

Army of the Wronged: Autobiography, Political Prisoners, and Black Radicalism

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They daily stagger out of prison doors embittered, vengeful, hopeless, ruined. And of this army of the wronged, the proportion of Negroes is frightful. We protect and defend sensational cases where Negroes are involved. But the greater mass of arrested or accused Black folk have no defense. There is desperate need . . . to oppose this national racket of railroading to jails and chain gangs the poor, friendless and Black.

—W. E. B. Du Bois,

as quoted in *If They Come in the Morning:
Voices of Resistance* (1971)

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, there was a robust yet besieged Black radical movement in the United States. This was the volatile era of Black Power, and several Black radicals (many of whom were members of, or affiliated with, the Black Panther Party) explicitly regarded themselves as effectively at war with the US government. These were leftist revolutionaries who were convinced that the American social order completely lacked legitimacy, and that US law therefore had no authority over them. They also thought that their declaration of war was reciprocated, that state officials—from the FBI to local law enforcement—were self-consciously using the tactics and machinery of war to repress this internal uprising and socialist insurgency, including hunting, capturing, incapacitating, torturing, and killing Black radicals.

There is, I believe, much truth in this characterization of this moment in US history, and by using this framework we can learn something about law's value and limits in the context of violent civil conflict. I explore the underlying questions of political morality and legal theory at issue through a reading and examination of four autobiographies: *Soledad Brother: The Prison Letters of George Jackson* (1970); *Revolutionary Suicide* (1973); *Angela Davis: An Autobiography*

(1974); and *Assata: An Autobiography* (1988).¹ I also consider selections from a classic anthology of prison writings, *If They Come in the Morning: Voices of Resistance* (1971), edited by Angela Y. Davis.²

The authors of these texts—George Jackson, Huey P. Newton, Angela Y. Davis, and Assata Shakur—each spent significant time in prison, and while incarcerated they wrote about their lives, their captivity, and their radical political vision. Each regarded himself or herself as a political prisoner and, effectively, as a prisoner of war, captured by a domestic enemy and hoping to escape to rejoin the fight. Though each fought for their own personal freedom from incarceration and for the freedom of other political prisoners, their stated aim was ultimately the freedom of all oppressed peoples through revolutionary struggle.

I. Slavery, Colonialism, and the Right to Revolt

The enslavement of Africans and their descendants in the Americas are a literary, moral, and political touchstone for these four Black radicals. Each regards slave resistance and the radical abolitionist movement as a model for their own political engagement and an inspiration in their ongoing struggle for freedom. It is tempting, then, to regard their biographical, prison-related writings as neo-slave narratives.³ After all, they rely on familiar slave-narrative conventions. For instance, they provide detailed and vivid descriptions of the horrifically inhumane conditions of their captivity and the cruelty of their captors. Suspense is created by first-person narration of harrowing attempts to evade capture, with narrow escapes facilitated by guile and uncommon bravery. An emotional identification with the protagonist is created through lyrical and evocative representations of the fear, sadness, and paranoia of the fugitive. There are scenes that depict painful shackling, public humiliation, brutal beatings, heartbreaking separation from loved ones, and torturous physical isolation. The sympathetic reader is moved by displays of solidarity and self-respect among the oppressed; inspired by the sacrifice and commitment of allies; and disappointed by the inevitable betrayals and cowardly submission among those well positioned to advance the cause.

However, I'm hesitant to interpret these works solely through the lens of that venerable tradition of black letters. The most influential slave narratives, such as those of Frederick Douglass and Harriet Jacobs, exposed and dramatized the

¹ George Jackson, *Soledad Brother: The Prison Letters of George Jackson* (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 1994); Huey P. Newton, *Revolutionary Suicide* (New York: Writers and Readers Publishing, 1995); Angela Davis, *Angela Davis: An Autobiography* (New York: International Publishers, 1974); Assata Shakur, *Assata: An Autobiography* (London: Zed Books, 2016).

² Angela Davis, ed., *If They Come in the Morning: Voices of Resistance*, Kindle edition (New York: Verso Books, 2016).

³ See, for example, Joy James, ed., *The New Abolitionists: (Neo)slave Narratives and Contemporary Prison Writings* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005).

evils of slavery with a view toward moral suasion. They were self-conscious appeals to the sympathy and sense of justice of powerful whites, with the hope that they might withdraw their support for the slave regime and join the nonviolent abolitionist movement. The autobiographical writings of the Black radical political prisoners I discuss are not best understood as attempts at moral suasion or peaceful protest. And they are aimed at raising the political consciousness of the oppressed, not at appealing to the powerful for redress. They are their own genre of literary nonfiction, which could be called “revolutionary political-prisoner narratives” or “radical prisoner narratives,” and I will treat them as such, highlighting what is most distinctive about this mode of writing.

