals the multitude of lovely people who are separated from their families and being punished by society, it resonates more deeply and reminds the reader that these people are also people. She forces readers who do not have to think about prisons in their everyday lives to imagine themselves or someone they love being thrown at the mercy of this system.

Additionally, Kerman uses humor as another way of making the material more accessible and interesting. She ridicules herself and her fellow inmates, often about the absurd lengths prison makes them go to for basic comforts. Again this makes the characters more approachable and human for the audience, who is looking into this world from the outside. Her critiques of the system, also often include a tone of sarcasm and ridiculousness. This

forces the reader to view the entire situation as so ridiculous that it defies common sense. Although the work is not definitively satirical it shares some commonality with satirical literature, “Satire is a powerful art form which has the ability to point out the deficiencies in certain human behaviors and the social issues which result from them in such a way that they become absurd, even hilarious, which is therefore entertaining and reaches a wide audience” (LeBoeuf). The most classic example of this being the anti-war book, *Catch-22*.

The essence of what Kerman is attempting to accomplish through her comedy is the same. By emphasizing the absurd, she wishes to question the normalized perspective we view prisoners through. She subverts the system through its own definitions. Although, she drops into a serious tone on personal matters involving family and hardships, the overall tone of the book is lighthearted. This sarcasm and wit is unique to the memoir. Usually memoirs are powerful because of the bare bones truth they expose, but here Kerman displays the truth in an often sarcastic light hearted way, even though she is deeply passionate about the subject matter. The book softens the reader up with jokes before punching them in the face with the reality of prison life.

Unlike many famous protest memoirists like Richard Wright, whose autobiographical short stories and novels displayed the cruelties of Jim Crow in deeply raw and fierce direct powerful prose, Kerman knows the people she is writing to and is brilliant at subtly mixing entertainment with emotions. She understands that people need incentives, humor and entertainment in this case, to be engaged with an issue that does not directly affect them. Rarely does the material become too heavy for a reader and when the topics become more sobering she uses humor to puncture the atmosphere, thus making the characters in the book lovable and human. All the while, bringing her sincerity to the forefront.

Additionally, Kerman uses examples of her fellow prisoners’ crimes and puts them into context. She gives a name to the huge number of statistics involved in the prison system.

She breaks stereotypes of prisoners by illustrating the diversity of her minimum security prison population, for example, nuns, political prisoners, white collar criminals, and those convicted of petty crimes, to directly challenge our stigmatization of convicts. She paints on the surface with a very stereotypical brush but then inverts these stereotypes with personal antidotes which challenge this thinking. While she is quick to point out that the majority of women were convicted of non-violent drug offenses, the presence of these other criminals diversifies people's imaginings of the prison population. Making the prison population more human. Kerman is able to communicate the sense of community and solidarity this diverse group forms against the force that is prison.

"When she entered the Camp, an entourage traveling before and behind her, the noise in the hall was deafening, and people were calling out, "Where's Miss Malcolm?" She was immediately enveloped by people hugging and congratulating her. As she made slow progress up the hall, Natalie laughed and smiled and looked overwhelmed. Down near the CO's office, someone was waving her test results in the air. "Natalie, you did it!" (155).

Throughout the memoir Kerman shows the tiny victories that these women achieve over the system which make life bearable. In Kerman's own words the prison system wants to make someone feel, "utterly powerless, vulnerable, alone." (191). By creating an unlikely and diverse community within its boundaries, prisoners can subvert its power, even if it is rare and temporary. By the time we experience this sense of community, the reader is already cheering for the prisoners. Kerman has spent so much time vouching for their character that the reader feels part of that community when these victories are achieved and actually sympathize for the injustices that the women experience, taking a personal interest in their stories and fortunes.

Kerman's story is so personal and captivating that it draws the reader into the conflict without realizing it. By identifying with Kerman, her awakening to both herself and the prison

system is simultaneous with the readers. The reader has digested a politically active piece of literature but because the story is so captivating and entertaining it is nearly unnoticeable. In this way she has created a popular piece of pop culture that is not only engaging, but trendy, while simultaneously launching awareness of the situations in prisons to a wide range of people who were only looking for entertainment.

To solidify and give scope to her arguments, Kerman occasionally inserts statistics and facts about the prison system. These are slid into the text inconspicuously between the personal stories and memorable characters. Inside of these numbers she often adds monetary critiques about the tax costs of keeping people imprisoned, which again would appeal to her white middle-class readership. These additions, sometimes feel forced but serve the important purpose of showing how the prison system seeps into the real world and has effects on even those who do not have direct contact with it. “I was like the vast majority of the women there: a nonviolent drug offender.....I knew I had lots of company; in the federal system alone (a fraction of the US prison population), there were over 90,000 prisoners locked up for drug offenses compared with about 40,000 for violent crimes. A federal prisoner costs at least \$30,000 a year to incarcerate, and females actually cost more” (138).

Furthermore, she makes a mockery of the capitalistic incentives that propel the prison-industrial complex. She points out the absurdity of expenses that gorge prisoners, unpaid labor practices and the lackluster programs that are paraded as rehabilitative. By doing this she undermines the prisons justifications for existence. One description of a prison teacher goes as follows, “His attitude toward his pupils was simple: I don’t care if they never learn that one plus one equals two. I get paid for eight hours of work” (161). Here she describes the programs that allow prison advocates to save face and claim humanity. “Natalie had toiled for many years as a skilled baker in that prison kitchen, a treasured member of the cooking staff, and yet she could never be paid more than \$5.50 for forty hours of work” (154). Again

Kerman clearly illustrates the capitalistic advantages of having a working class that has almost no rights with a real life example. Prisoners in her memoir work in multiple services for multiple industries.

“A handful of prisoners worked as trainers for seeing-eye dogs.....Some women worked in CMS, getting on a bus every morning to do jobs like plumbing and grounds maintenance.....Certain prisoners worked in Unicor, the prison industries company that operates within the federal prison system. Unicor manufactures a wide range of products that are then sold within the government for many millions of dollars. Unicor paid significantly more than other prison jobs, over one dollar an hour as opposed to the regular base pay rate of fourteen cents an hour” (85-86).

Such hints give insights into the functioning of the economic incentives behind prisons. Giving the reader actual examples, with real consequences for individuals, instead of simply statistics. She additionally tells of the enormous obstacles that these women face once convicted of a crime. For example, the advice they are given about the after prison job market involves using the internet, which they have no access too (197).

These tactics have been used before in protest writing. Perhaps the best comparison actually comes from fiction. Harriet Beecher Stowe released *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, in serial format between 1851 and 1852 (*Uncle Tom's Cabin*). It is an engaging read that is both heartbreaking and entertaining. Also, it was incredibly commercially successful, “In the US alone it sold 300,000 copies in a year, and more than 2 million copies by the end of the decade” (Younge). Abraham Lincoln famously greeted Stowe with, “So you're the little woman who wrote the book that made this Great War” (Younge). It is not unlike both the commercial and critical success of *Orange is the New Black*.

Stowe's experiences mirror Kerman's in certain ways. She experienced slavery first-hand from former slaves who worked for her family, she hid and spent time with runaways and saw slavery in Kentucky (*Uncle Tom's Cabin*). But she lived on the border of those two

worlds, belonging culturally to her white-middle class background. Her novel ignited a discussion about slavery that helped contribute to the Emancipation Proclamation and the Civil War. It was a “publishing and propaganda phenomenon” (*Uncle Tom’s Cabin*). Her work is seen as the single most instigating act of writing in the fight for emancipation. She not only wrote about the issues of slavery and the Fugitive Slave Act, but took part in their resistance. She was politically active in anti-slavery politics, and by hiding runaways, put herself directly in the struggle.

The effect of her book is not contested, however the dialogue surrounding it has shifted drastically as it has aged. “What is now commonly regarded as a sentimentalist, racist text was at the time received as a vicious polemic against slavery in general and against the fugitive slave law in particular” (Younge). What becomes quickly clear when reading *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, is the stereotypes of her times do not escape her own writing. There is a sense that she writes from a position of superiority instead of unification. The hero is the “good” slave, who plays the role of victim and deserves sympathy. Her black characters mostly lack initiative or motivations beyond the relief of their suffering. The most famous critique likely came from James Baldwin,

“*Uncle Tom’s Cabin* is a very bad novel.....her book was not intended to do anything more than prove that slavery was wrong; was, in fact, perfectly horrible. This makes material for a pamphlet but it is hardly enough for a novel; and the only question left to ask is why we are bound still within the same constriction. How is it that we are so loath to make a further journey than that made by Mrs. Stowe, to discover and reveal something a little closer to the truth?” (The Very Definite Thrill of Virtue).

It is possible to look at *Orange is the New Black* in much the same way. What message does Kerman try to pose besides prisons are bad? When the questioning fails to mature further does not the critique simply set the table for another manifestation of the same system, in much the same way that Jim Crow replaced slavery and the prison system replaced Jim Crow?

She never cuts into the root causes and underpinnings of the system with much conviction. Most of her critiques stop at the surface, saying this is bad, failing to ask the next big question. Why are things this way? As Foucault would argue, she never challenges the rationale behind the system, only the implementation. She is simply asking for a more efficient form of discipline.

Kerman's argument can generally be boiled down to this paragraph, "As I watched my neighbors, young women who lacked even a high school education, with their children in the visiting room, I found myself asking again and again (in my head), *What could she possibly have done to warrant being locked up here for so long?* Criminal masterminds they were not" (132). The majority of her companions on this journey are sweet, quirky, funny, individuals, but she rarely goes into their situations or gives them much depth and all are simply victims of situation without input about their situation or character. One group she describes as "the crazies" without any real comment. Their voices are largely absent from the text and are generally only displayed in relation to Kerman. For example,

"She (Pennsatucky) was "not right," according to women around the Camp, which was something said about people who struggled with behavioral problems or sometimes outright mental illness. The conditions of the prison did not make these challenges easier. Now that I had known Pennsatucky for a while and worked with her, I thought she had more on the ball than people gave her credit for. She was perceptive and sensitive but had great difficulty expressing herself in a way that was not off-putting to others, and she got loud and angry when she felt disrespected, which was often. There was nothing wrong with Pennsatucky that would have prevented her from living a perfectly happy life, but her problems made her vulnerable to drugs and to the men who had them on offer" (179).

Here we see the pretentiousness that pollutes Kerman's perspective. It feels as if she is arguing that Pennsatucky should be more like her or what her socialized ideal is. When Kerman describes herself as unique to prison, it often feels like she is saying she is normal and those in prison are abnormal. Kerman defends Pennsatucky by saying that with the right

support she could become normal in Kerman's eyes. It is not wrong for her to be critical or thoughtful about drug addiction but the description the reader is given is incredibly isolated in perspective or depth. While these insights are sincere and genuine, they lack Pennsatucky's voice or any critique of why she might be angry. Kerman consistently explains her fellow prisoners instead of letting them speak, fitting them into the prepackaged labels she has created for the book, creating explanations that are often fairly one dimensional, nice but troubled individuals. While this is understandable because it is her memoir from her perspective, it is troubling because of the entitled position she has worked so hard conveying to the reader. Her voice is the only one we hear and gives her a sense of authority over the situation, when she is writing about many women who have been locked in the perpetual cycle of the prison system for their entire lives. The novel at times feels as if she is talking over her fellow prisoners about why they are suffering. Which is ironic, because one of the main objectives of this memoir is to show the way these women have befriended and helped her survive prison.

