

Prisons as Diasporic Sites: Liberatory Voices From the Diaspora of Confinement¹

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Dedicated to Tiyo Attallah Salah-El

A wall is just a wall and nothing more at all. It can be broken down.

-Assata Shakur

Neo-Slave Existence In The Penal Colony

In 2000, a film about Angola (*The Farm*) was shown on South African TV. South Africans were surprised to hear that the naming of this notorious prison in Louisiana had to do with the country of origin of those Africans brought to Louisiana to work on this plantation site.² After “emancipation” of the slaves in 1865, Angola plantation was swiftly transformed into a prison. We (in the U.S.) may be surprised to learn that a plantation was refurnished into a prison where prisoners are condemned to hard labor. After all, slaves were supposed to be freed, first through President Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation (1863) and then through the abolition amendment (13th) to the U.S. Constitution. One may ponder about the meaning of emancipation with Mumia Abu-Jamal (2000), who echoes the famous words of Frederick Douglass by asking “What, to a Prisoner, is the Fourth of July?” Douglass and Abu-Jamal are preeminent voices of conscience to raise questions about the place of slavery and slave-like carceral existence in a democratic polity. In the “prison of slavery” (Davis, 1998), Black people experience “natal alienation and social death” (Patterson, 1982). It is only too fitting that a former slave state gives “freed persons” a taste of slavery on a plantation site.

Taking my cue from Dostoevsky’s dictum “The degree of civilization in a society can be judged by entering its prisons” and from Assata Shakur’s poetry (cited in 1987, see above) I argue that social/political advocates for systemic change have to come to terms with the fact that incarceration as a form of punishment (or, as anti-prison activists believe, as a form of containment) must be a central category of their analysis. Since the end of the cold war, the United States has become the premier prison nation of the world. Ironically, its government is eager to embrace and export the ideal of “liberty” to any country (particularly to those who do not subscribe to capitalist democracy). According to 2006 Justice Department data (the latest available), 2.38 million people were

incarcerated in state and federal facilities, an increase of 2.8 percent over 2005, which is about 1 in 99 US Americans who faced imprisonment (Moore, 2007). Black Americans bear the brunt of tactics of over-policing and over-incarceration, at the same time that crime rates which peaked in 1992 have significantly dropped (Loury, 2007). One in three Black men will face incarceration in their life times.³

The focus of this paper is to highlight the racist implications of the criminal justice system, the legacy of chattel slavery, and to join a growing number of scholars (e.g., Davis, 2005; James, 2005; Morris, 1994; Pepinsky & Quinney, 1991; Salah-El, 2006; Stern, 1998; Sudbury, 2005) and activist organizations (e.g. Critical Resistance, USA; Incite!, USA; International Conference on Penal Abolition; Justice Action, Australia; the Quakers International; and PRAWA, Nigeria) in calling for the abolition of prisons and for restorative justice. What unites these efforts is a *macroscopic* perspective of the oppressive nature of all penal structures, as they penalize the poor, disabled, people of color, indigenous peoples and women. Most studies on criminal justice issues focus on *microscopic* perspectives, with respect to *mens rea* (guilty mind), risky behaviors, criminality and deviance. While many of the prisoners featured here are imprisoned for their political views (even though the United States government denies that it has political prisoners) and thus innocent of the charges they are convicted of, guilt or innocence are not central to the claims made in this paper.

In their clarion calls for emancipation and demands for reparations, Black political prisoners open a dimension in Diaspora studies that could benefit from investigating the effects of the prison industrial complex, especially in the heart of the Empire of the 21st Century. *I argue that prisons in the U.S. are diasporic sites for Black men and women.* For the purposes of this paper, “Diaspora” refers to *involuntary* “scattering” of a group of people because of perceived threats, such as pogroms and lynching, against members of their group and because of incarceration (“forced marches” to the prison citadel). In this article, I will use the trope of Bantustan to underscore the racist practices that engulf prisoners and their families and communities. The forced resettlement of the criminalized Black youth and adults is reminiscent of the forced relocation of South Africans to Bantustans during white minority rule.

I wish to invoke “Diaspora” to describe the carceral phenomenon, rather than the

more common metaphor “ghetto” to signal that despite the repression—and perhaps, because of the repression—faced by millions of people in this country through the mechanisms of law and criminal justice, Black prisoners are carving out a cultural identification, often with the African continent.⁴ And it is precisely this *double* diasporic moment—of Africans living in the Diaspora and of being held captive throughout prisons far away from loved ones and their communities—that compels Black prisoners to imagine a bond with ancestral homelands, the origin of their “scattered” existence. It is in prisons, i.e. being in a carceral Diaspora within a wider (geographically dislocated) Diaspora, that Black people relive the terror of the middle passage, the experience of being ripped away from home and stranded on a “slave ship that doesn’t move” (Shaka N’Zinga, 2000).

The metaphors of Diaspora and Bantustan are poignant, since they capture the idea that African Americans have involuntarily⁵ experienced the “Second Great Migration” in the last 35 years (Rashad Shabazz, n.d.). According to Shabazz, this process mirrors the First Great Migration (1917-1940), the flight from the *rural* south, white supremacy, lynch terror and indentured servitude (i.e., sharecropping) to the *urban* North and the promise of industrial jobs. Since the late 1960s, Blacks have faced massive job loss (Chicago, Detroit, etc.) and repressive criminal justice policies (e.g., FBI’s Counterintelligence Program and the War on Drugs) and thus have faced removal from *urban* centers to *rural* prisons—all over the United States. Even, eerily, the numbers correspond: the First Great Migration involved the movement of about one million Blacks, whereas the Second Great Migration has confined 1.2 million Blacks in the Diaspora and slave fortress of prisons. So, in fact, I am describing a *triple diasporic effect* (Middle Passage 15th to 19th centuries, First Great Migration 1917-1940, Second Great Migration 1969-present). Finally, it should be noted that one of the key expressions of Diaspora culture in US prisons is resistance literature by captive political and politicized writers, who write on slavery, reparations, visions of a New African republic and importantly, of abolishing the penal system (cf. Hames-García, 2004; Rodriguez, 2006). Many of them write themselves into (Black) existence from the perspective of “a prison-slave or a prison-slave-in-waiting” (Wilderson, 2003).

Liberatory Voices

Revolutionary captured people, such as New African political prisoners (Sundiata Acoli) or Black Panthers/Black Liberation Army members (Assata Shakur, Mumia Abu-Jamal and Jalil Muntaqim) in addition to slain politicized Soledad brother prisoner George Jackson, have inspired the diasporic imagination of a new generation of imprisoned Black people. In the wake of the prison rebellion years of the 1960s (cf. Gómez, 2006), they started pan-African studies and college programs, literacy education, legal rights education, AIDS awareness and health education, etc. Black Muslims have organized and won religious recognition, even though their worship continues to draw suspicion from the authorities, in particular after the events of 9/11/2001.⁶ Their subversive ideological persuasion lead them inevitably to two key pan-African leaders in the Diaspora, whose deeds and professed beliefs were considered to be criminal or subversive by the US government: I am thinking, of course, of W. E. B. Du Bois, a founding member of the Niagara Movement and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), and Marcus Garvey, the founder and leader of the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) and “Back to Africa” movement. A third influential leader, Elijah Muhammad of the Nation of Islam, inspired some one million Blacks to convert to Islam in the 1960s (cf. Muntaqim, 2002, pp.98-99). Black Muslim convicts were singled out for repression by prison psychologists and guards, in particular for psychological and physical torture, dubbed behavior modification techniques (brainwashing, Skinnerian operant conditioning, sensory deprivation, and “(overdosed) chemical or drug therapy” (Gómez, 2006, p. 63). Much of this torture program has been “refined” over the last thirty years and brought to light anew through the “Torture Memo” (2002, issued by then attorney general Roberto Gonzalez) justifying the Bush administration’s clandestine practices in the “Fight against Terror.”