Nevertheless, slavery and slave revolts are frequently invoked in these writings. The heroes here are not so much Douglass or Jacobs but Nat Turner and Harriet Tubman, and sometimes John Brown. Such references to enslavement and slave resistance play three principal roles. First, the ongoing mistreatment of Black people, in Black communities and in prison, is said to be the continuation of slavery, a new form of slavery, or strikingly similar to familiar practices of enslavement. Second, the condition of enslavement—in particular, the relation between the slaveholder and the enslaved—is taken to justify extralegal, even violent, resistance as self-defense and to secure emancipation. Third, slave rebellions are a model for revolutionary collective action, both inside and outside prison walls.

In addition to slavery, colonial subjugation is frequently invoked in these radical prison narratives, and for the same reasons. Black American oppression is often portrayed as neocolonial domination, where Blacks in the United States are described as a subject people with a right to self-determination that is being wrongfully denied. The violent and despotic relation between the colonizer and the colonized (like the relation between master and slave) is taken as a justification for defiance of law and for organized rebellion. And revolutionary national liberation movements in Africa, Asia, and Latin America are models for militant political engagement to win Black American independence, through violent struggle if necessary. Here, two earlier texts in the broader Black radical tradition are hugely influential—Frantz Fanon’s *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961) and *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (1965)—and are best read alongside these Black radical prison narratives to grasp their full import (for example, how Black nationalist and revolutionary socialist ideas are combined). I turn now to illustrating the two narrative patterns (slavery and colonial parallels) and making explicit the underlying structure of normative argument implicit therein.

Slavery, in both the republican and liberal traditions, is regarded as intolerable tyranny, abject unfreedom, and a state of war against the enslaved. There are two related wrongs—despotism and involuntary servitude—which are often combined in practice. And yet this condition, says the Black radical, is the experience

of generations of Black people in America and elsewhere: involuntary servitude under despotic rule. To add insult to injury, this tyrannical and exploitative practice was justified on the grounds that Black people are an inferior race and thus are owed no better treatment than permanent paternalistic subjection. For nearly four centuries, the principal agents and beneficiaries of this wretched regime have been intent on maintaining white supremacy at the expense of peoples of African descent. Thus, the long-standing plight of Blacks in America has been involuntary servitude under despotic white rule.

In *Soledad Brother*, in a letter addressed to his father, Jackson says, "I know you have never been free. I know that few Blacks over here have ever been free. The forms of slavery merely *changed* at the signing of the Emancipation Proclamation from chattel slavery to economic slavery."⁴ In a letter to his mother, Jackson continues on this theme by insisting that Blacks continue to be "slaves" and inheritors of a "neoslave existence."⁵ At the same time, he speaks of Blacks in America as being in a "colonial situation," as members of a "Black colony," and as forcibly socialized and educated within an "enemy culture."⁶

Jackson explicitly rejected Martin Luther King Jr.'s nonviolent resistance on the grounds that Black people's oppressors have no fellow-feeling or sense of justice toward their subordinates, are manifestly hypocritical in their stated commitment to "liberty" and "equality," and will not yield without the use of force.⁷ To further establish the legitimacy of this point of view, he draws attention to the fact that eighteenth-century white colonial settlers in America refused to submit to the arbitrary will of the English monarchy, publicly declared their independence, and, when threatened with violent reprisals, fought a war to secure their freedom and political autonomy.⁸ Black Americans, though subject to much worse forms of tyranny and servitude, are consistently denied self-determination and broadly condemned and sometimes retaliated against when they fight back or refuse to submit.

In *Revolutionary Suicide*, Newton also highlights the similarities between enslavement and imprisonment. For instance, he describes prison labor as uncompensated involuntary servitude, and thus akin to slavery. He notes the lack of freedom of movement, the absolute power of prison authorities, the constant surveillance, and the general atmosphere of fear and suspicion. He tells us, "[I]f inmates develop meaningful and revolutionary friendships among themselves, these ties are broken by institutional transfer, just as the slavemaster broke up

⁴ Jackson, *Soledad Brother*, 68.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 111.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 7, 32.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 106, 167–68.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 118.

families.”⁹ He also laments the fact that Black children are not taught that their ancestors participated in slave rebellions.¹⁰