Here in lies the difficulty with this memoir. By painting her fellow inmates as nice but with complicated backgrounds, she shows her inability to separate herself from the social conditioning of her class, which is also the strength of the novel and why it is a New York Times Bestseller. It is incredibly popular because it humanizes without questioning the fabric of the system. She makes the answers to the prison problem seem simple and straightforward. She never implements herself or those in her social class of being complicit. In no way does she ascertain that prisons are indeed bad, but that how we run them and who we choose to lock away in them is flawed. Perhaps, that is all Kerman wishes to do but it seems to not muddy itself in the inherent role of prisons in our society and how they have been perpetuated by those in power through history, or in some way deduce that these institutions are in place

purposefully, for gain or exploitation. For Kerman, prisons are just something that is and always will be around and can be improved upon.

Which leaves the impact of *Orange is the New Black* at an interesting crossroads. It is possible Kerman simply knows the limits of her audience and knows where to push. Likely, it is one of the most productive pieces of prison protest writing ever made. But its pseudo authenticity can possibly reinforce change without actual progress, the types of which Michelle Alexander has so thoroughly illustrated. White middle-class individuals can try to fix a very specific symptom of the larger disease that is the prison system and the racism and class suppression which accompany it and feel good about their efforts without actually impacting the roots of the problem or questioning their own complacency within that system.

That being said, nobody would argue that the ending of slavery was a bad thing, even with the foresight of knowing that Jim Crow followed. But the problem with well-intentioned writing from an outsider is the hijacking of message to conform to another group's ideals. Her entitled position enables her to judge a system without properly understanding it. Kerman as a leader and voice of this movement is problematic and pretentious in a way, because she inserts her cultural norms and ideals onto an environment in which she is an outlier. As said before, she feels at times like a 19th century British anthropologist.

If we think of prisons as an isolated world, at least somewhat outside American society, Kerman comes off sometimes as a missionary or teacher. The speech "To Hell With Good Intentions" by Ivan Illich rings true here with his critics of American volunteers using poverty to promote their own self-image without regard for the place they are occupying.

"You, like the values you carry, are the products of an American society of achievers and consumers, with its two-party system, its universal schooling, and its family-car affluence. You are ultimately-consciously or unconsciously - "salesmen" for a delusive ballet in the ideas of democracy, equal

opportunity and free enterprise among people who haven't the possibility of profiting from these" (Illich).

While Kerman speaks to her audience, it is difficult to imagine her words being especially useful to most of the people she shared her experience with.

"Juxtapose [Ms. Kerman's experience] against the majority of women serving sentences in prisons who are disproportionately African-American, Latina and noncitizens," writes Brenda V. Smith, the director of the Program on Gender, Crime, Sex and Community at the American University Washington College of Law. "Their imprisonment is often framed as a casualty in the war on drugs, while Ms. Kerman's involvement in an international drug ring was a brief period of recklessness" (Gross).

One critic notes that Kerman gets a book deal "while the majority of women are 'booked' and forgotten"(Grose). While Kerman claims to have learned her lesson for her crime (a point that prison system supporters might argue proves the system works and which feels disingenuous after viewing the Free Piper shirts sold on her website, jabbing at the popular Free Mumia shirts) she fails at showing that there is no lesson to be learned for most people in prison. There is only pointless suffering.

Perhaps Kerman's well intentioned writing brings about actual change that helps people and is a small, necessary step in the right direction and cascades into a larger awakening to more foundational problems. It is unlikely that any single book can encapsulate the entirety of the prison landscape while also reaching such a wide audience, but it is worth considering what is sacrificed and forgotten for a tidy and recognizable story.

Mumia Abu-Jamal: Live From Death Row

Live From Death Row by Mumia Abu-Jamal has followed a very different path. Abu-Jamal was sentenced to death in 1982 for the murder of a police officer. His sentence was later changed to life in prison in 2001. There were many discrepancies in the testimonies during his trial, including witnesses who claim they were forced by police to sign accounts that went against what they actually witnessed and the changing of physical evidence by the coroner. In Abu-Jamal's current attorney's words,

"The only inexperienced actor in Mumia's case was the court-appointed attorney, who was thrust into the role of defense counsel... The attorney repeatedly sought to be relieved as assisting counsel to Mumia during pretrial hearings. The court allocated only \$150 pretrial to the defense for the investigation of the case despite the fact that the police investigators had conducted more than 125 witness interviews" (196).

To this day, Abu-Jamal professes his innocence.

While this thesis will not discuss Abu-Jamal's innocence or guilt, the fact that he claims to be innocent and his experience in the court room are vital to understanding his work as a whole. Institutional shortcomings rendered his ability to defend himself almost impossible. Before prison he was a journalist who both wrote and reported on the radio and an activist who challenged the racial bias and police brutality in Philadelphia. Additionally, he was a founding member of the Black Panther party in Philadelphia and had been previously arrested during a political protest (Cox).

The actual book, *Live From Death Row*, is a series of articles both personal and journalistic with scholarly citations, which he wrote while on death row. It relays the actual atrocities of prison but also steps back to critique the system as a whole. The book is divided into three sections, "Life on Death Row," "Crime and Punishment," and "Musings, Memories,

and Prophecies.” Through these sections he explores the prison system on multiple levels. Initially there are personal stories and individual detailed accounts of prison life on death row. This is followed by more general criticisms of the system including prison’s actual goals verses projected goals, and the racial biases and corruption within the system. Lastly, he focuses on what these abuses mean for the country and the black community in the United States specifically and how it affects entire generations of people.

The portrait that Abu-Jamal paints of prison is a far cry from Kerman’s takes in *Orange is the New Black*. He is overtly political and does not hide his intent. His entire life has been a battle with the police and prison system, it clings to his existence on a day-to-day basis and was the focal point of his work even before entering prison. He lived with the prison system hanging over his life in a way that cements the examinations that Walker and Alexander explain. At every level, when Abu-Jamal attempts to protect himself and flex his constitutional rights he is thwarted by institutionalized racism working against his interests. The main focus of this book is who the prison system really serves, the people who pay taxes to support it and expect protection from it, or those who wish to have power. While Kerman’s work is a reminder of another world easily forgotten, Abu-Jamal’s is a gut check to the reality of so many people in the United States and the entrenched mentality of society.

In the first section, “Life on Death Row,” the writing sets the man against the prison system on all levels. Death row is an incarnate hell, “Many death units operate on the 22 + 2 system: 22 hours locked in cell, followed by 2 hours of recreation out of cell. Outdoor recreation takes place in a cage, ringed with double-edged razor wire—the dog pen....Condemned prisoners are treated as bodies kept alive to be killed” (7).

Abu-Jamal’s true gift as a writer is pushing beyond the first level of interpretation to expose the roots of prison policy and abuse. For him, a rule is not for safety or management

but part of a well-programmed system to exercise complete control over an individual. As Foucault points out, the prisoner as part of society must be complicit with the punishment in some way. Abu-Jamal challenges this notion. He sees through the hypocrisy of a legal system that is in theory supposed to protect all citizens, but in fact discriminates against people of color and the poor. The system for Abu-Jamal is specifically programmed to break the prisoner of his will to resist and thus make him or her as working for the system instead of against. There is no reason for the intensity of the punishment besides creating obedient citizens. One example is physical contact.

“It is not just security rule; it is a policy and structure that attempts to sever emotional connections by denying physical connection between the visitor and the inmate. The prisoner is handcuffed and separated by a partition of shatterproof glass, steel trim and wire mesh. What visitors do not see, prior to the visit, is a horrifying spectacle—the body-cavity strip search....Several prisoners have protested to the administration that such searches are unreasonable, arguing that body-cavity strip searches before and after noncontact visits cannot be justified. Karl Menninger, the late psychiatrist, who described noncontact visiting as “the most unpleasant and most disturbing detail in the whole prison” (9-11).

These personal details, expertly wielded by a trained journalist, contrast nicely in the book with his more scholarly articles such as “Death Marches and Lessons Learned” published in the Yale Law Journal in 1991. Here Abul-Jamal hashes out detailed, fact-driven arguments against different parts of the prison system. “No matter that of the ten states with the highest murder rate, eight lead the country in executions that supposedly deter, no matter that of the ten states with the lowest murder rate, only one (Utah) has executed anyone since 1976” (20).

These passages and articles give credibility to his work beyond personal experience. It provides context for his personal insights for the reader to piece together. He is the subject of the work, but he is also a cog in the system, an exceptional one because of his previous experience as a journalist and civil rights advocate, but that exceptionalism only allows him to

point out where he is being taken advantage of in the tangled bureaucratic web of the prison system.

In fact, that confusion is one of his main themes of the opening section. The rules of the court and the allocation of resources to poor defendants is such that many do not realize their constitutional rights and if they do are not allowed to exercise them. He portrays the state as against the convicted and even only charged citizen, insinuating that the states will use its full resources against them. When relaying the fight of one prisoner to prove his innocence, who after 12 years on death row and a much maligned public backlash to his supposed crimes was freed, Abul-Jamal writes, “What security exists in a system that plotted, lied, connived, and hid evidence to destroy one man’s life, that took twelve years from his life, his profession, his family?” (44). In other words, the very system that claims to defend and protect citizens is willing to throw away all protective rights for its own benefits. Here he illustrates Foucault’s claim that laws are only intended for some people. This drives a spike through the very fundamental idea of law, turning it from a protection service into a weapon for those in power. It shows the law as attempting to prove guilt instead of find truth. The law in theory is meant to protect citizens, but inside the churning of the prison system there needs to be criminals and crime to feed and justify the system. Alexander points out repeatedly how on every level of the system this occurs, from racial profiling by police during arrests through the prison debts, loss of voting and jury rights, and loss of social benefits after being released, which contribute to more crime from a lack of legal resources.

This is illustrated in one passage describing how the law changes depending on who you are.

“When I hear politicians bellow about “getting tough on crime” and barking out “three strikes, you’re out” rhetoric, several images come to mind. I think of how quickly the tune changes when the politician is on the receiving end of some of that so-called toughness, after having fallen from grace. I am

reminded of a powerful state appellate judge who, once caught in an intricate, bizarre web of criminal conduct, changed his longstanding opinion regarding the efficacy of the insanity defense, an option he once ridiculed” (49).

This is contrasted directly with a teenager who was given a sentence of 15 to 30 years at age 15 for an alleged robbery with a CO2 air pistol.