And yet, prisoners continue to resist their own civil death: they cherish a sense of belonging to the “beloved community;” and a few are even sought out for political analysis and commentary; Stanley “Tookie” Williams has even been nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize. It is also noteworthy that the repressive prison apparatus brings about, ironically, spiritual transformation of convicts who assume iconic status, e.g. Malcolm X and Tookie Williams, executed in 2005.

I wish to single out imprisoned intellectuals⁷ who have left their theoretical and spiritual marks on prisoners in the US in such a way that their writings are feared and often censored by prison administrators while being unknown to civil society, media and academics.⁸ For example, Abu-Jamal received thirty days in isolation for publishing *Live from Death Row* in 1995, a collection of essays originally intended for National Public Radio, which cancelled his contract after U.S. senatorial protests of airing the voice of a convicted “cop killer.” Tiyo Salah-El, also confined in Pennsylvania, authored “A Call for the Abolition of Prisons” in James’ anthology *The New Abolitionists: (Neo)Slave Narratives and Contemporary Prison Writings* (2005). But the warden refused to allow Salah-El, a known prison abolitionist, to receive the book. Finally, it is worth mentioning Assata Shakur, who nowadays may be free to write on any topic she pleases. However, since her escape from a prison in 1979, she is wanted by the state of New Jersey with one million dollar bounty put on her person. She writes and speaks out against U.S. imperialism from Cuba, where she resides as a “marooned slave.” Incidentally, all of these authors contest their convictions, which occurred due to FBI or police sting operations.

Writing and agitating from the new Diaspora of prison cages, these intellectuals and spiritual leaders inspire new ideas for the meaning of emancipation from bondage and the meaning of true freedom. Thus, prisons, which were meant to create a compliant populace (cf. Foucault, 1977), actually create a conscientized⁹ imprisoned intellectual class writing in the neo-slave narrative tradition,¹⁰ resisting enslavement and subjugation. John Edgar Wideman’s notion of polyphonic neo-slave narratives is very apt here (1996), as he introduces the reader to Abu-Jamal’s insurrectionist prose. He revisits how the freedom cry of “Up North!” during slavery times, has shifted or continued in narratives of today’s convicts. Joy James expounds, “Not all penal slave narratives offer new visions of freedom. Some yearn for emancipation (parole, clemency) but not *freedom* (liberation from racial, economic, gender repression) and the political agency and risk-taking that could realize it” (James, 2005, p. xxiii). Abu-Jamal, Salah-El and Assata Shakur all exemplify the perspective of (radical) freedom of an “abolition democracy” (Davis, 2006), that is in a democracy where all institutions are meaningfully transformed so as to allow previously oppressed people to participate equally. Rather than focusing on self-improvement and enlightenment, their autobiographies criticize the evils of (prison) slavery and passionately

invoke new frameworks of justice.¹¹ It's noteworthy how John Edgar Wideman (1996) impassionedlly invokes the diasporic moment in the continuum of resistance exemplified by voices writing behind bars and tearing the bars down psychically:

In a new world where African people were transported to labor, die, and disappear, we've needed unbound voices to reformulate our destiny—voices refusing to be ensnared by somebody else's terms. . . . African-American culture, in spite of the weight, the assaults it has endured, may contain a key to our nation's survival, a key not found simply in the goal of material prosperity, but in the force of spirit, will, communal interdependence.

Because he tells the truth, Mumia Abu-Jamal's voice can help us tear down walls—prison walls, the walls we hide behind to deny and refuse the burden of our history. (Wideman, *ibid.*, pp. xxxiii-xxxiv)

Assata Shakur's autobiography (1987) also envisions institutional transformation—not just personal uplift—and it is not surprising the state is keen on recapturing her, announcing a bounty to bring her back to New Jersey dead or alive. Yet Assata Shakur, who describes herself as a run-away slave marooned on Cuba, explains in her autobiography, “a contemporary insurrectionist penal-slave narrative” (James, 2005, p. xxxii), it wasn't until her experience of imprisonment that she understood the ideological underpinnings of a rights-bearing individual¹² in the US. Confronted by a guard who ordered her to work, Shakur, a pre-trial convict, disobeys, “You can't make me work.” The guard's retorted: “No, you're wrong. Slavery was outlawed with the exception of prisons. Slavery is legal in prisons” (Shakur, 1987, p. 64). The guard's response was factually wrong, since Shakur had not yet been convicted. However, Shakur did not contest that interpretation. She went on to re-read the 13th Amendment and realized that anti-Black racism is part and parcel of the capitalist system—a system which promises the illusion of justice weighing onto the rights-bearing Black individual but whose institutions are racist to the core.

That explained why jails and prisons all over the country are filled to the brim with Black and third world people, why so many Black people can't find a job on the streets ... Once you're in prison, there are plenty of jobs, and, if you don't want to work, they beat you up and throw you in the hole. ... Prisons are

part of this government's genocidal war against Black and third world people.
(Shakur, *ibid.*, pp. 64-5)

Imprisonment radicalized her thinking about “aberrations” in the system. In a moving exchange with another prisoner, Shakur shares her notion of “freedom”—very much in the spirit of radical neo-slave narratives and echoing Malcolm X. It conveys a sense of that double diasporic movement—between the uneasy security of self in the streets (“walking while Black”) and the insecurity of personhood in the carceral:

[I'd] rather be in a minimum-security prison or on the streets than in the maximum-security prison in here. The only difference between here and the streets is that one is maximum security and the other is minimum security. The police patrol our communities just like the guards patrol here. I don't have the faintest idea how it feels to be free. (Shakur, *ibid.*, p. 60)

Furthermore, as Michael Hames-García (2004) articulates, we see a “struggle” paradigm in her autobiography, which is apt given her chosen African “free” name: Assata—“She who struggles.” Assata's yearning for her African roots is strongly portrayed in Gloria Rolando's documentary of her marooned life in Cuba in *Eyes of the Rainbow: Assata Shakur and Oya* (1997). In the film, Assata identifies with the warrior spirit of the Yoruban orishas and to this day, she speaks out against injustice globally and particularly imperialist injustice perpetrated by the U.S. government. Using Martin Luther King's notion of justice, Hames-García notes that Assata's revolutionary philosophy symbolizes that “[t]he very fact of freedom's incompleteness (no one is free so long as others remain unfree) necessitates action directed at changing society. Freedom, therefore, is ultimately a practice, rather than a possession or a state of being” (Hames-García, 2004, p. 96). Joe Olsen (2004) clarifies and critiques the political implications of the possessive aspects of liberty:

Freedom in the white imagination is something to possess rather than an activity to practice. This passive conception of freedom tends to sustain a worldview of atomized, status-seeking persons who see in others a threat to individual liberty rather than a condition of it. As a result citizenship becomes an identity that claims possession of significant political power but is generally disinclined to use it. (p. 127)

In their journey towards seeking liberation for their people, Black freedom fighters, such as Assata and Abu-Jamal, shed the possessive individualistic facets of liberty and endorse a struggle or process paradigm instead.

Abu-Jamal radicalized his thinking about liberty and democratic rights while appealing his death penalty from death row. Only after his appeals were unsuccessful, he came to the painful realization that he is not eligible to be a rights-bearing individual guaranteed by the U.S. constitution.