Shakur was convicted of murdering a New Jersey state trooper but later escaped from prison and fled to Cuba, where she reportedly remains, having been granted political asylum. She explains that she came to reject her “slave name” of “JoAnne Deborah Chesimard” in favor of “Assata,” which means “she who struggles.” Although she sometimes invokes slavery and slave revolts in *Assata* (including a nod to her hero Harriet Tubman, who also renamed herself), Shakur more consistently uses an anticolonial framework to characterize her revolutionary activity: “[The Black Panther] Party supported revolutionary struggles and governments all over the world and insisted the u.s. get out of Africa, out of Asia, out of Latin America, and out of the ghetto too.”¹¹ In line with this framing, she considers herself a member of the “Black Liberation Army,” whose function is to deliver national liberation for a colonially subordinated people “by any means necessary.”¹² The moral ground for this stance is not only opposition to racism and capitalism, but also a belief that Black self-determination is a “basic right.”¹³

These imprisoned radicals insist on the right of revolution in response to unyielding tyranny and exploitation. Sometimes the apt comparison is to the American Revolutionary War (or War of Independence), particularly when the colonial subjugation analogy is being invoked. At other times, the relevant comparison is to the Civil War, which was waged, in part, to end slavery. In both cases, the rhetorical point of the comparison is to highlight the fact that the Black liberation struggle, even when revolutionary in its aims, is not morally out of step with American political culture, but is in fact a logical extension of it, though, crucially, in an antiracist and anti-imperialist register.

II. Law Enforcement as Weapon of War

In her 2000 Foreword to Shakur’s *Assata*, Davis explains, “When Richard Nixon raised the slogan of ‘law and order’ in the 1970s, it was used in part to discredit the Black liberation movement and to justify the deployment of the police, courts, and prisons against key figures in this and other radical movements of that era.”¹⁴ A close reading of these Black radical narratives reveals a shared outlook on the

⁹ Newton, *Revolutionary Suicide*, 278–79.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 197.

¹¹ Shakur, *Assata*, 203.

¹² *Ibid.*, 52.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 192.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, iiiiv–ix.

nature and function of law enforcement in the United States. Law-enforcement agencies—what Davis calls the “police-court-prison apparatus”—are viewed as organized violence that functions to repress or thwart political rebellion.¹⁵ We are not dealing with ordinary failures of due process (say, due to incompetence or bias). These are coordinated efforts to maintain a system of domination and exploitation in response to militant dissent and active opposition.

The police are the first line of defense and the public face of state violence against rebellious oppressed populations. As Davis says in *If They Come in the Morning*, “From Birmingham to Harlem to Watts, Black ghettos are occupied, patrolled and often attacked by massive deployments of police. The police, domestic caretakers of violence, are the oppressor’s emissaries, charged with the task of containing us within the boundaries of our oppression.”¹⁶ When the police are visible in Black communities, they are generally perceived to be present, not to protect and serve the community, but rather, as Shakur remarks, to function as “nothing but a foreign, occupying army, beating, torturing, and murdering people at whim and without restraint.”¹⁷ The Black Panthers initially garnered the respect and trust of those in Black communities because they monitored the police during traffic stops to deter law-enforcement officers from engaging in illegal searches, harassment, and unwarranted violence. They would not only carry legal firearms but criminal law books, which they would read from aloud to make onlookers and the police themselves aware of how constitutional rights to due process were being violated.

Newton brings the point home vividly by narrating the police encounter that led to him being shot and then imprisoned for thirty-three months.¹⁸ In the early morning hours, he and a friend, Gene McKinney, were driving around in search of some “righteous soul food” after a night of partying and socializing with family and friends. Newton noticed the red light of a police car behind them and pulled over. When the officer got to their car window, he immediately made it clear that he knew who Newton was. Shortly thereafter, another police car arrived. Newton was ordered to get out of the car, and when he did, he took his law book with him, as was his practice. He was physically searched in a way that Newton felt was degrading, and afterward he protested that the officer had no grounds to arrest him and proceeded to read from the relevant part of his law book. The officer responded, “You can take that book and shove it up your ass, nigger,” and then struck Newton with a “solid straight-arm,” knocking him to the ground. As Newton rose, the officer pulled out his gun and shot Newton in the stomach. Newton heard a few more shots and then blacked out. He later learned that an

¹⁵ Davis, *Angela Davis*, 306.

¹⁶ Davis, *If They Come in the Morning*, location 515.

¹⁷ Shakur, *Assata*, 235.

¹⁸ Newton, *Revolutionary Suicide*, 184–86.

officer, John Frey, was killed during the encounter, and that he was charged with Frey's murder.