“For those critical years in the life of a male, from age fifteen to thirty, which mark the transition from boy to man, Rabbani was entombed in a juridical, psychic, temporal box branded with the false promise “corrections.” Like tens of thousands of his generation, his time in hell equipped him with no skills of value to either himself or his community. He has been “corrected” in precisely the same way that hundreds of thousands of others have been, that is to say, warehoused in a vat that sears the very soul. He has never held a woman as a mate or lover; he has never held a newborn in his palm, its heart athump with new life; he hasn’t seen the sun rise, nor the moon glow, in almost fifteen years—for a robbery, “armed” with a pellet gun, at fifteen years old. When I hear easy, catchy, mindless slogans like “three strikes, you’re out,” I think of men like Rabbani who had one strike (if not one foul) and are, for all intents and purposes, already outside of any game worth playing” (51).

In this side-by-side comparison Abu-Jamal clearly illustrates the inherent unfairness of a supposed unbiased system. Those with power and influence, like Piper Kerman for example, receive treatment and sentencing that is far more lenient than do the masses of young poor black men who march through the prison system unnoticed on a daily basis. Statistics show just how rigged the system is. One example, “In federal courts, the average sentence during 2008 and 2009 was 55 months for whites and 90 months for blacks” (Starr). Additionally, “Prison sentences of black men were nearly 20% longer than those of white men for similar crimes” (Palazzolo). These biases and differentiations come to life in *Live From Death Row*. Abu-Jamal still tells a story, but unlike Kerman, his story is mixed with his fellow prisoners and has a systemic and historical perspective that shows the extent of the issue. You do not hear individual stories in isolation, but instead in a broader context of racial and class biases which terrorize entire communities.

The other major theme of the first section, which resonates throughout the book, is a description of the torturous conditions and grind of death row. “Much has been written and much has been said about “life” within prison. Some write of the glaring incidents of violence that occur, certain that such subjects will grab the attention of the reader. Others write and play down the violence, lest the reader jettison those dark visions, so distant from his or her experience, as simply beyond belief. As ever, the truth oscillates somewhere in between” (64). Whereas *Orange is the New Black* seems concerned with fighting the former stereotypical response to prison violence mentioned by Abu-Jamal, *Live From Death Row* seems to focus on the causes of this violence. Much of the media coverage and fictional depictions of prisons in popular media are characterized by their graphic violence. Kerman shows the other face of this coin, depicting a world full of good and loving people, mostly misunderstood or in desperate situations. She provides an alternative to most depictions of prisons, which feature headlines like, “An Alabama Prison’s Unrelenting Descent Into Violence,” “In America’s Prisons, Rape Behind Bars and Under Wraps,” and “Violent, Overcrowded Alabama Prisons Hit a Breaking Point,” making-up the majority of news related to prisons. She fights back against this image with her humanizing stories.

In contrast, Abu-Jamal writes, as he states, somewhere between these two extremes, probing at the commonplace reality of violence but not making it the all-encompassing theme of prison. For him, violence is just a symptom of the system as a whole, not the actual cause of prison’s failures.

“That prisons are hotbeds of violence is undeniable, but overt expressions of violence are rarely daily ones. The most profound horror of prisons lives in the day-to-day banal occurrences that turn days into months, and months into years, and years into decades...Encased within a psychic cocoon of negativity, the bad get worse and feed on evil’s offal. Those who are harmed become further damaged, and the merely warped are twisted.....where none are corrected, where none emerge better than when they came in” (64-65).

For Abu-Jamal, violence is an inevitable conclusion to a system which tears at the very core of people's lives. If something takes so much away, becoming angry and violent are not only justified but understandable. If the reader can flip to thinking of prisoners as the victims, fighting against an oppressive system, then even their graphic violence becomes a source of empathy. Here we see Abu-Jamal's real goal, to not paint himself as a victim of injustice, or any other criminal, guilty or innocent, but display the prison system, from policy making to imprisonment, as the real criminal and thus reversing the perspective with which the reader views the entire situation.

The second section of the book, "Crime and Punishment," delves deeper the details of how the system systematically targets black victims, how prisoners are left without any real rights in prison and the fraudulent theories and practices the entire system are based upon. Here he illustrates and summarizes how actual laws claim to do one thing but in reality are used for ulterior motives.

The irony in many of his stories is almost comical because of the ridiculousness, but Abu-Jamal never strays from his sobering tone, pulling the reader back to the consequences of these actions. In one such account, he details the fact that police and investigators want to solve crimes, it is justifiably their job, however, the law often focuses on convicting someone instead of finding the truth. This is especially clear when Abu-Jamal outlines the career of Fred Zain, a medical examiner who,

"Affected, according to one attorney's estimate, more than forty-five hundred criminal cases in two states.....Zain, according to forensic specialists in both states, wrote reports on tests that were never done, reported positive matches where negatives would have cleared suspects, and listed as conclusive test results that were inconclusive. His efforts to please cops and prosecutors sent possibly thousands of innocent men to serve centuries in prisons across two states, some on death row" (120-121).

In this case it is clear that Zain saw his job, not as a search for truth, but instead to support the prosecution. As a professional state's witness he was therefore going against the

very people he should have been protecting the most. Furthermore, Zain was rewarded for his behavior, becoming Chief of Serology in West Virginia. In fact, even when authorities were faced with his misdeeds they were ignored. “He was shocked to have found Mr. Zain regularly praised and promoted for his trial work. This was so, Mr. Castelle said, even though, beyond public notice, two laboratory colleagues had been complaining about his bias against defendants and even presented evidence to state officials showing some of his laboratory tests contradicted his trial testimony” (Clines).

This is a clear example of the system’s prospering continuation taking precedence over everything else. It is laced into the very fabric of the system. If law enforcement is rewarded for finding and convicting criminals, it is no wonder they are going to start finding more. Angela Davis expresses this sentiment well, “The notion of a prison-industrial complex insists on understandings of the punishment process that take into account economic and political structures and ideologies, rather than focusing myopically on individual criminal conduct and efforts to “curb crime” (85). While there is an inevitable human element of prejudices and subjectiveness on an individual basis in regards to those persons working within the system, laws and legislation are often passed that promote a general institutionalized biases which favor the system. This is obvious in the mandatory minimum drug sentencing which disregards person or situation.

The instances of this institutionalized biases trickle down through all levels of the prison system. The most brutal examples of this in Abu-Jamal’s writing come from prison guards and police, “At Grateford....the nineteen men met uniformed hatred and naked brutality, as they were beaten, kicked, and terrorized by government officials sworn to protect the illusive peace in prisons—guards who, acting on nothing but assumptions, assaulted over a dozen men on the notion that they were troublemakers” (104). These guards were acquitted of all serious charges. Here Abu-Jamal shows Foucault’s carceral system, that the injustices

and biases that convicts and the accused face are so ingrained into the system that people on all levels buy into the mindsets it projects. Guards, judges, prosecutors, police, and even the public are not there for the prisoner or to make society safer or prevent drug usage and crime, but to perpetuate a system.

But the very foundational mindset that guards are there to guard and protect the prisoners is completely forgotten. Violence in prisons is so commonplace in the public eye that it is taken for granted they have to be dangerous places. Because criminals are seen as abnormal, this violent environment is seen as morally justified, unimportant, and inevitable. There is an inhumaneness to this rationale. As pointed out by prison journalist Doran Larson, “Those of us in the virtually prison-immune demographics also fail to credit convicted people with the simple capacity to see and understand where they are” (Larson). Even though there is clear evidence to the contrary in Scandinavian countries who have open prisons, more humane living conditions, less criminals, and shorter sentences, while boasting some of the lowest murder and recidivism rates in the world (W.W.). The ingrained nature of our prison culture suffocates our viewpoint. As clearly illustrated by Larson when observing an American family in a Swedish open prison, Americans have a different sense of normal in regards to justice and safety,

“The Americans look shocked and afraid. The father glances at his wife. The wife cocks her head back, as though she’s ventured too far. The son—fit as my La Crosse-playing students—takes a step in reverse, just outside the gate, and says to his mother: “I *told* you.” (Linda clearly wonders what she’s said to cause such a reaction.) Then the son adds, his voice cracking on a nervous attempt at sarcasm: “It’s sure reassuring to know we’re being protected from criminals” (Larson).

As compared to the mindset in Norway, for example,

“There are no life sentences in Norway. The longest sentence a person can receive is 21 years, although that can be extended by five year increments indefinitely if authorities decide that the prisoner has not

been rehabilitated. That's the sentence that Anders Breivik, who killed 77 people in a mass shooting and bombing received. Most Norwegians were satisfied with the sentence because of an overarching belief that the prison systems goal isn't punishment, but rather rehabilitation" (Ahmed).

This contrast should inspire a debate about what the point of prisons are and what is the most effective way to run them. A debate Abu-Jamal is having, mostly in isolation. "If we are able to approach the matter rationally, which is hard, I think we will see that a society's main imperative is to guarantee the safety of its members by taking the criminal out of commission and then by punishing wrongdoers to the extent necessary to deter similar future crimes" (W.W.). By this standard almost every other Western country is more effective than the United States, who has the largest prison population in the world and largest recidivism rate. But the debate in America is often defensiveness.

"One of my Facebook friends says, 'If you prefer comfort to liberty, go to Norway and commit murder. You could get 21 years in what looks like a nice dorm.'.....In a segment on Norway's 'heavenly prison,' the folks at Fox News seem sort of boggled by the idea that prisons might be anything other than the squalid overcrowded rape pens where human offal in America is sent to fester out of sight.....It's one thing to favor rehabilitation for the majority of inmates, it raises ethical questions when spending 20 years in a place like Halden (Norway prison) could be the worst fate facing a mass murderer and political terrorist" (W.W.).

The major argument seems to be that people are not being punished enough in these places. This just illustrates how deep the normalized ideologies of prisons and dehumanizing of prisoners seems to go in the American psyche. Abu-Jamal points this out with cold irony.

Abu-Jamal supports the cases in his work with instances from history where the justice system has been clearly faced with its own biases but chosen to ignore them. In the case *McCleskey v. Kemp*, the Baldus study was presented, which showed the stark punishment discrimination between black and white convicts. The Supreme Court did not find this

evidence reason enough to change McCleskey's sentence however. Abu-Jamal quotes the Justice's arguments in his work to show how married society is to the prison system.

"Retired Justice Powell said in essence that "differences don't amount to discrimination." The bedrock reason that McCleskey was denied relief was the fear, again expressed by Powell, that "McCleskey's claim, taken to its logical conclusion, throws into serious question the principles that underlie our entire criminal justice system." How true. McCleskey can't be correct, or else the whole system is incorrect" (94).

In essence, this excerpt shows Abu-Jamal's claim that those involved in the prison system work for the system and that facing the truths of this systems would completely discredit it.

Unfortunately, those in power have benefited so much from these institutions that facing their reality is not a simple matter, but something that has to be brought out from the world of prison and into the light of the general public. Abu-Jamal wants readers to literally rethink their understanding of how society functions and question its very foundations. This might seem implausible, however slavery and Jim Crow era segregation were both seen as inevitable staples of society. As Davis reminds us, "When Frederick Douglass embarked on his career as an antislavery orator, white people-even those who were passionate abolitionists-refused to believe that a black slave could display such intelligence. The belief in the permanence of slavery was so widespread that even white abolitionists found it difficult to imagine black people as equals" (23).