Perhaps I'm naïve, maybe I'm just stupid—but I thought the law would be followed in my case, and the conviction reversed. . . . Even in the face of the brutal Philadelphia MOVE massacre of May 13, 1985, that led to Ramona Africa's frame-up . . . my faith remained. Even in the face of this relentless wave of anti-Black state terror, I thought my appeals would be successful. I still harbored a belief in U.S. law, and the realization that my appeal had been denied was a shocker. (Abu-Jamal, 1996, pp. xviii-xix)

Tiyo Salah-El, finally, remembers his journey towards radicalization that came from becoming meaningfully educated while incarcerated in a maximum-security prison. For him, it was the path of becoming a Quaker; and after many years of intense studies becoming an abolitionist of the current penal system, which earned him the wrath of prison officials:

I did not become an abolitionist over night. Having teachers such as Monty Neill and Howard Zinn leading me into new fields of study was the key factor which in turn was indeed a blessing. Reading the works of Marx, Homer, Cervantes—looking at the powerful paintings of Picasso, Chico Mendes, African, Native American and Mexican art—listening to the powerful and beautiful music of Miles Davis, John Coltrane, . . . Bach . . . all played a part in my development. . . . I gained an international perspective regarding politics and prisons. I became a dialectical dreamer with my brain reeling with visions and dreams of a radically new society founded on a total transformation in human relationships and the abolition of prisons. (Salah-El, 2006, p. 100)

For a number of years, Salah-El has endured indignities of seeing his cage destroyed, being personally taunted by racist guards, but he has prevailed. Today, he leads successful GED

classes, parallel to the regular program provided by outside paid teachers, and trains his students in media literacy and ideology critique.

I mention these three radical freedom fighters and their pursuit of justice because it seems to me that only in the Diaspora of extreme deprivation (i.e. in a maximum security prison) did these writers begin to clarify their political and spiritual perspectives (e.g., on the structural, institutional persistence of slavery) and precisely because they refused their slave status in word and deed, they became anathema to the authorities.

Countering Amnesia About The Slavery Of Prisons

Not every critic of the current criminal justice system looks at the state of confinement with the conviction of radicalized writers, such as Abu-Jamal, Salah-El or Shakur. Remarkably, few academics and journalists writing about the prison system make use of the “slavery” trope to describe current conditions of Black and Brown mass incarceration. Joel Dyer's bestseller *The Perpetual Prisoner Machine* (2000) avoids it explicitly, along with Marc Mauer's popular treatise *Race to Incarcerate* (1999/2006). Noel Ignatiev's study *How the Irish Became White* (1995) describes prison revolts as working-class revolts rather than slave revolts—the term preferred by Black political prisoners and other imprisoned intellectuals. I find particularly useful the analysis of New African political prisoner Sundiata Acoli (1998), who gives a historical perspective of ghetto and slavery tropes. Some critics prefer the trope of the ghetto/hyperghetto (Wacquant, 2001; Mendieta, 2004) to make light of the racialized conditions of segregation, but their analyses do not clarify why it is that Black people are singled out for systematic overcriminalization. The silence vis-à-vis the “slavery of prisons” (Davis, 1998) in the majority of critical prison studies literature is perplexing, since post-1865 court decisions (e.g. *Ruffin v. Commonwealth*, 1871), Jim Crow, and lynch justice ride on the codification of slavery. On the other hand, prison critic Ruth Gilmore (2007) joins the debate by arguing that the slavery trope overstates the reality of work extracted from prison labor. Angola plantation notwithstanding, the vast majority of prisoners in fact are idle. Granted, private or government sponsored prison industries have been unable to capture effectively the potential labor pool of over 2 million captive people. Nevertheless, slavery and involuntary servitude are codified into the U.S. constitution. So, prisoners have no right to object to forced work. It should stir our conscience in ways we—on the

outside—benefit from slave labor: In New York state, the prison industry UNICOR supplies desks for public institutions and license plates for all automobiles. A convict can lose “privileges” (and incur the wrath of his jailors) for not cooperating in the daily routine of his carceral status, as Salah-El found out even as remand prisoner, when he audaciously organized a prisoner’s labor union in the aftermath of the Attica rebellion.¹³ After losing his case, he was placed in the “hole,” i.e. in segregation (Salah-El, 2006, pp.60-64).

The reality of the 13th Amendment looms large in the current era of mass incarceration, in particular of African American men and increasingly of Latinos and Black women. This constitutional amendment (1865) codified slavery, and enslavement by the state is the punishment reserved for those who are convicted of a crime: “Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, except as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall exist within the United States, or any place subject to their jurisdiction.” The question to ask here is whether it is necessary to separate *intent* and *meaning* of the law. Radical republicans such as Senator Charles Sumner of Massachusetts intended the law to have declarative character, making explicit the constitution’s anti-slavery sentiments. He submitted an amendment that explicitly provided for “equal rights” for freed persons. However, that proposal was deemed too radical and in the end the law only meant “freedom from” bondage but not “freedom to” citizenship, suffrage, land, etc.—demands enshrined in the Black Panther manifesto, a hundred years later, where freedom from imprisonment is also mentioned (BPP, 1966). Former slave states were quick to pass Black Codes, followed by the convict lease system, which brought back slavery through other means (cf. Vorenberg, 2001).¹⁴ So, clearly these states *intended* for slavery to be continued by any means necessary. The question for us today is whether the law still *means* to enslave convicts; and I would err on the side of Black radical prisoners, such as Salah-El and Acoli, that, in fact, the literal meaning of being “a slave of the state” prevails—even in an era that has brought some limited prison reforms in the aftermath of the Attica Rebellion in 1971.

As one imprisoned intellectual puts it aphoristically: “Prison. The last bastion of the Klan” (Forde/Mattis, 2001, p. 10). The reality of codified slavery has moved Joy James (2005) to speak of a “Penal Democracy” and Angela Davis (2005) to call for an “Abolition Democracy.”

The prison industrial complex has engulfed the contemporary polity just as slavery posed serious contradictions to the proclamations of freedom and democracy for all by the Founding Fathers. Drawing on Du Bois's concept of abolition democracy, Davis points to a necessary transformation of existing social structures, so that out of the ashes of slavery, debt peonage, convict leasing, the death penalty, etc., "new democratic institutions would have to be created" (2005, p. 72). The vestiges of slavery have not been dismantled, as the legal record clearly indicates. *Ruffin v. Commonwealth of Virginia* (1871) interpreted the 13th Amendment to mean that the convict had "not only forfeited his liberty but also his personal rights, except those which the law in its humanity affords him," so that the prisoner was "for the time being, the slave of the state."¹⁵

The infamous convict lease system was an outgrowth of the 13th Amendment and *Ruffin*, so that the "prison of slavery" turned into the "slavery of prison" (Davis, 1998). These institutions, chattel slavery and the carceral complex, imprint in the psyche and body of the affected person a "natal alienation" and "social death" (Patterson, 1982): "Alienated from all 'rights' or claims of birth, he ceased to belong in his own right to any legitimate social order. All slaves experienced, at the very least, a secular excommunication" (ibid, p.5). Natal alienation is a reason for refusing prisoners the right to vote. As prison abolitionist Angela Y. Davis (2006) ponders:

Why has the disenfranchisement of people convicted of felonies become so much a part of the common sense thought structures of people in this country? I believe that this . . . has its roots in slavery. A white contemporary of slavery might have remarked: 'Of course slaves weren't supposed to vote. They weren't full citizens.' In the same way people think today, 'Of course prisoners aren't supposed to vote. They aren't really citizens any more. They are in prison.' (p. 38)