Although the police are the most feared and despised, Black radicals don't trust the courts either. Prosecutors seek convictions on fabricated or flimsy evidence and use the threat of long sentences to extract unfair plea bargains. Judges deny bail or set it at unreachable heights. They also run trials in ways that favors the state's case, and they impose excessive penalties upon conviction. Juries, when properly composed of peers, can sometimes be sympathetic. But more often they are biased against Black defendants or manipulated by clever and unscrupulous prosecutors. It is the reasonable fear that a Black radical could not get a fair trial in the United States that led Angela Davis to flee when charged with murder, kidnapping, and conspiracy.

The basic background to this famous case is this (and here, as with Newton, I rely exclusively on Davis's account): George Jackson was one of three "Soledad Brothers" being held in Soledad Correctional Facility in California on the charge that they killed a prison guard. Davis was a member of the Soledad Brothers Defense Committee, a group of activists fighting to free the Soledad Brothers on grounds that they were political prisoners and innocent of the charges against them. Jonathan Jackson and George Jackson were brothers and, due to her work to free political prisoners, Davis became close friends and comrades with them. In what Davis calls a "courthouse revolt," Jonathan (though only seventeen) entered the Marin County Courthouse, during an ongoing trial, armed with a carbine. He, together with three other San Quentin prisoners present in the courtroom, took several court officials and jurors hostage, but Jonathan was shot to death by prison guards as they attempted to leave the scene. A judge was also killed and a prosecutor was wounded in this violent encounter. Davis's .380 automatic handgun was used during the courthouse revolt. Court officials contended that Jonathan had taken this drastic action as part of a plan to bargain for the freedom of his brother George, and that Davis, because of her passionate love for George, had conspired in the effort.

When Davis learned that the state sought her arrest, she immediately went underground but decided not to leave the country. Relying on disguises, assisted by trusted friends and comrades, and moving around under the cover of night, she fled from Los Angeles, to Las Vegas, to Chicago, to Detroit, to New York City, and to Miami to evade capture. During this time as a fugitive, the FBI put her on its "Most Wanted" list. She was ultimately discovered and arrested in a motel in New York. She was then temporarily incarcerated at the Women's House of Detention in New York, where Davis and Bettina Aptheker first worked together to produce the anthology that would become *If They Come in the Morning*, which

was explicitly conceived as “an organizing weapon.”¹⁹ Davis was later extradited (with the help of the US Air Force!) to California, where she would stand trial.

Though Davis would eventually be granted bail, she did not attempt to flee again. This is somewhat surprising. No Black jurors participated in deciding her guilt or innocence (the one Black person in the jury pool was preemptively challenged by the prosecution). Even more striking, just prior to her release on bond, George Jackson had been killed by San Quentin prison guards under suspicious circumstances. Davis believed that Jackson had been killed because of his political beliefs and because of his radicalizing influence on other prisoners. “George was,” as she says, “a symbol of the will of all of us behind bars, and of that strength which oppressed people always seem to be able to pull together.”²⁰ With his death at the hands of state officials, Davis had to worry that she could be next, and she had no real faith in the fairness of the judicial system. It is true that, during her confinement, the California Supreme Court abolished the death penalty, and so she was no longer charged with a capital crime (which, it so happens, is the reason she became eligible for bail). But she, too, could be killed in prison or isolated for years in solitary confinement.

The reasons that Davis thought she could win in court, and the reasons she took the risk, are revealing. The courtroom is itself a battleground on which radicals and the state wage war against one another. Yes, sometimes brute force is used, as in the tragic case of Jonathan Jackson or the police shooting of Huey Newton. But often the law itself can be deployed tactically—for repression or for liberation. In the Preface to *If They Come in the Morning*, Davis and Aptheker say that “the courtroom victories thus far are the result of uncompromising and relentless resistance: one which succeeded in altering the political consciousness of the jurors in particular, and the communities in general; one which politically, organizationally and legally at every point and opportunity, sought to counter the calculated assault of the government.”²¹

The key to success in court was to help jurors see the merit of the larger political cause and to expose publicly how the state was using any means at its disposal, legal or illegal, to repress the movement by incapacitating its most vital and effective leaders. Davis explicitly sought lawyers who would see her case as “political” and would understand that “the courtroom battle would be interwoven with a battle conducted by a mass movement.”²² She and her lawyers intentionally avoided moving Davis’s case to federal court, and instead successfully petitioned to have her case moved to California state court. The main reason was that, in federal court, the judge questions and picks the jurors, but in state court

¹⁹ Davis, *Angela Davis*, 306.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 317.

²¹ Davis, *If They Come in the Morning*, location 174.