The third and final section of the novel, "Musings, Memories, and Prophecies," is a collection of pieces that focus more broadly on the United States as a whole. While Abu-Jamal connects these threads to common themes in the rest of the book or even the prison system itself, he uses this section to display the far-reaching consequences of political and societal biases and prejudices. Here is where he writes about the larger context of black America and the different ways in which society and politicians use blacks for their own means. Themes such as Malcolm X, Rodney King and the LA Riots, Bill Clinton, police

brutality, and the Black Panther Party come into play. Abu-Jamal does not simply reiterate news or their views however, but puts these national characters and their politics into a contemporary context of black culture in America. By doing this he takes the prison system out of its isolated environment and connects the themes from his earlier sections to more general ideas on society.

For example, Bill Clinton, who was introduced at the Congressional Black Caucus Awards Dinner with this commentary, "(Clinton) took so many initiatives he made us think for a while we had elected the first black president" (Morano). A man who received 83% and 84% respectively of the black vote when he ran for president (How Groups Voted in 1996). Abu-Jamal depicts him as an opportunist, who uses the black community when he needs it,

"When then candidate Clinton was embroiled in the Gennifer Flowers controversy, his response was a mid-campaign flight to Little Rock, Arkansas, to oversee the execution of Ricky Ray Rector, a brain-damaged black man on death row. When he began to sink in the polls, his political instincts led him to denounce rapper Sista Souljah.....He sought to divert attention from a gnawing sex scandal by demonstrating his toughness of crime.....a New Democrat is no different from an Old Republican" (151).

And there is hard data to justify these sentiments, showing a somber trend, where black people in America are used for political or other gains. "During Clinton's tenure, Washington slashed funding for public housing by \$17 billion (a reduction of 61 percent) and boosted corrections by \$19 billion (an increase of 171 percent). Effectively making the construction of prisons the nation's main housing program for the urban poor" (Alexander 57).

Likewise, Abu-Jamal's depiction of the societal legacies of Martin Luther King Jr vs Malcolm X goes deeper than even liberals are likely to be comfortable with.

"The system used the main nonviolent themes of Martin Luther King's life to present a strategy designed to protect its own interests—imagine the most violent nation on

earth, the heir of Indian and African genocide, the only nation ever to drop an atomic bomb on a civilian population, the world's biggest arms dealer, the country that napalmed over ten million people in Vietnam, the world's biggest jailer, waving the corpse of King, calling for non-violence.....Northern-bred blacks preferred a more defiant, confrontational, and militant message than turn the other cheek, and Malcolm X provided it in clear, uncompromising terms. His message of black self-defense and African-American self-determination struck both Muslim and non-Muslim alike as logical and reasonable, given the decidedly unchristian behavior displayed by America to the black, brown, red and yellow world" (134-135).

In this contemporary critique of society we see his broader vision. Abu-Jamal challenges the simplified and politicized history most celebrate. He wants to show that even the messages of many of those glorified for their progressive ideals are actually controlled by and forced into convenient tropes to benefit a fundamentally flawed system.

"What is happening to Marx's theory has, in the course of history, happened repeatedly to the theories of revolutionary thinkers and leaders of oppressed classes fighting for emancipation. During the lifetime of great revolutionaries, the oppressing classes constantly hounded them, received their theories with the most savage malice, the most furious hatred and the most unscrupulous campaigns of lies and slander.

After their death, attempts are made to convert them into harmless icons, to canonize them, so to say, and to hallow their *names*, to a certain extent, for the "consolation" of the oppressed classes and with the object of duping the latter, while at the same time robbing the revolutionary theory of its *substance*, blunting its revolutionary edge and vulgarizing it." Lenin

As Foucault states, this is how the control of knowledge is linked to power. By isolating history into a narrow scope, the capacity to critique is confined. Revolutionary heroes are neutered to fit into the established dialogues and ideologies, which are there to maintain those in power. This is why Martin Luther King is canonized for his non-violence but his socialist and anti-Vietnam stances are less known.

Challenges and statements such as this have led to Abu-Jamal being characterized as a radical. Oxford dictionary defines radical as “advocating or based on thorough or complete political or social change.” This seems like a perfunctory definition for Abu-Jamal’s political stance but the political context of the radical label complicates definitions.

Reforms in society and shifts in consciousness are usually remembered for their dramatic lead-ups to change, but the seeds for these changes were planted long before by radicals who voiced ideas that at the time seemed outlandish. Today radical is used as a discrediting term.

“America has a propensity for dismissing people and ideas with labels. Anyone who openly identifies with such positions is assumed to have nothing legitimate to contribute to public debate, irrespective of the plausibility, merit, and true ideology informing their arguments. "Radical" – a word often used to evoke associations with extremism, instability and an absolutist approach to politics. But the popular usage belies the important role many radicals have played in promoting democracy and justice throughout history, not to mention the continued role radical ideas and activism have to play in unfinished projects. I challenged the presumption that radicals were inherently a liability to social movements, given the positive history of radicalism in America. Indeed, it was "radicals" who were responsible for sowing the seeds of two of America's most important social movements: worker rights and racial justice” (Fitzgerald).

Abu-Jamal has been met harshly with the label radical, which has influenced the dialogue surrounding his work. NPR famously backed out from putting Abu-Jamal’s commentaries on air after political backlash. This resulted in a lawsuit over political interference in regards to free speech from Abu-Jamal (Lewis). The argument around his work has largely been replaced in the public sphere by a dialogue surrounding the legitimacy of his voice. Headlines such as, “Anger as Death Row Cop-Killer Gives Commencement Speech to Students as Colleagues of Officer He Killed Hold Protest,” are often connected to Abu-Jamal’s work. And his voice meets opposition without focus on content, “The Fraternal

Order and a state law maker who organized the silent protest are among those who want convicted cop-killers like Abu-Jamal stripped of their right to freedom of speech” (Adams). These critics rarely focus on the content of Abu-Jamal’s writing, instead focusing on the controversy surrounding his case. Articles such as these pollute the conversation around his work and further attempt to discredit his ideas, which is an easier critique than facing the content of his words about prisons and society.

Abu-Jamal sees himself as a political prisoner and an enemy of the state who directly challenges the idea that the individual must be compliant with the system. He protests by writing about the narrow minded and blindly defended social norms of the prison system. He refuses to acknowledge individual responsibility for being born into the process of mass incarceration. He shows that the system is accepted by a portion of society and then implemented on others. Just as slaves were not complicit in slavery or blacks in Jim Crow, prisoners are not complicit to the system which imprisons them. He could possibly improve his position by towing the line, however, this would indicate in some way that the system is correct and he is in fact abnormal.

The revolutionary writer from history that parallels can be drawn from is W.E.B Du Bois. While the similarities might initially seem abstract, both men’s uncompromising views on social change show likeminded resolve. In fact, the NAACP, founded by Du Bois, provides legal counsel for Abu-Jamal through its defense fund.

During the end of the 19th and early 20th century two schools of conflicting thought began to emerge within the black rights movement. The one most often associated with Booker T. Washington, the famous educator and author, insisted on rights, improvement through education, and the learning of trades without directly challenging Jim Crow laws. It was an idea based on improving the lives of black people practically, through improved jobs,

better living conditions, and a basic education but without directly challenging the system. In his famous speech, “The Atlanta Compromise of 1895,” he bartered for the improved conditions of blacks with submission to white political rule. While these ambitions are rational and admirable, they fail to attack the root of racial segregation. His philosophy attacks the problem from behind instead of head on, working through economic stability and higher education to achieve better living conditions and a more accepted place within society.

In contrast, W.E.B Du Bois, the sociologist and historicist, believed that the situation itself should be challenged. His beliefs, which led him to help start the NAACP, questioned not only the poverty and violence against blacks but demanded complete equal rights and the opportunity for higher education. He was actively against the Atlanta Compromise and anything less than complete freedom. He argued that compromising is exactly what whites want in order to furnish the newly industrialized South with skilled workers, and that it would only result in another, slightly altered version of slavery (Rudwick). A conclusion which foretells the contemporary work of Angela Davis and Michelle Alexander. He eloquently sums up the two positions in the following quote.

“The second thought streaming from the death-ship and the curving river is the thought of the older South,—the sincere and passionate belief that somewhere between men and cattle, God created a *tertium quid*, and called it a Negro,—a clownish, simple creature, at times even lovable within its limitations, but straitly foreordained to walk within the Veil. To be sure, behind the thought lurks the afterthought,—some of them with favoring chance might become men, but in sheer self-defence we dare not let them, and we build about them walls so high, and hang between them and the light a veil so thick, that they shall not even think of breaking through

And last of all there trickles down that third and darker thought,—the thought of the things themselves, the confused, half-conscious mutter of men who are black and whitened, crying “Liberty, Freedom, Opportunity—vouchsafe to us, O boastful World, the chance of living men!” To be sure, behind the

thought lurks the afterthought,—suppose, after all, the World is right and we are less than men?
Suppose this mad impulse within is all wrong, some mock mirage from the untrue?” (Du Boise 38).

This quote introduces us to Du Bois’ idea of Double Consciousness in the black community. Double Consciousness in this sense is the idea that blacks in America must think of themselves in two separate lights, black and American, but that these two perspectives often are in conflict with each other. Neither side, the black nor the American, can be left behind because both are ingrained within people and meaningful but since one of these identities has been devalued so much and the other not fully associated with black people it becomes difficult to understand one’s true identity. Thus in America, blacks are forced to constantly negotiate their two identities, never fully reconciling either or finding what their true identity is. Abu-Jamal introduces another example of this double-consciousness. The prisoner and the American.

“It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness, an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife- this longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self. In this merging he wishes neither of the older selves to be lost. He does not wish to Africanize America, for America has too much to teach the world and Africa. He wouldn’t bleach his Negro blood in a flood of white Americanism, for he knows that Negro blood has a message for the world. He simply wishes to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows, without having the doors of opportunity closed roughly in his face” (Du Boise, 2-3).

Abu-Jamal clearly reflects these ideas and gives a contemporary voice to Du Bois’ and others work. At one point in the book Abu-Jamal quotes Frederick Douglass to clarify his own likeminded passage.

“Had I the ability, and could I reach the nation’s ear, I would, today, pour out a fiery stream of biting ridicule, blasting reproach, withering sarcasm, and stern rebuke. For it is not light that is needed, but fire; is not the gentle shower, but thunder. We need the storm, the whirlwind, and the earthquake. The feeling of the nation must be quickened; the conscience of the nation must be roused.....And its crimes against God and man must be proclaimed and denounced. What, to the American slave, is your 4th of July? I answer: a day that reveals to him, more than all the other days in the year, the gross injustice and cruelty to which he is the constant victim. To him, your celebration is a sham; your boasted liberty, an unholy license; your national greatness, swelling vanity; your sounds of rejoicing are empty and heartless; your denunciations of tyrants, brass-fronted impudence...a thin veil to cover up crimes which would disgrace a nation of savages” (156-57).