Curiously, their slave/convict status has reverberations post-release. In some 13 states, ex-convicts are not enjoying their fully restored civil right; instead they are permanently barred from voting. Patterson (1982) explains how difficult it is for state actors to grant liberty to a manumitted person. Freedom is a fragile privilege, and at the slightest form of disobedience (e.g., missing a parole appointment), a former slave can be re-enslaved

for lack of gratitude and docility (cf. Patterson, 1982, pp. 240). Patterson echoes what Du Bois (1992) laments with respect to the failure of Black Reconstruction:

Slavery was not abolished even after the Thirteenth Amendment. There were four million freedmen and most of them on the same plantation, doing the same work that they did before emancipation, except as their work had been interrupted and changed by the upheaval of war. Moreover, they were getting about the same wages and apparently were going to be subject to slave codes modified only in name. . . .They had been freed practically with no land nor money, and, save in exceptional cases, without legal status, and without protection. (p. 188)

Amnesia continues to shield the beneficiaries of white supremacy from the destructive psychic force of the “post-slavery syndrome” which may have to be relabeled “neo-slavery syndrome,” to indicate that the plantation of yesterday is the walled fortress of today. And still, the spirit of resistance in the Diaspora of the prison-bantustan is alive. Political prisoner Sundiata Acoli (1998) makes these connections succinctly:

The Afrikan prison struggle began on the shores of Afrika behind the walls of medieval pens that held captives for ships bound west into slavery. It continues today behind the walls of modern U.S. penitentiaries where all prisoners are held as legal slaves—a blatant violation of international law. (p. 1)

Prisons As Diasporic Sites

Instead of fulfilling the reparative gesture of “forty acres and a mule” free Black people received the “gift” of the thirteenth amendment, and very quickly thereafter, convict leasing in the South supplanted the terror of lynch justice. While lynching subsided through the advent of the Civil Rights Movement, prisons continue to be the receptacle of a disproportionate number of people of African descent.

Since 1989 and for the first time in national history, African Americans make up a majority of those entering prison each year. Indeed, in four short decades, the ethnic composition of the U.S. inmate population has reversed, turning over from 70 percent white at mid-century to nearly 70 percent black and Latino today, although ethnic patterns of criminal activity have not fundamentally changed during that period. (Wacquant, 2002b, p. 1)

Not surprisingly, the white man finds himself to be an endangered species behind bars. Note the case of Paul Hamill, a thin and white man who was sent to a drug treatment center, not to prison, because Judge Florence Foster took pity on him: "He is thin and white, he would be a target for sexual assault" (quoted in Maasha, 2001). This justification for rehabilitation rather than casual retribution (reserved for Blacks?) is only remarkable as it is made public. As Angela Davis (1998) has observed, a Black male is more likely to be put into prison than a law-breaker (p. 105);¹⁶ a telling statistic is that a Black drug offender is likely to get a jail term (80%) while a white offender is more likely to get probation (80%) in New York State. Geographer Ruth Gilmore (2007) gives this important definition of racism:

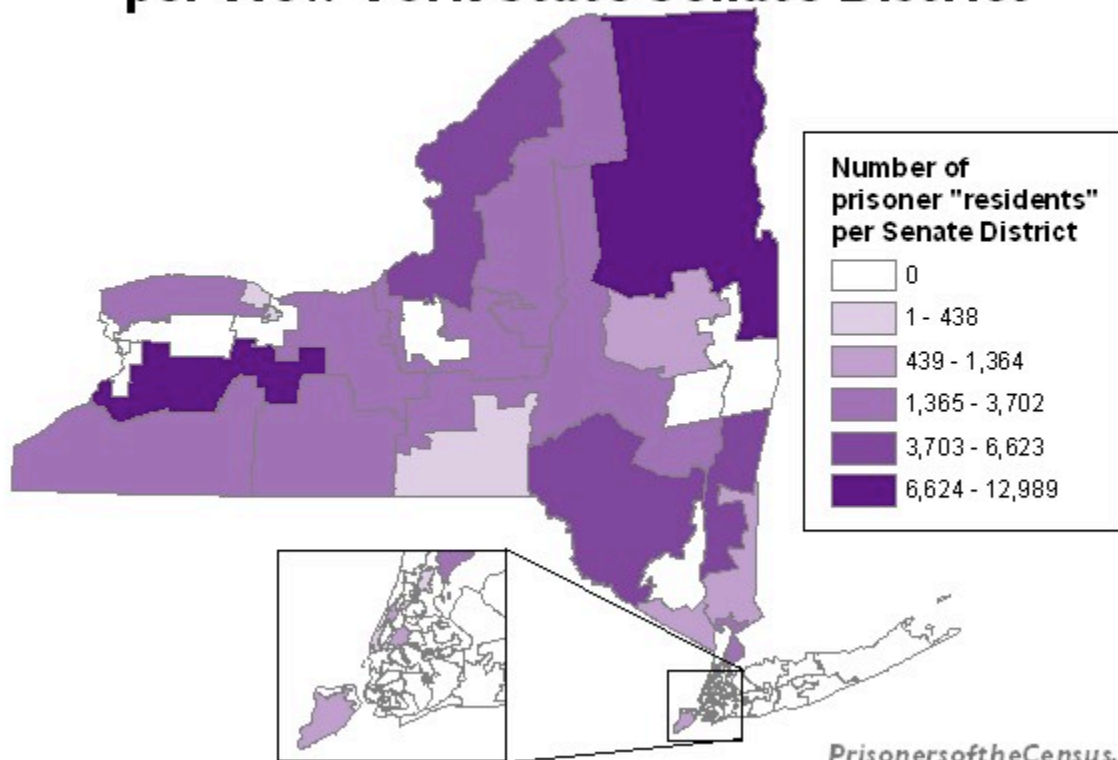
Racism is the state-sanctioned and/or extralegal production and exploitation of group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death. Prison expansion is a new iteration of this theme. Prisons and other locally unwanted land uses accelerate the mortality of modestly educated working people of all kinds in urban and rural settings and show how economic and environmental justice are central to anti-racism. (p. 247)

In her recent study on California's prison expansion before the turn of the 21st century, Gilmore also notes that the five county Los Angeles region alone is origin of 60 percent of state prisoners, and she notes that especially Black men in urban centers have experienced lower employment rates (*ibid.*, p. 75). These prisoners tend to be housed in rural, predominately white landscapes.