²² Davis, *Angela Davis*, 288.

the defense would participate in voir dire, allowing them to weed out racist and anti-communist jurors and to impanel mostly working-class people.²³ Davis also successfully petitioned to be co-counsel in her case, and she herself delivered the opening statement, in which she explained to the jury, “how [her] activities around the defense of the Soledad Brothers were part of a history of involvement in the movement to defend and free political prisoners such as Huey Newton, the New York Panther 21, Bobby Seale and Ericka Huggins, the Los Angeles Panther 18, and the seven other brothers from Soledad Prison also charged with killing a guard.”²⁴ Davis was ultimately acquitted on all counts of the indictment.

High-profile court cases that sought to free political prisoners were also good for the movement itself. There were huge rallies, around the globe, calling for the release of Huey Newton and Angela Davis. These assemblies were opportunities to bring more people into the movement, to engage in political education, to enhance public awareness of the malfeasance and malice of the “police-court-prison apparatus,” and to raise money for bail and lawyers for political prisoners. When a case was won, the victory galvanized the movement by providing evidence that the resistance of ordinary people could make a difference. For those incarcerated Black radicals, this open public agitation could also lift their spirits, giving them much needed hope. Remarking on the day of her initial capture, and facing the death penalty, Davis says, “Yet, at that moment, I was feeling better than I had felt in a long time. The struggle would be difficult, but there was already a hint of victory. In the heavy silence of the jail, I discovered that if I concentrated hard enough, I could hear echoes of slogans being chanted on the other side of the walls. ‘Free Angela Davis.’ ‘Free All Political Prisoners.’”²⁵

III. Political Prisoners and Prisoners of War

So what, then, makes a person a “political prisoner”? George Jackson, universally regarded as a political prisoner among Black radicals, focused his analysis on two different types of mindset. There is the ordinary “criminal mentality,” which Jackson exhibited as a child when, without political intent, he engaged in many unlawful acts, including robbery and hijacking, because he simply couldn’t accommodate himself to social rules that he regarded as oppressive: “All my life I’ve done exactly what I wanted to do just when I wanted, no more, perhaps less sometimes, but never any more, which explains why I had to be jailed.”²⁶ In prison at eighteen years old, and with a life sentence, he read the classics of

²³ Ibid., 312.

²⁴ Ibid., 365.

²⁵ Ibid., 23.

²⁶ Jackson, *Soledad Brother*, 14.

Marxist theory and guerrilla warfare, which he says “redeemed” him, and he became friends with, and learned from, other prison radicals. Jackson underwent a political transformation in prison, from someone with a “criminal mentality” to someone with a “revolutionary mentality.” He took it as his mission to educate fellow prisoners and to organize them into an “implacable army of liberation.”²⁷ In response, prison authorities worked to isolate him and to limit his influence among other prisoners.

In an essay composed while she was being held at Marin County Jail (and included in *If They Come in the Morning*), Davis argues that a political prisoner is an incarcerated person who has broken a law that directly or indirectly oppresses a group, and breaks the law, not for selfish reasons, but in order to ensure the well-being or liberation of the oppressed group.²⁸ The ordinary criminal, though perhaps oppressed, breaks the law solely for personal gain. The political prisoner takes unlawful actions, at least in part, to relieve the unjust burdens of the oppressed or to change society for the better. The political prisoner’s unlawful actions must, in one way or another, convey a protest against the existing social order, and this open resistance must be part of the reason they are, or remain, imprisoned.

A second kind of political prisoner, on Davis’s view, makes use of lawful means to organize and move people to resist their oppression. The political actor in this case has broken an “unwritten law” that prohibits challenging the status quo. False charges are then brought against them to justify their incarceration. Fundamentally, then, it is the effort to organize and mobilize the masses for their liberation—whether legally or illegally, and whether inside or outside prison—that engenders state repression. As the movement grows, “the judicial system and its extension, the penal system, consequently become key weapons in the state’s fight to preserve the existing conditions of class domination, therefore racism, poverty and war.”²⁹ “Crime” is merely the pretext for their captivity, a way to discredit the political prisoner. Thus, on this account, Martin Luther King Jr. and George Jackson, despite their disagreements over the morality and effectiveness of political violence, were both political prisoners.

In Newton’s “Prison, Where Is Thy Victory?” (his contribution to *If They Come in the Morning*), he distinguishes between two types of prisoners.³⁰ The first type, which he calls “illegitimate capitalist”—does not deny the legitimacy of the society’s laws but seeks to acquire money and power through illegal means. The second type contends that the society is deeply unjust and its laws illegitimate. This kind of prisoner refuses to exploit and degrade others for private gain, but

²⁷ Ibid., 25.

²⁸ Davis, *If They Come in the Morning*, location 349.