The provocation of history is essential to Abu-Jamal’s writing. Connecting his message to the message of those who came before him reminds the world that these were revolutionary and radical thinkers at their time as well, thinkers who are now idolized in American history. Furthermore, it shows the progression of the struggle and in some respects limited changes that have occurred. If Jim Crow was the child of slavery and the prison system the evolution of Jim Crow, then has society actually addressed the underlining racial divide in the country or simply provided cosmetic changes? Realizing that the end of slavery and Jim Crow were not simply small feats but history and cultural altering events is important. But, he also reminds the reader, that it is necessary to face the fact that the core problems of those institutions have not been properly addressed is essential for drastic lasting change.

Du Bois’ career spanned many fields. “Du Bois had also been a prime architect of Pan-Africanism; rarely mentioned were his credentials as an advocate of women’s suffrage, socialism, and peace.” But like many of the other figures from history, the complexity of his critiques, mostly the more radical concepts, have been largely whitewashed from his legacy, “in only a minority of instances, were there serious examinations of Du Bois’s most radical texts or ideas, or discussions about his political harassment, censorship, and external exile

forced by the U.S. government in the 1950s and 1960s. The last thirty-odd years of his political and intellectual life were obscured, ignored, or relegated to history's footnotes" (Marable 2). He died in Ghana, renouncing his American citizenship. He even warred with the NAACP, leaving it on two separate occasions claiming it "was dedicated to the interests of the black bourgeoisie and ignored the problems of the masses" (Rudwick).

His insights were often complex and multi-layered, moving across racial and Marxist theory, fighting for the idea of blacks "as a striving, palpitating group, and not an inert, sick body of crime; as a long historic development and not a transient occurrence." He illustrated that reform was necessary across multiple platforms, while not ignoring the looming historical racial prejudice in America. He championed blacks becoming socially powerful, to be key contributors to a new racial history in America. Quotes such as, "It is only a question of time when white working men and black working men will see their common cause against the aggressions of exploiting capitalists," showed he understood the larger strings being pulled that reinforced racism in society and kept working people from joining together and was a direct threat to established power. Du Bois was seen as a radical at the time and now much of his more radical work is either ignored or seen as something unrelated to his celebrated successes.

"The final decades of Du Bois's life, including his decision in 1961 to become a member of the U.S. Communist Party, cannot honestly be interpreted as a radical departure or extreme rupture in the earlier stages of his intellectual evolution. In fact, the central theoretical elements of what would become Du Boisian social thought—a Black radical and democratic analysis of U.S. and global society— were largely in place *prior* to Du Bois's joining the NAACP in 1910. For scholars such as early Du Bois biographer Francis L. Broderick, their greatest dilemma was primarily due to the fact that Du Bois failed to conform or fit into the arbitrary categories they had constructed to analyze patterns of African-American social thought and Black political culture" (Marable 5).

Largely, history has taken what it likes about Du Bois and ignored his more controversial ideas that challenge foundational aspects of American culture. But those ideas

were imbedded in his ideas for overcoming the racial divides within society. This was something difficult to stomach in a 1950s and 60s America obsessed with the Red Scare. But it illustrates how Abu-Jamal and Du Bois are radically similar. The content of their arguments is transformed in the prism of their situation. For Du Bois it was Communism. For Abu-Jamal it is the prison system and his alleged crime.

Both of their uncompromising voices, which refuse to settle for surface level solutions and unflinchingly probe deeper into the reflective truths of society are enormously uncomfortable for the controlling powers and are thus contorted. This is the great challenge for the political success of *Live from Death Row*. All the merit it deserves is simply thrown under the label of radical and quickly discarded as unacceptable, which is why he is so critical of the coverage of both his own material and within the book of the prison system in general. He is the personal manifestation of the blind eye that society has generally cast toward prisons. As the introduction to *Live From Death Row* by John Edgar Wideman points out,

Mumia Abu-Jamal's voice is considered dangerous and subversive and thus is censored from National Public Radio, to name just one influential medium. Many books about black people, including a slew of briskly selling biographies and autobiographies—from Oprah to O.J. to Maya Angelou—are on the stands. What sets Mumia's story apart?

It is useful to remember that the slave narrative and its progeny, the countless up-from-the-depths biographies and autobiographies of black people that repeat the form and assumptions of the slave narrative, have always been best-sellers. They encapsulate one of the master plots Americans have found acceptable for black lives. These neoslave narratives carry a message the majority of people wealthy enough to purchase books wish to hear.

The message consists of a basic deep structure repeated in a seemingly endless variety of packages and voices. The slave narratives of the 1800s posited and then worked themselves out in a bifurcated, either/or world. The action of the story concerns moving from one world to another. The actor is a single individual, a featured star, and we watch and listen as this protagonist undergoes his or her rite of passage. South to north, rural to urban, black environment to white environment, silence to literacy, are some of the classic crossovers accomplished by the protagonists of such fables. If you punch in modern

variants of these dichotomies—ghetto to middle class, ignorance to education, unskilled to professional, despised gangster to enlightened spokesperson, you can see how persistent and malleable the formula is. The formula for the neoslave narrative sells because it is simple; because it accepts and maintains the categories of the status quo; because it is about individuals, not groups, crossing boundaries; because it comforts and consoles those in power and offers a ray of hope to the powerless. Although the existing social arrangements may allow the horrors of plantations, ghettos, and prisons to exist, the narratives tell us, these arrangements also allow room for some to escape. Thus the arrangements are not absolutely evil. No one is absolutely guilty, nor are the oppressed absolutely guiltless. If some overcome, why don't the others?" (Xxxii).

By not conforming to the accepted, palatable, and understood structures of overcoming personal situation, Abu-Jamal isolates himself from the mainstream of society. His story is not what readers are expecting nor can it be easily sold because it shines such a piercing, critical light onto them and works on such a macro and micro level. His answers are not easy and do not benefit those who have the power to popularize them. This is why the intended audience appears to be those in education, university students, professors and those self-educating. It is not something a reader simply walks into passively. It is for those in search of a critical analysis. His advice to today's youth at a recent conference was, "When you go to college or when you're studying independently, or when you are reading; wherever you are, study seriously. Study deeply and use it for the most important thing you can do, which is your people's freedom," with the reminder, "As long as you are born south of the Canadian border, you are in prison" (Wilson). It appears he is attempting to reach readers who are open to critical analysis, which greatly limits his audience.

Piper Kerman wrote a book about prison that is a bestseller because it tells a funny and interesting story of personal growth and responsibility, while showing the shortcomings of prison as well but as a place to be escaped and overcome through personal fortitude. She also reached an enormous audience, most of which were fed some truth into their casual consumption of entertainment, that possibly introduced an alternative perspective to a

situation they might have been unaware of. But she is accepted by such a large audience because it does not upset the balance of power. It works within a liberal mindset but still within the established system.

Abu-Jamal, on the other hand, refuses to blame himself or other prisoners for an inherently unjust system. He even celebrates his opposition, refusing to become a man controlled by the system, and thus existing somewhat outside of that system. He refuses to meet skeptical readers halfway, instead bombarding them with his direct message. His lack of flexibility and narrative however pigeonholes his readership. It is not hard to believe that *Live from Death Row* works more like additional ammunition and motivation to already sympathetic and like-minded readers. While skeptical or opposed readers will refuse to give it any chance or dismiss it outright. This can be incredibly important and useful however. As previously stated, courageous and inspiring voices from history are the seeds which plant the ideas for social change. Those pushing the boundaries and reimagining the structure of society and the system of our realities with such overwhelmingly conviction about our very morals and ideals are the ones who push the public conversation in new directions and inspire new threads of thought on issues that seemed locked into place. Perhaps these texts are not the works that cause direct mass action, but they open up new territory for the next generation of artists and prison activists to explore.

Donald Goines: White Man's Justice, Black Man's Grief

White Man's Justice, Black Man's Grief by Donald Goines smacks its intent blatantly in the reader's face from the title through the final line. The book tells the story of Chester Hines, a career criminal and expert in navigating the criminal justice system and his experiences with the prison system. This fictional novel focuses extensively on the main character's time in county jail while awaiting trial and his experience with the police and sentencing. What makes this novel distinct is the sharp edge it accentuates when relaying the story. While there are positive moments, the writing never shies away from the most gruesome and unsavory parts of prison like rape, violence, and humiliation.

Donald Goines (1936-1974) wrote 16 novels in a five year span and is touted as America's bestselling black author. He was so prolific he was published under the pseudonym Al C. Clark during this period so as to not fatigue his readership. He, like Kerman and Abu-Jamal, writes from experience, even though his work is fictional.

"He falsified his age to join the U.S. Air Force, served in Japan during the Korean War, and returned to Detroit a heroin addict at the age of seventeen. After leaving the air force, Goines's range of experiences provided the background for his novels. At various times he was a pimp, professional gambler, car thief, armed robber, and bootlegger. These illegal activities landed him in jail several times, which proved to be productive: Goines was heroin-free only while in prison and focused on his literary talents there as well. During a term in Jackson State Prison in 1965, Goines wrote his first novels" (Donald Goines).

Goines is described as a voice from and for the black urban community, and his works were greatly responsible for popularizing the urban fiction genre. He has been a noted influence on many black artists who recognized his truth and struggle. "Decades after his last words were written, men with names like 50 Cent, Ludacris and Nas, who once rapped, "My life is like a Donald Goines novel," still celebrate his influence" (Allen Jr.).

His works focused on drug addiction, crime, and the black market economy of the inner-city. Goines is unique and unlike Kerman and Abu-Jamal, his audience was intended for the very people he wrote about.

“All those (other black) writers, no matter how well they dealt with black experience, appealed largely to an educated, middle-class, largely white readership. They brought news of one place to the residents of another. Goines’ novels, on the other hand, are written from ground zero. They are almost unbearable. It is not the educated voice of a writer who has, so to speak, risen above his background. It is the voice of the ghetto itself” (Goines).

The heart of *White Man’s Justice, Black Man’s Grief*, as clearly suggested by the title, focuses on race and the differing relationships black and white men have both with and in the prison system. Goines clearly illustrates the otherworldliness of prison, showing the differing rules and hierarchy structures. In Goines’ novel, prison is a white person’s creation but is a black person’s world and the power and social collisions of these two dynamics serve as a backdrop for the obscure landscape of prison.

There is a raw reality underlining the novel as a whole. It is not a spectacle, as in *Orange is the New Black*, and it is not a journalist dive into the deeper philosophical and political elements, as in *Live From Death Row*. Goines’ writing, instead, operates with a heavy reality that demonstrates the pressure and danger of being black in America and living under the threat of an unjust system. The almost casual nature in which traumatic events transpire is there to show that this is not a story but real life for many people.

There is no doubt that this is a protest novel. Goines makes sure that the reader understands this immediately. The title is blatant in its juxtaposition of white and black roles within the prison system. In the title, he sets the tone for the straightforward, reality of the novel with its direct attack.

Furthermore, he begins the novel not with the story but with an “Angry Preface.” This section sounds like a passage from Abu-Jamal’s writing.