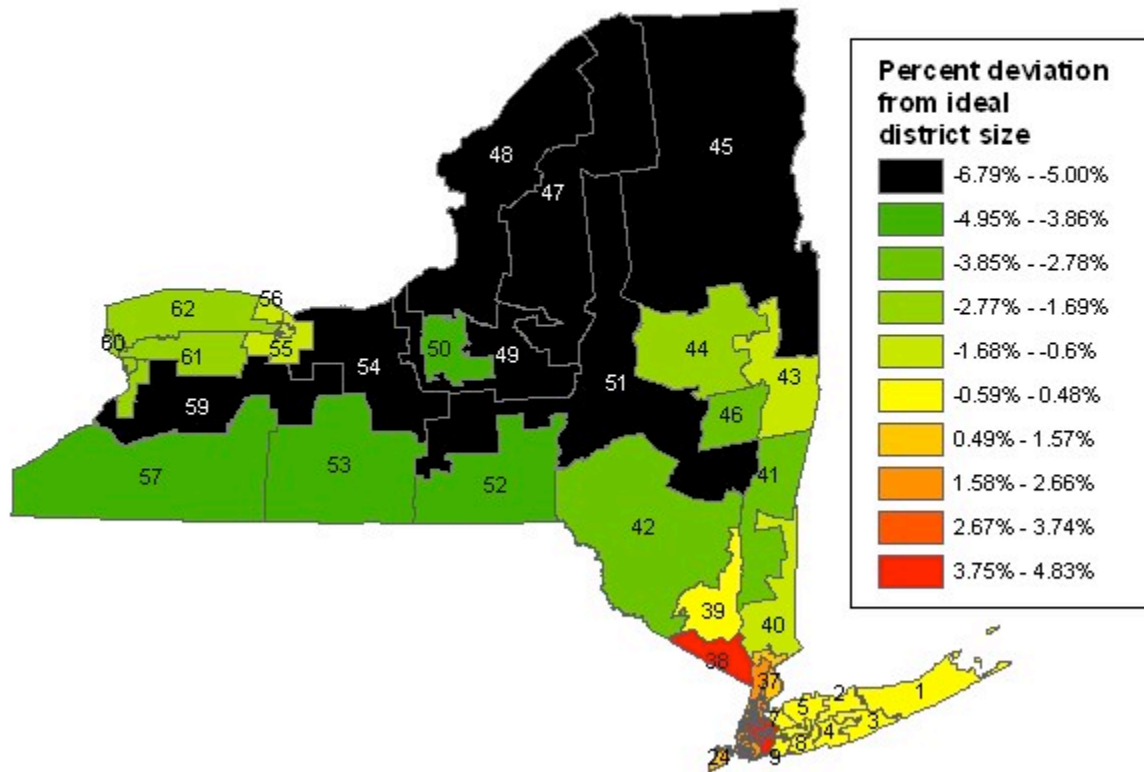
Looking at the other state that experienced similar escalation in prison construction, New York State, prison intellectuals from Sing Sing prison studied the geographic makeup of prisoners in "upstate" New York and found that, remarkably, 75 % of prisoners come from New York City. All of them are poor and most of them are African American and Latino.¹⁷ An average of 3000 men from Harlem alone are incarcerated in any given year. While none of them are allowed to vote, their bodies are counted in the district where they are incarcerated¹⁸—another reminder of an era when African American slaves were considered 3/5ths of a person in order to pad Southern states' populations and to increase their political power. The vast majority of prisoners

come from the poorest borrows of New York City, and as the following three graphics show many Northern districts find themselves suddenly racially diversified.

Number of prisoner "residents" per New York State Senate District

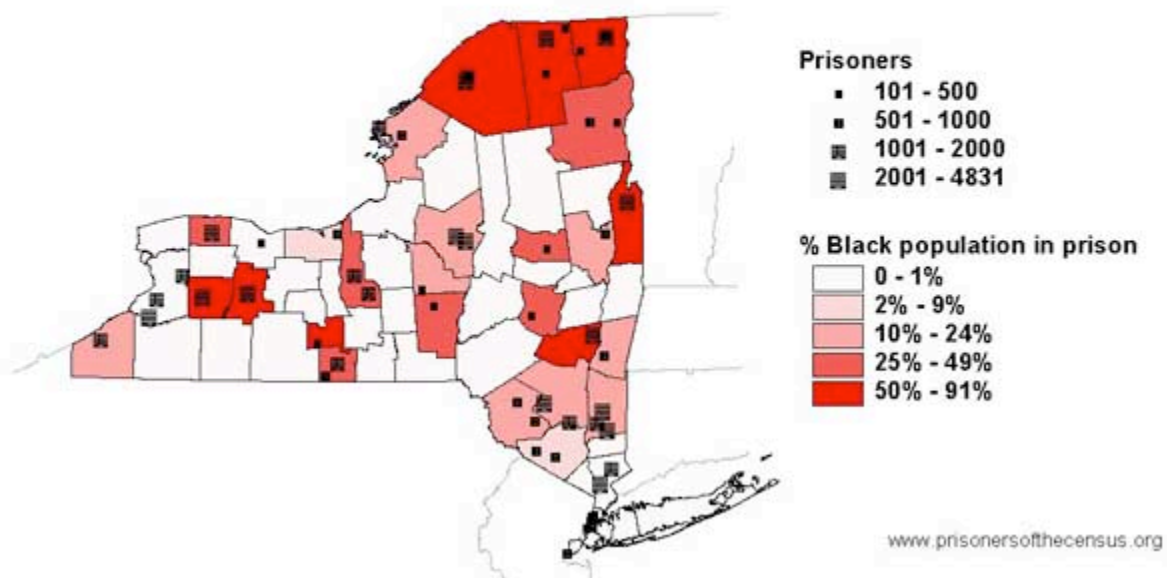


**Without prisoners as "population"
Upstate New York Senate districts
are severely under-populated**



PrisonersoftheCensus.org

New York % Black Population in Prison



<http://www.prisonersofthecensus.org/newyork.html>

Whole populations are uprooted and shipped to these rural Bantustans¹⁹ where they don't have the right to vote or the choice whether or not to work. (Work counts as “good time,” “good behavior” for parole decisions). These Bantustans increasingly harbor women and men indicted under minimum sentencing laws which contribute to an incarceration rate “of blacks in all state prisons [being] 7.66 times that of whites” (Dyer, 2000, p. 183). Salah-El (2006) makes sense of this re- and dislocation from his prison in rural Pennsylvania:

[In 1977, t]he prison population was approximately 900-950 men, all of whom were single celled. As of November 2004, the population has soared to 2,250 men half of whom are now double celled. The staff was and remains 98 percent white. Most of the prisoners are minorities from the inner cities of Philadelphia, Chester, Harrisburg, Pittsburgh and smaller towns [...]. One need not be a rocket scientist to assume that such a mix of people in a prison setting will at times bring out the worst in some if not the majority of prisoners and staff. (p. 65)

These bantustans are big business for the white towns. State prison Clinton in the North Country is a case in point—the town Dannemora, NY survives on prisons. The

prison provides 1,198 jobs, 2 million dollars per week of payroll. Dyer notes that the entire Northern New York region went from 2 prisons in 1970s to 18 prisons in the 1990s which includes \$1.5-billion in construction costs and \$425 million a year in salaries and operating expenses (Dyer, 2000, pp. 16-17).

Many of the men incarcerated in Central, Western and Northern New York have no geographic, mental mapping of where they are being held. This is often expressed in their first letters home. ("Where am I?") Once I brought maps to my students, but they were confiscated after class by the guards, even though it was the *Peterson's World Map*. Perhaps the guards were worried that the prisoners would use them to plan an escape route. What is even more troublesome is the rate of illiteracy at a staggering 70 percent of the prison population.²⁰ It certainly strikes me as a continuation of the slave master's desire to keep his docile workforce in cognitive bondage. In the film *How Do You Spell Murder?* (A. Raymond & S. Raymond, 2003), Nathaniel tells of his trials of repeating second grade five times and ending up in state prison on a murder charge. We see his arduous and successful journey towards simple reading comprehension guided lovingly by another prisoner-literacy teacher. In the end, he reopened his legal case and received a new trial, because the court discovered that Nathaniel was illiterate when he "signed" his confession as a teenager.