²⁹ Ibid., location 411.

³⁰ Ibid., location 847.

feels no obligation to comply with the law. In fact, this type of prisoner refuses to cooperate with the oppressive system except insofar as such cooperation would help hasten the system's demise. This second type of prisoner is a political prisoner, and may have acquired this radical outlook prior to imprisonment or during confinement.

In *Revolutionary Suicide*, Newton acknowledges that, like Jackson, he was once an ordinary criminal, or, in his parlance, an "illegitimate capitalist."³¹ Once he became a Black radical and started (along with Bobby Seale) the Black Panther Party, he worked to politicize street hustlers who operated in the underground economy of illegal activity—in effect, to convert them from illegitimate capitalists to anti-capitalists—and some came to contribute weapons and money to the party and volunteered in the party's community service programs. Though Newton's earlier periods in jail were not the occasion for his political transformation, his previous stints in prison, along with his experience organizing "brothers on the block," did prepare him for his long confinement as a political prisoner, during which he sought to instill "the spirit of revolution" among the prison population.

Indeed, Newton did not draw a sharp separation, either theoretically or practically, between life in the ghetto and life in prison. Exploitation, confinement, segregation, violence, and surveillance typify both socio-spatial sites, and the war against the rebellious few takes place on both terrains. The ghetto uprising in Watts and the prison uprising at Attica (both sometimes called "riots") are kin. As are police in Black communities and guards in prisons.

This position is echoed by Shakur, who laments to a fellow prisoner at Middlesex County Jail that "the only difference between here [prison] 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."³² But out of these same oppressed communities come "Black revolutionaries," who are created in part by harsh ghetto conditions but also in prisons "like attica, san quentin, bedford hills, leavenworth, and sing sing."³³ Shakur insists that prisons are used as weapons in a "genocidal war against Black and Third World people."³⁴ This is why a Black Liberation Army is necessary, for both self-defense and as means of emancipation.

Expanding the conception of "prison" to include the ghetto, as these radical prison narratives suggest, opens up a theoretical possibility that bears on how we should think about the relationship between law (including its enforcement and defiance) and war. If ghettos are, in the relevant respects, also prisons, then this

³¹ Newton, *Revolutionary Suicide*, 107.

³² Shakur, *Assata*, 60.

³³ *Ibid.*, 52.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 65.

might be thought to license expanding the concept of “political prisoner” to include ghetto denizens who regard the sociopolitical order as oppressive and consequently refuse to cooperate with its laws and norms. They have either engaged in unlawful resistance (for example, participating in the underground economy) or violated the “unwritten law” that prohibits even lawful resistance. This kind of political prisoner is a denizen of the ghetto who, because of unjust economic disadvantage or racial discrimination, lacks the freedom to move from a ghetto to a neighborhood where they could enjoy all the advantages of equal citizenship, including freedom from impoverishment, racism, and police harassment. The police-court-prison apparatus would then not only be properly understood as a weapon of war, but those relegated to prison *as an institutional site of punitive incarceration* (for example, San Quentin) would be prisoners of war. They would be combatants who have been captured during an ongoing civil conflict.

One possible problem with this political analysis is that Black denizens of the ghetto during the Black Power era were not confined to the ghetto because they openly struggled against the status quo. There were those, such as Shakur, who out of solidarity refused to leave Black communities: “I want to help free the ghetto, not run away from it, leaving my people behind.”³⁵ The vast majority, though, were stuck in these deeply disadvantaged and segregated communities because they were *Black*, not because they had a “revolutionary mentality,” and they couldn’t exit these neighborhoods even if they accommodated themselves to the injustices of the system and didn’t fight back. Thus, in one crucial respect, ghetto denizens are not like the political prisoners depicted in these Black radical narratives.

However, some residents of ghettos, then and now, are defiant in the relevant respects, and this resistance is sometimes the cause of their ghetto confinement. Those who refuse to participate in the licit economy on the grounds that to do so would be degrading or exploitative often have great difficulty raising sufficient funds to move to better neighborhoods, particularly if they abstain from preying on other disadvantaged members of their community (for example, robbing them or selling them harmful narcotics). Their unwillingness to accept whatever jobs are available is “punished” with an impoverished and segregated existence. Some of these rebellious residents will have criminal or arrest records, making it challenging for them to find jobs or decent housing. I am therefore inclined to endorse an additional subcategory of political prisoners to include them. This would bring new meaning to the slogan “Free All Political Prisoners,” as it would require abolishing the ghetto as a socio-spatial site of oppression.³⁶

³⁵ Ibid., 154.