“Each day, hundreds or even thousands of poor blacks and whites are picked up, arrested, booked and held in county jails all over the country until their court dates are set. The courts are glutted, and the rights of the citizen to a speedy hearing or trial are denied....There are cases of people spending more than a year in county jails simply because they couldn’t raise bail-bond money. And those who are lucky enough to raise bail bond money will never get it back....Black people are aware of this abuse, for a disproportionate number of blacks suffer from it constantly....Make no mistake about it, there’s big money in the bail bond business, and most of it is being made at the expense of poor blacks” (8-9).

This type of exposition is not the strength of Goines’ writing. He, unlike Abu-Jamal, lacks the historical and political overviews in this section to make his arguments more than emotional pleas. But what this short 3 page introduction does is prepare the reader’s mind for realizing the underlying themes of bigotry and exploitation of poor people in his novel. It is a signal for the reader about what to see underneath the story and what is being questioned in society.

But the focus of this novel is not as narrow as the preface. While he rails against the bond system in America and how it unfairly targets the poor, especially poor black people, the novel itself dives deep into the social and political biases within the prison system that work against vulnerable people.

The novel mostly follows the character of Chester Hines, a career criminal, as he negotiates the court system and county jail while awaiting trial. Chester Hines is a smart, tough, strong, savvy, knowledgeable, patient, and mature character, all traits that should make him ideally suited to succeed in the world. He is also black, which makes him powerless in the face of the bigotry he faces, “The black-robed men who sat up high on the benches dispensing their so-called “justice” filled him (Chester) with awe. It was not a feeling of

reverence or of wonder caused by something sublime. It was a feeling of terror, inspired by the raw power that these hypocrites held over the helpless black men who came before them” (26).

Instead, Chester’s talents are used at negotiating the world of prison. Here Goines illustrates prison as an intricate ecosystem with an ever changing hierarchy that is dictated by race, violence, and dominance. Chester uses both his intellect and physical skills to acquire both small material comforts (food, cigarettes, etc) and to protect himself in prison. Chester is an ideal vessel to see this system through because he is not interested in its game, only in getting out, but because of his experience with the prison system he is also an expert of its workings.

Goines does not make it easy on the reader however. Chester is a murderer. He killed his first wife for money and commits armed robbery to survive. This fact is never justified or even internalized besides through recurring nightmares. The subconscious guilt he feels however is mostly ignored and never delved into because it is just another part of life. Similar to the other violence in the novel, it is played out against a casual backdrop to accentuate its ordinary nature. It is just another day in the life. Goines makes prison ordinary, which accentuates its cruelty. Prison, unlike in Kerman’s and Abu Jamal’s worlds is less of a separate world, the separate worlds occur instead between black and white and rich and poor in America and prison is simply a neighborhood within the black and poor worlds.

The borders however are not clear. Most people belong to both of these worlds, being both black and poor. However, the prison system sucks in both rich blacks and poor whites as well, although their experiences are drastically different than the norm.

One wealthy, black drug dealer named Raymond who is arrested, spends a few hours in county jail. His experience overlaps the others in places but his money gives him certain

advantages within the system. The other inmates can relate to his treatment from the police for example, “Them honkies come through my home as if I’m dirt! They wouldn’t dare treat my white neighbors like that, but since I’m black, it doesn’t make no goddamn difference. They don’t even have a search warrant” (151). This story is similar to Chester’s and many others. If they had been white then they likely would not have ended up in jail. The police act as the guardians of the state, who act to protect the status quo and keep the racial hierarchy in order. A rich black man challenges the societal norms, so he is thus targeted. Any attempt at defending himself is seen as an attack on society and thus the man is thrown into a Catch-22 of either doing nothing and being harassed by the police or defending himself and going to jail.

“The bastard pushed her so hard she (his wife) fell right on her ass. Then all of them motherfuckers tried to look under her skirt since she had on a short mini....Anyway, man, after that, I jumped up like a fool, trying to interfere just as they wanted, and the motherfuckers got a chance to throw me on my ass....The cops know they ain’t got no case. But it’s like the motherfucker told me, he said I didn’t have no business living out there next door to them good white folds, so he’s making it his concern that I move my black ass away from out there, if I know what’s good for me” (152-153).

Here is shown the cruel truth that even making it out of poverty in America as a black person doesn’t protect that person from societal racism. This mindset still continues today under various guises. “In many of America’s largest metropolitan areas, including New York, Chicago and Los Angeles, black families making \$100,000 or more are more likely to live in poorer neighborhoods than even white households making less than \$25,000” (Eligon, Gebeloff). Furthermore it is clear that wealth doesn’t protect black people from being targeted by the law. “About 2.7 percent of the poorest white young people — those whose household wealth was in the poorest 10th of the distribution in 1985, when they were between 20 and 28 years old — ultimately went to prison. In the next 10th, 3.1 percent ultimately went to

prison....About 10 percent of affluent black youths in 1985 would eventually go to prison” (Ehrenfreund).

Raymond is the epitome of the American dream. Goines emphasizes that he was born into poverty but through hard work achieved success. If the word drug dealer was replaced with business owner his character reads as the poster child for the American dream. But he comes from the black world and thus, with the tanking economy of inner cities during this time, he only has access to work within the black inner city economy, which often revolves around illegal trades. This echoes of Foucault’s idea that prison exists for both political and economic gain. Economically there are vast amounts of money to be made in drugs, while politicians can then crack down on these people for political gain. All of this works to emphasize Goines’ illustration of the racial divide in the country.

While money does not eliminate discrimination, there are benefits for Raymond over the other black prisoners. His money pays his bail and he is not subjugated to the horrors of county jail while he awaits trial. Others, innocent or guilty, stay for months in county jail before their case is even heard. But Raymond’s economic status sets him apart. He gives Chester \$10 as he is bailed out but refuses to give Jug, a dumb, rapist, bully, anything stating, “I might as well fact with you. If it took five dollars to get you out, I wouldn’t put it up, man.....We live in different worlds, Jug, altogether different” (162). By sharing with Chester and not Jug, Raymond shows again why Chester is such a unique narrator. He is able to bridge the gaps between all the intersecting worlds that occur in prison. Raymond sees him as an equal even though they are not in the same economic class. He recognizes his intellect and moral code. Chester receives respect from everyone in prison, just like he would in the workplace or white society if he had access to it, but instead his talents are used in prison.

The other side of this puzzle are poor white prisoners. While arguing race or social class often results in a chicken or the egg debate about discrimination, it is clear that Goines

feels that the two are both distinct aspects that intersect in different ways. Poor white characters are also in jail, less frequently but mixed in with the black inmates. As a white person living in a black dominated world, the hierarchy of the main stream society is inversed and they are the major victims of violence, especially sexual violence in the novel. While the novel is fictitious, the basis for this relationship is real.

“Approximately 21% of male inmates are physically assaulted during a 6-month period. Sexual assault is estimated at between 2% and 5%. Although prevalence evidence is growing....study of race relations in prison found that aggressors of sexual assault were more likely to be Black and motivated by revenge and by a need to prove their “manliness,” while the victims were more likely to be White, young, and physically underdeveloped.” It is also worth noting that it is commonly accepted that a significant portion of these assaults go unreported and are thus difficult to track” (Wolff, Shi).

The violence of the prison guards, again the guardian of white society, against the black prisoners is directly reflected in the violence from black inmates against white inmates. It is an imitation of the official prison system, but completely unhinged and without even an outward appearance of civility. The violence between prisoners is the raw, actual metaphor for the violence of society against itself, specifically prison which is a normalized and accepted part of society.

Anger and violence is voiced by prisoners throughout the novel, “I’m goin’ make these honkies pay for the three hundred years of sorrow they caused us” (73). Goines adds these justifications for violence from black inmates to show the roots of the racial divide. There is a deep seated anger and need to humiliate behind much of the violence. It is the ultimate showing of manliness to be able to dominate other men and gain material advantages. This manliness has been denied to these men in the outside world because of their race and class and they overcompensate with an angry pseudo version of society in prison where they have some control. They are imitating the system that has been used against them for their entire lives and applying it against the new minority in prison, whites.

“Wait a minute, brother. If he wasn’t no honkie, I wouldn’t have bothered him—you understand?...I’m for real about that, brother. Ask any of the guys in here. I don’t fuck with no brother.’.....They talked over the white boy’s heads, not bothering to try and hide what they were saying. It was something that had happened over a hundred years ago, when the white men used to talk in front of their slaves, not bothering to conceal what they said, because they didn’t give the slave the credit of having enough sense to understand what was being said, or rather, they just didn’t give a damn” (71).

This is a direct reflection of how the guards treat the black characters. “The sergeant kicked him in the butt as hard as he possibly could. ‘Nigger,’ the sergeant growled, ‘when I tell you to move, I mean just that’ (85). While the graphic sexual violence sections make the reader almost sick, it is important to see the replication and revenge aspects of it. The violence from the police is easier to stomach because it is not sexual and partially because it is so commonplace in society, but it is equally as disturbing because it is people in a position of entitled power and responsibility abusing an entire other group. Additionally, with most guards being white, there is a circular nature to the violence as the guards become angry for the attacks on white prisoners. “Also, 95 percent of the rape victims were white, which really made the deputy angry. He was southern-born. Even the sight of white women visiting some of the black prisoners on visiting day so angered him that he would always find some reason to take away the prisoners’ small privileges” (66).

This knowledge is not lost on all the inmates however. Some of the older inmates and Chester have passages of clairvoyance and deep rooted understanding of the injustices at work in the system, but all they can do is talk and most of the violent younger inmates do not understand and are too busy fighting over the small amount of resources available to them.

Additionally, the hierarchy quickly breaks down as soon as the prison system or outside world interferes, showing how insignificant the power these men possess here really is. When one man realizes he is going to be charged with sodomy against a white inmate, for

example, all his black cell mates, many of whom had done similar things and seemed to be his friend, refuse to stand with him and risk the wrath of the prison system and getting an additional charge.

While being white in prison is dangerous, there are definite advantages. As shown earlier, sentencing displays a large variation based on race. Goines shows this discrepancy often. “He (officer) saw dozens of cases come through the courtroom, and he knew that had Chester been white, he’d have been given a small bond or released on his own personal word” (30-31). Likewise, when two friends, one black and one white, guilty of the same crime with the same background get different sentences. The white inmate explains,

“My record is just as bad as Willie’s. We’ve both done prison bits before, each one of us have been in juvenile, and we’re both charged with an armed robbery this time.” But the black inmates know this makes no difference. “Only another black man could really understand what went through the minds of the two listening men. It wasn’t that they would resent his making probation, because they definitely would resent it, but not for any reasons that he would grasp immediately” (108-109).

This is a prime example of Goines writing to a black audience. He doesn’t need to explain institutional racism and injustice to them or white privilege, just acknowledge it, and his readers will automatically understand from experience. Where Kerman would point out to the reader, this is wrong, these are actual people we should care about, Goines threads these scenes into the normal cadence of the novel.

Despite the grim reality of this novel, Goines gives us a glimpse of some possible brighter future. This again hinges on Chester. Chester’s skills and abilities to bridge into each world and see through the petty grievances which isolate the different groups, also allows him to connect with people across the spectrum. This is an example of the moments of possible social class unity in history that Alexander writes about.