Prisoners are geographically isolated from their communities and their children. This is contrary to the spirit of the United Nations' *Body of Principles for the Protection of All Persons under Any Form of Detention or Imprisonment* (1988) and contrary to rehabilitative principles that stipulate that prisoners housed in vicinity to their families may be able to continue affective bonds which reassure their reintegration into society post release. The long distances traveled by families of prisoners in New York State are a case in point. Almost all state prisons are in upstate New York. It takes eight or more hours by bus to get to Elmira prison from Port Authority, New York City. (A number of the charter buses have been set up by former convicts; buses leave the terminal at midnight or 2 am so that the families may arrive during opening hours of the prison visitors' center.) The Albion medium security prison for women is located on the Northern New York border. Women are the primary care takers of their children. 75% or more of women prisoners are mothers and most of them come from New York City.

Since the 1997 Adoption and Safe Family Act (ASFA), which intended to benefit foster children neglected by parents who were drug addicted, it has become harder for women convicts to keep custody over their children. How can children travel 16 hours a weekend or more, to keep “emotional bonds” to their mother alive and well, traveling from New York City to Albion by bus? Attempting to provide “better homes” for children of prisoners the state’s child welfare service cuts off all contact if the biological mother cannot prove that she has provided adequate emotional service. The memory of chattel slavery looms large. The child may lose her mother, if she has been incarcerated for 15 months. Children of the incarcerated have a greater chance of imprisonment as adults than those who grew up with their parents or close kin in the home. The child’s posttraumatic stress of losing one’s parent to the “system” is one of the hidden collateral effects of imprisonment (Bernstein, 2005). Again, ASFA reminds us of Patterson’s (1982) analysis of the slave’s natal alienation; such policy is a grim reminder of the enduring loss of kinship and of formal and substantive rights experienced by prisoners and those children of the incarcerated, who are themselves prisoners-in-waiting:

Formally isolated in his social relations with those who lived, [the slave] also was culturally isolated from the social heritage of his ancestors. ... That they reached back for the past, as they reached out for the related living, there can be no doubt. Unlike other persons, doing so meant struggling with and penetrating the iron curtain of the master, his community, his laws, his policemen or patrollers, and his heritage. (Patterson, 1982, p. 5)

The North (of the U.S.) developed its own version of Jim Crow justice after 1945. As ex-political prisoner and former Panther Lawrence Hayes has noted Blacks were hardly represented in the prisons in the Empire State before the 1940s, so that no racial statistics were kept. With the return of Black GIs from WW II who demanded equal rights to housing, jobs, and education, Black men were perceived as uppity, and they were duly criminalized and incarcerated (Hayes, 2000). So, prison populations in New York State slowly started to change their racial makeup, till the advent of the Rockefeller Drug laws in 1973 drastically accelerated this trend by targeting Black city youth and adults. Today, the vast majority of people, in fact over 92 percent, convicted for a non-violent offense under the punitive Rockefeller Drug laws are African Americans condemned to sentences

ranging from 15 years to life (Drop the Rock, 2006). At about the same time in the 1970s, US trade liberalization resulted in the loss of blue color jobs with devastating results to Blacks residing in Rust Belt cities and elsewhere. Add to that the dismantling of social services and turning schools into penal prototypes replete with metal detectors and armed guards, and one might understand why Assata Shakur describes the US American city environment as a “minimum security” prison.

The neo-colonial, criminalized, disenfranchised subject is ejected from her neighborhood (e.g., Queens, Harlem, Bronx) and transported to the white, rural outskirts of the state, the North Country—geographically, completely cut off from her family and community. Yet, these prisons create new cultural diasporic sites; depending on the prisoner, they become sites of resistance or are transformed into sites of resignation: “homes.” The few reporters who gain access to prisons today are able to do so because their purpose is fairly apolitical; they photograph well decorated prison cells, with crochet blankets draping toilets and beddings. Leading a life on the “installment plan,” when convicts return to the prison, they are often greeted with a hearty: “welcome home.” The prison symbolizes the extended family of the “street life” of criminalized city youth and adults.

Soffiyah J. Elijah (2007), a prominent attorney for political prisoners, recounts her story of traveling “upstate” New York to see her boyfriend in various state prisons before she got involved in the movement to free political prisoners in the 1980s. She noted that the guards were all white and the convicts mostly Black. Elijah was struck how many of the high school mates she recognized in the visiting room had previously “disappeared” (Elijah, 2007, p. 13). “Recidivism. Welcome back home. That’s what it seems like to me,” opines prisoner-poet Forde/Mattis (2001, p. 11).

Of course, politically astute prisoners, like Forde/Mattis, refuse to make their cage “home,” so as to refuse to grow accustomed to their imprisoned status. However, they are also singled out for further punishment: censored correspondence, no access to their own authored books (as Salah-El’s and Abu-Jamal’s cases exemplify), no “contact” visitation rights, no phone calls to loved ones—all of these deprivations signify “a racial geography of distance and alienation” (Rodriguez, 2006, p. 30). Beyond alienation, the state attempts to discipline the body to create a docile, pliable subject who has

sufficiently internalized the guard's gaze to regulate her own behavior and snitch on others who are not yet docile bodies (Foucault, 1995). Yet, as Michel Foucault (1990) reminds us "power comes from below" and people reduced to slave status in total institutions always find a way to resist and fight back.

The Meaning Of Slave Revolts In The Diaspora

If all prisoners stopped working today, would the prison machinery collapse? It seems it would be on the brink of collapse, if we think through the questions posed by the organizers of the Y2K strike:

Why should we be the raw materials in the [Department of Correctional services] prison industrial corporation which only serves the interests of politicians to be elected into office, and to provide jobs for rural Northern New Yorkers? Why should we work to maintain the prisons as porters, cooks, plumbers, masons, welders, tailors, roofers, painters ... or in any capacity necessary to keep DOCS prison corporation functioning properly? (cited in Gonnerman, 1999)

When one of my Black students in an upstate New York prison mentioned the impending Y2K strike, to begin January 1, 2000, that was organized by downstate prisoners in 1999 he ended up in "the box" for several months. Even though he got a majority vote to be on the prisoners' grievance board, the authorities also pressured him to resign, or, else, they would impeach him. This prison, as others, is 85 % black and brown, but the grievance board is made up of white prisoners only. To advocate a strike in the post-Attica era prisons will jeopardize your parole eligibility; it is one of the disturbances prison officials fear most.

A conscientized²¹ prison population that understands the function of work, the gaze of the guards, regimentation of minute bodily movements, etc., in the total institution is truly hard to manage. Greenhaven prison, which was the center of the Y2K work strike, was a case in point. It was frightening for guards to watch a thousand men file into mess hall silently consuming their meal in preparation for the strike or that the convicts did not show up at all to meals.²² Over 300 suspected organizers were shipped to upstate prisons where prisoners were considered to be more docile (Gonnerman, 1999), and thus the strike was narrowly averted.

Racist practices by the administration, however, are used to further conflict

among prisoners. Friendships across racial boundaries are hard to build or maintain, especially when whites are perceived to get substantial perks: white convicts enjoy better work opportunities, for instance doing maintenance work, rather than janitorial tasks, they get to drive the lawn mower trucks, they get paid better and also for overtime. Furthermore, there is religious discrimination: Muslims and Rastafarians and other religious minorities need to sign up for call-out, whereas Christians can go to their church services without giving prior notice. Native Americans may be denied altogether their religious right to participate in a sweat lodge ceremony, even if it is for their “last rite” before state execution (Peltier, 2003, p. 317).