³⁶ For a defense of the need to abolish ghettos that draws on ideas from Huey Newton, see my *Dark Ghettos: Injustice, Dissent, and Reform* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016).

IV. Black Radicalism and the Struggle to “Abolish” Prisons

Angela Davis is a well-known and long-time advocate for the abolition of prisons.³⁷ She has argued that prisons are inherently dehumanizing and exploitative and that they would be unnecessary in a just society and peaceful world. But she also argues, along with other Black radicals, that prisons are instruments of war and political repression. Even if prisons are sometimes used to punish “ordinary criminals,” they are often used to maintain an unjust status quo and to put down any political resistance. Thus, her opposition to prisons is based, in part, on her contention that they represent formidable obstacles to mass mobilization to transform society.

In this section, I consider how these radical prison narratives conceive of prisons as a tactical terrain on which political prisoners and their allies fight it out against a repressive political regime. Just as there are tactical advantages to be gained over the police and the courts, it is possible—through organizing, political education, and prisoner solidarity—to considerably weaken the power of prisons as a weapon against the oppressed. There is, in effect, a way for the “army of the wronged” to partially *disarm* their adversaries, as a means of self-defense. This kind of war maneuver can be understood as a component of a long-range plan to ultimately do away with prisons altogether.

The principal strategy here is to make the use of prisons for political repression self-defeating. There’s an inside game and an outside game. With respect to the internal life of prisons, the Black radical movement sets out to demonstrate that repression through incarceration will not deter their militant political activity. Nor is it an effective means of incapacitating incarcerated political rebels. Part of the reason prisons fail to deter ghetto denizens is that they are already living in a “minimum security prison,” and so may feel they have little to lose by being defiant. As Jackson says, “Blackmen born in the U.S. and fortunate enough to live past the age of eighteen are conditioned to accept the inevitability of prison. For most of us, it simply looms as the next phase in a sequence of humiliations.”³⁸ But the principal means of showing that prisons won’t deter resistance is by continuing and even expanding political agitation, organization, and education inside prisons. Though captured and caged, the dissident will not submit or lay down arms, even if this means a longer prison stay and greater suffering while incarcerated. Political prisoners insist that they are not in need of “rehabilitation,” as there is nothing wrong with them. It is a broken social system that needs to be fixed—or perhaps replaced.

³⁷ See Angela Y. Davis, *Are Prisons Obsolete?* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2008).

³⁸ Jackson, *Soledad Brother*, 4.

As already discussed, political prisoners seek to turn ordinary criminals into political prisoners. After their consciousness has been raised, radicalized inmates may be urged to disobey prison rules or prison guards' commands. They may, for instance, refuse to submit to strip searches, fashion makeshift weapons, or go on hunger strikes. Another tactic is to refrain from routine prison labor—for instance, preparing food, cleaning, and doing laundry. Such prisoner strikes are all the more meaningful, from a political point of view, when they include refusing to provide goods and services for the benefit of private firms or others outside the prison. This conscious withdrawal of labor then not only disrupts the order of prisons but also expresses a broader political message about labor exploitation in society. Shakur advances this position when she tells the story of a prison guard confronting her with “a big bushel of stringbeans”:

“Here, we want you to snap these stringbeans.” “How much are you gonna pay me?” i asked. “We don't pay no inmate nothin', but if you snap these beans we'll let your door stay open while you snap them.” “I don't work for nothing. I ain't gonna be no slave for nobody.”³⁹

Newton was similarly defiant while in prison, viewing his resistance as a way of instilling or strengthening a spirit of revolution among his fellow prisoners: “I look forward to the time when all inmates will offer greater resistance by refusing to work as I did. Such a simple move would bring the machinery of the penal system to a halt.”⁴⁰ In effect, this kind of in-prison resistance turns the socio-spatial conditions of the prison into a radicalizing force, an incubator of militants—and because the vast majority of prisoners are at some point released, this revolutionary spirit spreads to the streets. The formerly incarcerated bring what they've learned in prison to family, friends, and associates, further developing the social movement.

When there is sufficient shared political consciousness, sense of purpose, and solidarity among prisoners in a particular facility, a prison uprising may be organized with a view, not only to improving prison conditions, but also to advancing a political cause. For instance, the 1971 prisoner rebellion at Attica Correctional Facility in New York began two weeks after the killing of George Jackson at San Quentin. In Davis's reflections on the meaning of the Attica “revolt,” she argues that it awakened and enlivened the political passions of the people, for it exposed the murderous intent of state actors. She also says that “the revolt was particularly edifying in that it burst forth as if to demonstrate that the brutal killing of George Jackson fell dismally short of its repressive aim.”⁴¹

³⁹ Shakur, *Assata*, 64.