As noted before, Chester connects with Raymond, the rich black man who is only momentarily imprisoned with him. Likewise, his other two close friends are a young poor white boy named Tony and a young poor black kid named Willie. All three have a certain higher moral code and thoughtfulness that is rarely glimpsed in the other young inmates who are always confined to their groups and busy fighting over the scarce material scraps like cigarettes, beds, and snacks.

These three combine their resources and work together, sharing their goods, protecting each other, and generally supporting each other. The inclusion of Tony in this group causes resentment from some of the other black inmates, because it goes against the basic nature of prison. “On one side all the white men stood, on the other side, all the black men stood. For some reason, each group separated into these lines when they reached the mess hall. No one told them to line up this way, but the men did anyway. It was a tacit understanding between the black and white inmates; whites ate on their side, blacks on the other” (202).

But Chester is unaffected by their critiques of loyalty and is able to see through his own prejudices, understanding Tony as being in a similar plight as himself and of the same moral fiber. By accepting Tony, Chester flips the narrative of who the enemy is. Instead of being each other, it becomes the system in general. Prison is a system that senselessly and mercilessly punishes them without any principals, even over seemingly inconsequential things that simply could make life more tolerable. “Preacher glanced fondly at the books and writing paper he held. Tears appeared in the corners of his eyes. ‘You mean I can’t even take my personal mail in?’ he asked, his voice breaking slightly” (105-106). Chester is a beacon of hope in some ways because he shows the possibility of people overcoming the circular violence and seeing through the façade of socially created factions and focus on true injustices.

All of that being said, Goines is a realist, and the system wins out. Even with the brief optimism, the system's all-encompassing effect and dividing nature eventually breaks the group. The hardships of prison and the economic situation outside prison tears these friends apart in their need for self-preservation. Prison at its core makes the people inside of it so desperate that they are faced with impossible choices, and being loyal or fighting the system comes at such a personal cost that it divides people who are in the same plight. It is designed to break the inmates as punishment but the outside world is bare of alternatives to crime, thus the cycle of recidivism begins and the need for self-perseverance against a lifetime of agony. By dividing men and forcing them against each other, prison reasserts its authority and shows how helpless many people are against it.

"The first friend he had ever had, his first rap partner, so to speak, had involved him in the robbery.....When he entered the courtroom, Willie looked every way but in his direction. He couldn't look Chester in the eye.....Shame was written across his face.....He knew that, if he were ever near one of them in prison, he'd kill the man, regardless of the outcome.....Chester couldn't believe that twelve people had found him guilty as charged. He wanted to scream out to them that it wasn't fair. He was in prison at the time, how could he be guilty of murder when he was four hundred miles away? The morning they took him over for sentence, he had to stifle a recurring thought. This was the date that he would have been coming home from prison, free, discharged—not on parole but completely finished with his jail term. But instead, because he had allowed himself to become friendly with another human being, he was going to court to be sentenced" (215-217).

What Goines repeatedly reminds the reader of is how Chester blames himself for opening up and connecting with someone in prison. He should have known better. He is a veteran of the system and should have understood that someday the system would punish that camaraderie, one way or another. Willie rats out Chester to save himself from getting life in prison, dividing brothers, making them enemies, instead of allies against the system. Here we see Goines' strength at juxtaposing individual decisions against the backdrop of the overarching system. This shows again that his audience is black people in the same situation

and humanizes people who make sickening decisions. He is writing about the decisions they face continually. Everyone wants to escape the brutality of prison, the hardship on the individual is so great that conflict arises not so often against the system but against fellow inmates to survive and get out.

The direct autobiographical elements of Goines' writing, along with the didactic approach remind one of an early civil rights writer, Richard Wright, who also wrote about his own life with the flexibility of fiction. Similarly to Goines, Wright worked at connecting the injustices of the system to individuals within the system. His writing is often full of graphic violence and real life situations that black citizens faced under Jim Crow segregation.

"The lesson of the novel (*Native Son*) is the connection between economic and social systems and individual actions and motivations. The novel's primary vision is its clear-sighted depiction of the cause and effect relationship between social conditions and individual actions, the idea that the two cannot be rationally separated, that the only reason they would be separated would be to mask the importance of those conditions and thereby keep them in place" (*Native Son* By Richard Wright).

Goines' works similarly depicts a social system that creates environments that produce criminals who are perversely slandered for their criminality, a historical process Goines is aware of and pays homage to with the naming of his lead character after the mid-20th century prison writer Chester Himes. He understands the continuity of the system and its historical oppressiveness, as well as its practical effects on individuals. The men in his work are monsters and social outcasts, but through Chester, the reader sees the innumerable threads which pull them into the stereotypes which are then used against them.

Wright, born in 1908, grew up in the Jim Crow South, in Mississippi. He was one of the early critical writers of Jim Crow and white society. His work is heavily autobiographical, especially the short story "The Ethics of Living Jim Crow" and the novel *Black*

Boy. He first gained fame in 1940 with the publication of *Native Son*. A work depicting the murder of a white woman by a black man (Richard Wright).

Both the autobiographical work and *Native Son* relate to Goines' writing. In *Ethics*, Wright describes the complex system of fear, violence and obedience under which Jim Crow worked. Like Goines, the intent is in the title. The autobiographical nature makes the story more personal but it is a first-hand account of the contradictory nature of the ideals of America and the practice of Jim Crow. Similarly, in *White Man's Justice*, Goines gives an insider's view of the prison system and the contradictions between the philosophies of "all men assumed innocent until proven guilty" and "all men created equal in the eyes of the law" and the actual racist practices which occur. Both works give specific concrete examples but never forget the overarching systemic struggles. Each event and decision by the characters is weighted against a system that puts individuals in survival mode and punishes rebellion.

The Autobiography is best defined by Georg Misch as, "An original interpretation of experience" (Hühn 29). This is a good reminder that an autobiography is not an autobiography but a selection of experiences that illustrate who the author thinks he or she is. While these works are only autobiographical in nature, they show both of these authors' basic understanding of themselves is clearly intertwined with the suffering they experienced at the hands of their respective racist social systems, a tradition that harks back to the early slave memoirs of the 18th and 19th centuries. Both describe what Du Boise called double-consciousness, the idea of being two persons, both black and American, which do not align. But they both rebel through their writing, even if they are forced to make practical decisions about surviving in society.

"The secular self-accounts for itself as an autonomous agent, ideally in charge of itself," is another useful definition of autobiographies (Schwalm). This empowerment in the face of the Jim Crow South or the prison system is an act of rebellion, a challenge to the

prevailing social structure. By giving themselves voices that can be heard they step outside the confines of the controllers and take their lives and experiences into their own hands, creating what they deem worthy of telling. They both find meaning in their personal suffering and expose the source of that suffering to their readership.

Both of these early pioneers use writing as a way of gaining some control over a world they feel powerless within. Their personal accounts have broader range because they trace the cause and effect of a discriminatory system onto the people within it. These stories not only trace the injustices from the system but the tragic inevitability of being sucked into the system. “Lawd, man! Ef it wuzn’t fer them polices’n’them ol’ lynch-mobs, there wouldn’t be nothin’ but uproar down here” (Wright 556). By showing a self-awareness by some characters in their writing they show the complicated and normalized version of these systems that people are subjected under. The self-awareness of the system being rigged does not exempt people from its power. The feeling of powerlessness permeates throughout both writers’ works. The violence and crime are reshaped within this context, becoming inevitable acts based on revenge, being trapped by poverty and their societal status, simply frustrated anger, or from the isolation from society by either prison, poverty, or race. The reader is suddenly sympathizing with the criminal, the anti-hero. The murderer and stick-up man become who the reader identifies and sympathizes with.

This differentiates so drastically from the traditional archetypes of black characters which are often performing a palatable character arc of being transformed into an accepted role. Both of these writers have stereotypical characters on the surface but that is what makes them powerful. They explain the unattractive stereotype. They dissect the anger and violence. They do not dismiss it or take it for granted. They actually defy the reader’s expectations by confronting them with society’s stereotypes.

Herein lies the critical dilemma of these books. Their strengths are also their failures. This ambiguousness is best illustrated again through the critics of James Baldwin who wrote

both, “Now the most powerful and celebrated statement we have yet had of what it means to be a Negro in America is unquestionably Richard Wright’s *Native Son*” (Charney 68-69). As well as, “Its failure, he wrote, lay in “its insistence that it is . . . categorization alone which is real and which cannot be transcended.” Bigger Thomas, the protagonist of Richard Wright’s “*Native Son*,” cannot transcend blackness, and his blackness, in Wright’s hands, is as ugly and debased a thing as ever was” (Mathis, Mishra).

Both writers almost explicit concentration on the race of their characters takes away the details of their humanness. It is nearly the same argument he uses against *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, but the opposing side. Due to the focus of the message the piece of art loses its value. It abandons the complexities of truth that entail being a human and invoking a deeper confrontation within ourselves and not just with society. “Bigger for all of his rage remains only a social symbol without the consciousness of a human being and therefore without any complexity or dimensions” (Charney 71). Most black characters in both novels lack any real humanness beyond being shaped by the system that oppresses them. They are fully defined by it and powerless, as the outcomes for each character shows. As symbols, the characters are subjected to their roles fully and lack any human characteristics. “No American Negro exists who does not have his private Bigger Thomas living in the skull but a paradoxical adjustment comes when the Negro is compelled to accept the fact that this dark and dangerous and unloved stranger is part of himself forever.” Here Baldwin reiterates that Bigger is not a complete character. He is one fraction of an intricate number of selves combining and in confrontation within black Americans. By giving only life to this one part, Wright, creates a false character. In a real character this should be an element of themselves, not the entirety. Goines also falls into this in his writing. The innumerable inmates are mostly seen through their violence and anger. Chester and Willy are given fuller characters but they are presented as more enlightened and not the norm. The rape and violence occurs from flat characters who are barbaric and one-dimensional representations of their situation. While Goines gives reason

for this he fails to show conflict within those characters. He avoids the complexities that lurk within these stereotypes and casts them as simply victims of situation. “But this vengeful cruelty only validates “those brutal criteria bequeathed him at his birth,” reinforcing old degrading notions about black men. This is why the “protest novel,” far from being disturbing, had become a “comforting aspect of the American scene,” cherished by white liberals” (Mathis, Mishra). By making these characters so easily definable, they become almost more digestible for the audience. Instead of insecurity about the complexity of the situation, the reader is faced with clear, uncomplicated characters that reaffirm their previously held beliefs.

Chester, however, does not take part in these acts and thus is set apart from the others. He is different, and has relatable human emotions and conundrums, even though he is still a criminal, but his complexities do not translate to these other characters. Here Goines shows an evolution of the stereotype. Chester can be barbaric, but he wrestles with a complicated moral code that is relatable, especially against the backdrop of such a violent and dehumanizing environment. He is the angry, violent Bigger who has grappled with those emotions, sometimes winning and sometimes losing. But by avoiding these complexities in the other characters, both Wright and Goines, according to Baldwin, make their characters less than human and fall into the dangerous and easy clichés of protest writing, losing their humanity.