The collective strikes by prisoners, from Attica, Folsom to the ostensibly civil disobedient action in Greenhaven, transcend racial strife, invoke principles of humanity and a spirit of community which break walls and overcome geographic distances psychically and symbolically. As today’s hunger strikes and brutal force feedings endured by Guantánomo Bay prisoners of war stir our collective conscience, prison takeovers and manifestos, while often futile in the short run, demand ethical and solidary responses from civil society, teachers, clergy and media, to name a few. However, prison writers, such as Piri Thomas (1994) who reflects on the futility of rebellion, often are the only voices of conscience that are being heard by the public. Hames-García (2004) notes: “Indeed, prison uprisings demonstrate the ultimate example of defiance for its own sake. Without a realistic hope of changing conditions, rebellion participants must find meaning in the act of rebellion itself” (p. 152).

Recall the immense moral outcry of the public of Governor Rockefeller’s brutal suppression of the Attica brothers’ take over of the prison. In its aftermath, public hearings were held with survivors testifying to the abysmal, retributivist and racist conditions of Attica and many other state prisons around the U.S. Reforms followed which established prison law libraries, GED and college level education, etc., in New York State and beyond. These reforms give the illusion that the prisoner still retains some rights and is not treated as a slave. However, over the past 200 years of modern imprisonment, reform measures have been sporadically introduced and tend to be short lived (Rotman, 1995). College education was abandoned with the passage of the 1995 Omnibus Crime Bill. Federal prisoners responded to this particular bill with their feet,

protesting the severe Crack cocaine sentences—100 times more severe sentencing guidelines than for the possession of powder cocaine. Aware of the racist statistics that no whites were ever convicted of crack-related federal offenses, 16 federal prisons experienced peaceful protests after the House vote (Hames-García, 2004, p. 253).

Not surprisingly, many of the collective actions have been led by political prisoners, who after the Attica rebellion are particularly scrutinized and often spend years, if not decades, in solitary confinement. Mumia Abu-Jamal is a case in point for remaining on death row, despite the fact that his death sentence was vacated in 2001. Officials also suspect political prisoners' involvement even where none can be proven. Marilyn Buck was put into solitary confinement for several weeks along with other political prisoners nationwide on September 11, 2001 and writes on these experiences in her poem "Incommunicado: Dispatches from a Political Prisoner":

9/11 *no prisoner may speak to you*
 you may not speak to any prisoner

9/12 overheard voices
 there are terrorists here
 who are the terrorists?
 Silence, everyone behind her door listens

9/14 a legal call
 small relief: it's political—Washington—
 not something I did

9/17 no more calls
 no visits
 no mail
 until further notice.

(Buck, 2003, p. 324)

Buck, a former Weather Underground member, has been imprisoned since 1985 for assisting Assata Shakur in escaping from prison in 1979.

While agitating from within for social change and social justice, political prisoners also inform and shape political action in the "free world." For example, in 1998 political prisoner Jalil Muntaqim encouraged students and other supporters to engage in a Jericho

march (inspired by a biblical passage and a spiritual)²³ for the liberation of political prisoners in the U.S. The march grew into a sustained Jericho Movement. Jericho chapters around the nation continue to thrive, and they raise the public's awareness that there are indeed political prisoners confined in U.S. federal and state prisons.²⁴

Recapturing Faith In The Diaspora Of Confinement

Writing in the neo-colonial and neo-slave era, prison intellectuals have shed light on the predominant black populace, as poignantly noted by Mumia Abu-Jamal in an essay "Fade to Black" (in *Live from Death Row*) where he recounts how a Native American prisoner on death row comments bewilderedly that he has appropriated a Black vernacular while incarcerated. Native people "turn black."

In his book *Faith of our Fathers: An Examination of the Spiritual Life of African and African-American People*, Abu-Jamal (2003) turns from his earlier socio-political analysis to a moving narration of African-based spirituality, which had inspired his ancestors to survive and even resist slavery in the Americas. The African gods and orishas may have gone dormant in Anglo-protestant North America, but Christianity was profoundly altered in slave quarters where African captives re-imagined the Jewish Jubilee (a year when all social differences were supposed to be leveled and every man to be returned to his family; Leviticus 25: 8-10) to deliver them from their enslaved status (Abu-Jamal, 2003, pp. 22-28). It is even more astounding that Islam, first brought to US shores by a few Muslim West Africans who were subsequently pressured to convert to Christianity, has become a cultural force in the diasporic Black community.

It is a kind of poetic justice that a faith, which faded some two centuries ago, is experiencing a resurgence at the dawn of the twenty-first century. With roots stemming from West Africa, Black Islam has had a long and remarkable history in the Americas. Whenever it would re-emerge, it would have a distinctly nationalistic character (Abu-Jamal, 2003, pp. 48-49).

Incidentally, Black Muslims and their imams are again under attack post- 9/11, with a heightened insecurity over the tentacles of Al Qaida's network, which apparently has unleashed its belief system into the U.S. prison system. A federal study warned that "[r]adicalized prisoners are a potential pool of recruits by terrorist groups. The U.S., with its large prison population, is at risk of facing the sort of homegrown terrorism currently

plaguing other countries” (cited in Jordan, 2006). Such government worry is familiar to those who remember FBI director Hoover’s rhetoric (and fear) of imminent Black insurrection of the 1960s.

Beyond Exile

Clearly, despite the geographic discontinuities, prison-Bantustan sites are also diasporic cultural sites: Besides the plethora of prison intellectual literature, there are also many other cultural productions which have influenced civil society in the US and globally, appropriating linguistic, musical and clothing styles. Some of them are not entirely meant as resistance commodification, as the popular jeans label “Prison Blues” attests to (Nagel, 2002). It is also important to note that oversized clothing casts a suspicion on young Black males of being associated with a gang; gang affiliation leads to criminalizing the youth as “terrorists” in states, such as California. Such mis-identification of Black men is reminiscent of the times of the fugitive slave law when three Black men walking together would be considered run-away slaves.²⁵

A political issue that has picked up tremendous momentum is the reparations movement, spearheaded in part by Black prisoners. The call for reparations is a key issue that ties the Diaspora back to the continent. As New African prisoner of war Abdul O. Shakur argues: “As long as this government refuses to pay reparation for slavery, Jim Crow, COINTELPRO, and all crimes committed against the New Afrikan nation, we have the right to impose armed restitution/reparation until they pay” (Shakur, 1999, p. 17). Prison resistances, from work strikes to rebellious manifestos, have divergent aims and ideologies, yet, fundamentally, are united by one goal: to refuse slave status and demand respect and recognition for one’s humanity. Perhaps this goal of achieving humanity is a long way from accomplishing the break down of the walls, as envisioned by Assata Shakur or by the Jericho Movement to free all political prisoners. However, these courageous voices from prisons and exile might just mobilize a new abolitionist movement in the long run—to end state-sanctioned slavery.

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Notes

¹ A different version of this paper was first presented at the Critical Resistance East conference at Columbia University (2001). I have benefited from discussions with participants at the conference celebrating the life and work of Ann Ferguson, University of Massachusetts (May 11-13, 2007), from participants at a summer NEH seminar (Atlanta, July 2007) and colloquium members of the Binghamton University graduate program in Social, Political, Ethical and Legal Philosophy (October 2007). I am grateful to Andrew Altmann, Ami Bat Bar-On, Neta Crawford, Ann Ferguson, Arabella Lyon, Kathy Russell, Tiyo Attallah Salah-El, Rashad Shabazz, Danesh Singh, Tonia St. Germain, Christopher Yeomans for their helpful comments.

² Lehlohonolo Moagi, personal communication (2002).