⁴⁰ Newton, *Revolutionary Suicide*, 282.

⁴¹ Davis, *If They Come in the Morning*, location 628.

With respect to the outside game, the aim of imprisoned Black radicals is to encourage and strengthen solidarity between the dispossessed who aren't incarcerated and those who are locked up, particularly political prisoners. This is achieved, in part, by destigmatizing criminal offending, imprisonment, and felony convictions. Being susceptible or driven to crime and thereby vulnerable to being incarcerated is a component of Black people's subjugation, not a result of bad character or poor upbringing, as racist ideology would lead some to believe. But fostering such solidarity is also accomplished by making a compelling case that political prisoners do not deserve to be in prison, and thus that "retribution" is not warranted. The state wants the public to believe that these would-be revolutionaries are common criminals to be feared and loathed. This attempt to delegitimize their political struggle has to be countered, or else the state will be free to destroy them with impunity.

Poor and working-class Blacks who have been involuntarily segregated in ghettos have had many negative, and sometimes violent, experiences with law enforcement, and they know that many who end up in prison were deeply economically disadvantaged before their convictions and often committed their crimes because of limited opportunities and out of economic desperation. They are not inclined to see the police-court-prison apparatus as friendly to the interests of the oppressed. As Davis argues, because of the experience of Black people in ghettos, "an almost instinctive affinity binds the mass of Black people to the political prisoners."⁴²

What the Black masses typically lack, though, is a theoretical framework that helps them to understand their situation. They also lack a feasible strategy for defeating their oppressors or for lifting the weight of their oppression. This the political prisoner tries to provide through revolutionary theory and practice. But, in addition, political prisoners show, through their open agitation and willingness to be "punished," that they are actively working to transform the social order and are prepared to sacrifice all to achieve this end. They represent a threat to the system, which is why they must be silenced and made an example of. Their obvious "skin in the game" makes it easier for the oppressed masses to trust and side with them. Because these political prisoners are viewed as providing vital leadership and are regarded as heroic figures, Black people are invested in and willing to contribute to the struggle to free them.

Naturally, prison officials will attempt to neutralize the most influential political prisoners by relocating them to solitary confinement (the prison within the prison). The point of this action, Black radicals argue, is to sharply curtail their influence on other prisoners. By making it challenging to communicate with other prisoners, prison officials impede political prisoners' ability to coordinate

⁴² *Ibid.*, location 534–54.

collective action and to provide political education. Sometimes the use of solitary confinement for political prisoners will backfire, causing other prisoners to protest and spurring unrest in the facility. If this response is intense and enduring, this may be sufficient to get the political prisoner released back into the general prison population. But even if not, it may spread or deepen the spirit of revolution among prisoners, perhaps giving birth to new leaders among them. Solitary confinement can also hurt a radical movement's cause outside prison walls. This is where publishing books like *Soledad Brother* and *If They Come in the Morning* becomes crucial. Political prisoners in isolation are then able to get their revolutionary vision to the people, who may rally to their defense.

V. Conclusion

Given their primary intended audience—oppressed people of color—the fact that these prison narratives are first-person accounts of experiences with law enforcement is not incidental. These testimonial narratives often resonate more powerfully than a theoretical treatise or political pamphlet would. To serve their purposes, they require, if not a charismatic person at their center, at least an authentic and credible voice. The self-sacrifice and resolve in fighting for the oppressed must be readily apparent. The autobiographical background often helps to establish this. It also enables the writer to be a likeable protagonist in a dramatic story with heroes and villains, tragedies and triumphs. As a result, it is harder to paint the political prisoner as a monster, someone to be killed or incapacitated. Moreover, the moral lessons that such works seek to impart are often more effectively communicated through moral exemplars than abstract principles. In all these respects, and others, Black radical narratives are similar in form to traditional slave narratives.

However, the differences are worth emphasizing. Although both genres are political autobiographies, slave narratives are exercises in moral persuasion, while Black radical narratives aim at fomenting revolution. The primary audience is also different. Slave narratives were aimed at powerful whites, while Black radical narratives are targeted at the oppressed. They both advance a political ethics—nonviolent resistance versus an ethic of revolt. The fugitive slave and the political prisoner both break the law to advance the cause of freedom. However, Black radical narratives focus on showing how law can be a useful (if limited) weapon in a tactical struggle. Finally, war, in the form of civil conflict, but also of anti-imperial resistance, is the primary framework for Black revolutionaries, where only an army of the wronged have a chance, however slim, at victory.⁴³

⁴³ I thank Brandon Terry for helpful feedback on a previous draft.