This critic, while incredibly insightful, perhaps asks too much from books doing so much already. The exaggerated caricatures are obviously part of the point. Making the traits which are the most distressing the focal point and portraying the character as a recognizable stereotype causes discomfort. The literal definition of a caricature is “a picture, description, or imitation of a person in which certain striking characteristics are exaggerated in order to create a comic or grotesque effect” (source). The grotesqueness is key. The symbol of the Jim Crow black citizen and contemporary convict were already in place. They were not created by Wright or Goines. *Birth of a Nation*, the first Hollywood blockbuster movie, is one of the

most obvious examples of these stereotypes. In 1915, 25 years before *Native Son* was written, the movie became an enormous financial success. “Blacks, particularly in the film’s second part dramatizing Reconstruction, are portrayed as the root of all evil and unworthy of freedom and voting rights. In addition, male African Americans are depicted as always lusting after white women” (Pfelffer, Lehr). Even the name Jim Crow itself originated from a white performer in black face. He performed a racist buffoon character based on white stereotypes about blacks. This character became the namesake for an entire segment of the black population and worked itself into popular vernacular, including the naming of this set of laws and etiquettes (*Native Son* by Richard Wright).

Controlling ideas and influencing emotions to protect an established racial caste system led to the support of laws which resulted in racial separation and abuses in the South. The systematic dehumanizing of a group of people set the stage for the institutionalized racism that has evolved within the American system to be accepted.

Similarly, the stereotypes of the prisoner existed before Goines’ writing. Both racially and about criminals in general stereotypes abound.

“The stereotyping of Blacks as criminals is so pervasive throughout society that “criminal predator” is used as a euphemism for “young Black male. In American society, a prevalent representation of crime is that it is overwhelmingly committed by young Black men. Subsequently, the familiarity many Americans have with the image of a young Black male as a violent and menacing street thug is fueled and perpetuated by typifications everywhere. In fact, perceptions about the presumed racial identity of criminals may be so ingrained in public consciousness that race does not even need to be specifically mentioned for a connection to be made between the two because it seems that “talking about crime is talking about race”

Whites have long viewed criminal behavior as an inherent characteristic of Blacks. Randall Kennedy explains that the reputation of Blacks has been “besieged” by beliefs about predispositions toward criminality that can be traced back to the enslavement of Africans in the United States. One study shows that Blacks are more likely than other racial or ethnic group to be characterized by Whites as violent, more likely to abuse drugs, and more likely to engage in crime than are Whites. A General Social

Survey question in 1990 showed that 54% of Whites believe that Blacks are prone to violence. In 1991, the National Race Survey showed that a clear majority of both Whites *and* Blacks agreed with the statement “blacks are aggressive or violent. In support of these findings, other research indicates that the public generally associates violent street crime with Blacks. Moreover, the results of a more recent study corroborate the prevalence of this belief because it found that a majority of Whites characterize Blacks as aggressive. Other nationwide research has shown that the public perceives that Blacks are involved in a greater percentage of violent crime than official statistics indicate they actually are” (Welch 276-278).

These stereotypes can be found represented consistently in media and entertainment, further perpetuating a system of injustice. Racial stereotyping about criminality is then compounded on black criminals when they face the stereotypical critics on all prisoners involving education, violence, and poverty.

Both Goines and Wright recognized the stereotypical monsters that society manufactured to justify the abuse of specific groups. Through their own experiences they recognized the burden of these stereotypes and lived with them, realizing the real life effects they had. In their work they pull the sheet back on these monsters revealing a mirror. Readers are forced to see these stereotypes in a glaring and exposing light, which reflects back on the society which supports systems that drive people to these ends. In these works, the monsters are not the actors in the work but the society which allows and supports these institutions to thrive. They take the liability away from the individual and put it squarely on society, forcing the reader to sift through the grotesqueness of the system that exists. It is a gut check for the reader. Perhaps not through the direct recognition of self in Bigger or the many black criminals in *White Man's Justice*, *Black Man's Grief*, but within their complacency and acceptance of a system which creates environments for such characters to exist.

Goines and Wright have taken back the stereotypes of the oppressor to expose the cruelties of the system they protect. They use the enemy's weapon against them. “With Bigger Thomas, Wright courageously defied those who would have preferred a milder

character, a less provocative commentary on the “problem of the color line” (as Du Bois called it), one that would reassure white readers rather than terrify them” (Mathis, Mishra).

Conclusion

In the three books described in this thesis, we see the difficult give and take of success that appears to go hand in hand with protest writing. What a writer gains in one area often results in a loss in another. The useful directness and powerful imagery of caricatures diminishes the human intricacies which can make a piece of art intimate and altering. The populism of connecting with a wide readership can transform into propaganda. The more radical ideologies can lose exposure. All of these pieces fit together unevenly to form the broad platform which is the blossoming prison protest movement. This movement will not be uniform but consist of a plethora of voices and opinions. Many will conflict with each other but all are seeking to change society and bring the subject of prison reform into the dialogue of main stream society. Each fulfils a different role in that struggle and bends the conversation further toward a fuller realization of the realities of the prison world.

Each of the writers discussed in this thesis, use their own strengths to foster awareness of the plight of many. Their voices are so important because they become the spokespeople for an entire group of underrepresented people. They articulate the struggle that so many people experience. Similarly, to the protest writers during slavery and Jim Crow, their words put pressure on a procrastinating society to take notice of the injustice that their fellow Americans experience. These writers, coming from prison, are unique voices to criticize society. People in the cracks between clearly defined labels in society might well be the most qualified to contemplate it. Being black and American has created an ambiguity in that population for over a century. Likewise, the prisoner is two things, a prisoner and American, and the balancing and negotiation of those two identities challenges the normalized perspectives that often encumber a society.

Through their different genres of writing and experiences, each writer has captured an intimate and unique vision of the prison experience, highlighting and uncovering different wrinkles within the system. The memoir of Piper Kerman shows an intimate and personal

view of the prison experience, from a perspective that many people unaffected by the prison system can identify with. Mumia Abu-Jamal's journalism gives historical context and researched stories, which undermine the legitimacy and actual goals of the prison system. And the writing of Donald Goines uses the flexibility of fiction to highlight the grossest attributes of the prison system in a monstrous way. All of these pieces work and fail in different ways, but each is clearly a piece of protest literature not only because it provokes social discourse, but because it is an individual act of personality inside of a system that attempts to suffocate individuality and is thus a protest in and of itself.

Movements often develop slowly, chipping away at the normalized ideology, until they hit a tipping point which propels them forward with more intensity and public awareness. If this movement is successful at overhauling the current prison system and changing public consciousness on the subject, we will look back on history and see literature such as these books which contributed to the instigation and propelling of this movement. The context of each of these pieces is still to be seen, but without artists and activists such as these, which challenge the status quo of society, there would be no voices bridging the gap between the separate but intertwined worlds of prison and society. They humanize a group made abnormal through their unique perspectives and works of literature. They shed light into the shadows of society.

Whatever happens, it is important to understand the historical roots of the prison system. If the historical context can be incorporated into the larger dialogue surrounding prison reform, perhaps it can inspire deeper conversations and critiques of society in general. The practicality of contemporary stories mixed with realization of the roots of this oppression could open the dialogue in unpredictable and exciting ways as the conversation develops. And we will look at literature like this as the instigating factors in change.

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Appendix: Abstract English

This thesis explores three books written inside of prison and their attempts at communicating between the separate but intertwined worlds of prison and society. *Orange is the New Black* by Piper Kerman, *Live From Death Row* by Mumia Abu-Jamal, and *White Man's Justice, Black Man's Grief* by Donald Goines, were all written since the foundation of the prison industrial complex in the United States. These works attempt to communicate the plight of prisoners caught within this system of discrimination to a highly unattuned outside world in the hopes of raising awareness to the conditions of prisons.

In this thesis Michelle Alexander's theories on the evolution of slavery into the modern prison system are being combined with Michele Foucault's ideas about control of power and knowledge in relation to prisons, to place these writers into the context of protest writers. I then compare their works with the writing of famous protest writers from United States history to put their struggle into historical context and contemporize the continual racial and class struggles of the United States. Finally, I analyze the effectiveness and limitations of their writing tactics and message.

What emerges is a small piece of the foundations of an anti-prison movement. The voices discussed in this thesis use different ways of planting the seeds of change and propelling it forward with their ideas. They emulate protest writers of the past that have been glorified for their courage and transformed through history, while providing an opportunity to study similar characters that are still held in their contemporary context absent of foundational societal changes.

Abstract Deutsch

Diese Arbeit untersucht drei Bücher, die im Gefängnis geschrieben wurden, und die Reaktionen die sie in der Gesellschaft provozieren. Piper Kermans *Orange is the New Black*, *Live From Death Row* von Mumia Abu-Jamal, und Donald Goines *White Man's Justice*, *Black Man's Grief* entstanden alle, nachdem der "Industriekomplex Gefängnis" der "prison Industrial complex" in den Vereinigten Staaten bereits etabliert war. Diese Arbeiten sind ein Versuch die Misere der Gefangenen innerhalb dieser systematischen Diskriminierung einer Außenwelt zu vermitteln die weitgehend kein Bewusstsein für das Problem hat, und so Aufmerksamkeit auf die Verhältnisse, die in den Gefängnissen herrschen, zu lenken.

Michelle Alexanders Theorien über die Evolution der Sklaverei hin zum modernen Gefängnissystem werden mit denen Michele Foucaults über die Kontrolle über Macht und Wissen in Verbindung mit Gefängnissen zusammengeführt, um diese Schriftsteller im Kontext der ProtestautorInnen – „protest writers“ abzubilden. Weiters werden ihre Werke im Spiegel bedeutender historischer ProtestautorInnen der Vereinigten Staaten betrachtet, um ihre Leidensgeschichte auch im Licht der geschichtlichen Geschehnisse verstehen zu können und die Kontinuität des Kampfes darzustellen, in den Menschen aufgrund ihrer Klasse und des nach wie vor allgegenwärtigen Rassismus immer noch hineingeboren werden, ob sie wollen oder nicht. Zuletzt wird auch die Effektivität und die Grenzen der Botschaft der behandelten Schriftstellerinnen, sowie ihres Schreibstils und die Strategie hinter ihren Werken ausgelotet.

Was sich daraus ergibt, ist ein kleines Stück der Grundlagen einer Gegenbewegung zum Gefängnissystem. Die Stimmen, die in dieser Arbeit besprochen werden, verwenden unterschiedliche Wege um Motivation zur Veränderung zu sähen und ihre Ideen zu verbreiten. Sie treten in die Fußstapfen der „protest writers“ der Vergangenheit, die für ihren

Mut gefeiert, und von der Geschichte transformiert wurden, aber ermöglichen auch eine Betrachtung ähnlicher Charaktere, die immer noch in ihrem zeitgenössischen Rahmenbau verhaftet sind und so noch keine fundamentalen gesellschaftlichen Veränderungen durchlaufen haben.