³ And the following sobering anecdote suggests that children have internalized this statistic: a six year old Black boy was asked about his aspirations for adulthood and he answered that "I want to go to college but first I'll go to prison to get that out of the way" (personal communication, Carol Tushabe).

⁴ The African Union has defined the African diaspora as "[consisting] of people of African origin living outside the continent, irrespective of their citizenship and nationality and who are willing to contribute to the development of the continent and the building of the African Union." Its constitutive act declares that it shall "invite and encourage the full participation of the African Diaspora as an important part of our Continent, in the building of the African Union."

<http://www.africaunion.org/root/au/AboutAu/Vision/Volume1.pdf>

AU acknowledges that pan-Africanist movement was inspired in the diaspora by WEB Du Bois and Marcus Garvey.

⁵ Migration often has the character of "involuntary choice," being caught in a double bind or avoiding a lesser of two evils. Black youth lack legitimate jobs in many U.S. cities and thus are recruited to high risk jobs of drug dealing, etc. Thus, urban economic conditions breed "illegitimate capitalists" who eventually reside behind prison walls (Jackson, 2003, p.82).

⁶ "Study: Prisons Breed Islamic Extremists" (Lara Jakes Jordan, AP, September 19, 2006; printed in <http://realcostofprisons.org/blog>).

⁷ For an analysis of the term, see Joy James, *Imprisoned Intellectuals* (2003). Referencing Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks*, James notes that the imprisoned intellectual "is a public intellectual who, like his or her highly visible and celebrated counterparts [i.e. public intellectuals], reflects upon social meaning, discord, development, ethics, and justice. Prisons function as intellectual and political sites unauthorized by the state" (pp.4-5).

⁸ Anecdotally speaking, whenever I mention Mumia's name in classes in prisons, the faces of the students light up, whereas teaching his work at my college none of the students

ever heard his name, even those students who are from Philadelphia where he worked as a radio journalist before his arrest and trial.

⁹ Here I am using the term “conscientize” in the tradition of South Africa’s Black Consciousness Movement of the 1970s. See also Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970).

¹⁰ See John Edgar Wideman’s introduction in Mumia Abu-Jamal, *Live from Death Row* (1996), for a discussion of neo-slave narratives.

¹¹ Note Hames-García’s discussion on autobiographical pedagogy (2004, pp. 102-3).

¹² Cf. Angela Davis (2000) writes: “The subject of the law is the abstract rights-bearing citizen and, indeed, the civil rights movement made great strides in deracializing the law and in extending its putative neutrality. However, the condition for the legal assimilation of racially marginalized communities is their conceptualization as aggregations of rights-bearing individuals who must appear separately before a law that will only consider their culpability and not its own. It has become increasingly difficult to identify the profound and egregious impact of racism, in and outside the law, on these communities. No racially explicit laws have facilitated the shifting of vast black and Latino populations from the free world to the universe of the imprisoned” (p. 135).

¹³ In a remarkable opinion, the Pennsylvania Labor Relations Board ruled that prisoners cannot be considered employees under the Public Employee Relations Act for reason of “wisdom and prudence” and admit that they “speculate” what the Act may have intended to mean with respect to the prisoners’ status (Pennsylvania Labor Relations Board vs. Teamsters Local 77, PERA-C-8953-E, p. 6).

¹⁴ Interestingly, today, lawyers who press for Black reparation, invoke approvingly the 13th Amendment when they argue for ending the badge of slavery. While compensation for slave-owners was debated in connection with the 13th Amendment in 1864, Black reparation was never brought up. African American abolitionists themselves were rather silent during the 13th Amendment congressional debates, because they felt that voting rights and getting land were more pressing: “African Americans revealed their preference for explicit rights *for* free labor over a constitutional decree *against* slavery” (Vorenberg, 2001, p. 84).

¹⁵ Quoted in L. Orland, *Prisons: Houses of Darkness* (New York: Free Press, 1975), p. 81.

¹⁶ See also Mauer, 1999/2006, who references sociologist Devah Pager’s (2003) study of Black and white testers, where whites with felony convictions got job interviews and Black men without convictions did not. Mauer notes that “[B]lack men are essentially born with the stigma of a felony conviction” (p. 199).

¹⁷ Report from the “What good comes out of prison?” conference, NY, 2000.

¹⁸ “The Census Bureau counts prisoners as if they lived voluntarily in the communities where they are incarcerated. And though most states bar prisoners from voting, the inaccurate census figures allow state lawmakers to pad district populations when drawing legislative maps. This creates prison districts with disproportionate voting power and drains political influence from the urban districts where most prisoners live” (Prisoners of the Census, 2007).

¹⁹ Here it is worth mentioning that the Apartheid government of South Africa instituted Bantustan for effective self-rule of the native population. Thanks to Neta Crawford for this point. Prison-Bantustans are not governed by this ideological pretense.

²⁰ However, in a new study comparing literacy skills between incarcerated and “free” people in the US, presents the following major findings:

* The average Prose, Document, and Quantitative literacy scores of the prison population were higher in 2003 than in 1992.

* Prison inmates had lower average prose, document, and quantitative literacy than adults living in households. On average, inmates also had lower levels of educational attainment than adults living in households.

* In general, either prison inmates had lower average Prose, Document, and Quantitative literacy than adults living in households with the same level of educational attainment or there was no statistically significant difference between the two groups. *The exception was that among adults without any high school education, prison inmates had higher average literacy on all three scales than adults living in households.*

* In 2003, 37 percent of the prison population did not have a high school diploma or a GED, compared with 49 percent in 1992.

* Incarcerated White adults had lower average prose literacy than White adults living in households. *Incarcerated Black and Hispanic adults had higher average prose literacy than Black and Hispanic adults living in households.*

* Between 1992 and 2003, average prose and quantitative literacy levels increased for prison inmates who were Black, male, or in the 25- to 39-year-old age group. (Literacy Behind Bars: Results From the 2003 National Assessment of Adult Literacy Prison Survey online; emphasis, MN)

²¹ Conscientization of the masses of prisoners is still a difficult feat: As Tiyo Salah-El often notes in his letters, most convicts are passive, preferring to spend the day watching TV, or involve themselves in gambling and other illicit activities (cf. George Jackson’s apt description of such prisoners as “illegitimate capitalists”). Salah-El reports with pride that he was able to coax some lifers in their 50s and 60s to participate in his GED classes and be tutored by him (personal communication, March, 2008)

²² Oddly, the classic Auburn prison model of the “silent system” invokes fear and trembling in the jailors of today.

²³ Muntaqim (1998) writes: “The principle idea is biblical in origin: Book of Joshua—Chapter 6. Joshua was a general of Prophet Moses and his brother Aaron, until they died. Joshua inherited the leadership as a political and military leader. On one Campaign, Joshua marched his army of People on Jericho, and in a 7 day siege they were able to win the city. The siege of Jericho according to biblical lore was a miracle of people power, which upon command they made a loud clamor of shouts and blowing of trumpets that the walls of Jericho came tumbling down.” And thus are the lyrics of the spiritual: “Joshua fought the battle of Jericho, Jericho, Jericho; Joshua fought the battle of Jericho and the walls came tumbling down” (Marpessa Kupendua, 1998).

²⁴ Thanks to Jericho, political prisoners and POWs are not forgotten, and due to vigorous organizing, especially among Puerto Ricans, several prisoners received release (with conditions), pardoned by President Clinton when he left office in 2000.

²⁵ Thanks to Soffiyah Elijah for this observation during a book reading on *Prisons and Punishment* (Nagel and Asumah, eds.) in Amherst, MA, May 2007.

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