Race, Slavery, and the Pedagogy of the Prison in 1970s California Prison Radicalism

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Beginning in the late 1960s and continuing for the next decade with added intensity, California was home to a militant anti-prison movement that rippled across the country.[[1]](#endnote-1) Through the writings and actions of black prisoners in different facilities, this organizing brought unprecedented visibility to the prison as a race-making institution. That is, by confining and disciplining populations by race, among other criteria, the prison helped create racial identities. While mass incarceration has increased the prison’s racializing force, the prison has long been a race-making institution--and prisoners acted as co-creators of racial meaning in prison and beyond. Indeed, black dissident prisoners were at the forefront in shaping California’s Black Power politics and in identifying California as the vanguard site of Black Power nationally. The publication of texts by prisoners or former prisoners in California such as Eldrige Cleaver’s *Soul on Ice* (1968) and George Jackson’s *Soledad Brother* (1970) introduced a wide range of readers to the centrality of the carceral state to the formation of black politics in the era before the consolidation of the prison industrial complex, the contemporary era of mass incarceration and hyper-policing that placed prisons at the center of a network of disciplinary institutions. The popularity of these books, along with similar works by other prisoners during this time such as Etheridge Knight, generated great interest in the prison and its authors, turning the prison briefly into a site of literary as well as political excitement. Surveying this development in the early 1970s, the quick-witted leftist writer Jessica Mitford (who had helped secure the publication of *Soledad Brother*) wrote that“literary agents are scouting prisons for convict talent.”[[2]](#endnote-2)

Yet California’s eminence in the visibility of prison-based tumult obscured that its roots lay partially in the American South. Those who led uprisings, wrote exposes, or otherwise populated what was called the “prison movement” in California were southern transplants, shaped by southern racial hierarchies and modes of resistance as well as by the particularities of the American West. In the shadow of sweeping civil rights legislation, these prisoners joined their understandings of the violent and racially polarized world of confinement within the southern collective memory of chattel slavery with the western experience of carceral discipline to articulate a critique of the prison as a form of slavery. Although these men and women experienced Jim Crow, not chattel slavery, they used slavery as a way to identify the state-sanctioned violence that structured black life. Prisoners advanced a critique of slavery that identified all black people, if not also all non-elites, as enslaved by white supremacy, what historian Steven Hahn recently called “slaves at large.”[[3]](#endnote-3) Activist prisoners, especially authors--figures that scholars such as Joy James and Dylan Rodríguez have labeled imprisoned intellectuals--argued that the racially disproportionate nature of confinement made the prison a vanguard institution of state racism. They maintained that the prison, like slavery, was a race-making institution facilitated through government policies and state violence.

In comparing the prison to the plantation, prisoners made an argument about political subjectivity. Dissident black nationalists and their Latino allies, placed in solitary as a result of their challenges to the prison, developed the sharpest critique of the prisoner as a slave subject. They used slavery to name the structural alienation enforced by the prison--its civil and political death, its seeming total control over the life and actions of its captives. These prisoners defined race in general and blackness in particular as being perpetually entangled with slavery, and slavery as fundamentally a problem of the United States and the modern world. It is easy to read into their position a host of anachronisms, an imagined community detached from historical continuity. The differences are critical--especially the difference between a labor regime premised on natal alienation and a repressive regime rooted in the absence of labor. Radical prisoners were not making a claim about labor; many of the most eloquent proponents of seeing the prison as a form of slavery, in fact, did not work while incarcerated. Still, the prison-slave analogy held valuable insight for making sense of racial consciousness in this pivotal era. Radical prisoners offered a critique of those liberal optimists who delighted that new civil rights laws would spell the end of black subjection and black protest, and they identified blackness as a source of inspiration in the struggle for justice.

Prisoner radicalism therefore provides insight into the ways that social movements shaped racial identities in the waning days of the civil rights era. This is especially true in California, where George Jackson identified a political program that inspired a generation of prisoners to challenge not only their confinement but the underlying racial logics of confinement itself in the United States. Jackson’s writings inspired prisoners and others around the world during the 1970s, but his work inside California prisons and his connection to leading figures of the Black Panther Party centered in Oakland maximized his impact in the Golden State. For that reason, this chapter emphasizes the orbit around Jackson as a window into the wider world of prison protest at the dawn of mass incarceration. The cases under consideration here, especially Angela Davis (1970-1972) and the San Quentin Six (1971-1976), reveal the ways California prisoners mobilized critiques of slavery as a way to indict the prison as a manifestation of white supremacy and imperialism.

Prisoners were cutting edge “race radicals” in the dissolution of racial liberalism, offering a glimpse of the permanent-war America that was cohering in the 1970s.[[4]](#endnote-4) Originating largely from a stratum of black communities that was emerging as the perpetually, if not permanently, unemployed, these dissident prisoners theorized the changing political economy that scholars now call neoliberalism. That is, they pointed to the state’s extensive capacity to punish and its fundamental disinterest in the plight of the poor. Slavery, to them, was the new-old system of racial inequality that policed black communities. It named not only a system of racial animus but one of political economic oppression--from the exploitation of the plantation to the marginalization of the postindustrial city. In locating slavery as the centerpiece of American race relations, these prisoners were also identifying the growing class division among black communities. Their attempt to name their condition as one of slavery was both an attempt at forging (some might say forcing) black unity while pointing to the growing use of extreme deprivation as a form of labor management.

The centrality of black migration to the development of postwar prison protest suggests that the prison has not been as static, immobile a force as it might seem. Designed to restrict movement, the prison is paradoxically bound up with it. The prison generates movement in at least two ways: through physical migration and through political protest. As prisoners, men and women forcibly migrate from cities to the rural areas where prisons are located. Once there, dissident prisoners seek to contest or mitigate their confinement in a myriad of ways. These two movements--migration and protest--often merged as prisoners challenged both their immediate conditions and the broader political economic circumstances that resulted in their imprisonment. Both of these movements converged in California in the 1970s as a result of the preceding generations of black migration out of the South. Between 1940 and 1960, the number of black people in Los Angeles increased from 63,774 to 334,916, quickly becoming roughly one-eighth of the city’s population.[[5]](#endnote-5) The defense industry beckoned people west during the run up to World War II, and black southerners continued to head to California during the 1950s and 1960s as they sought a life outside of Jim Crow or were enticed by the Golden State’s promise of reinvention. These women and men, part of what historian James Gregory has labeled the southern diaspora, built the West Coast wing of the Black Power movement.[[6]](#endnote-6) They brought their politics and experiences into prisons in Soledad and San Quentin, Folsom and Chowchilla. These politics flourished at the moment that southern-born musicians playing traditionally southern music--figures from B.B. King and James Brown to Merle Haggard and Johnny Cash--performed in prisons and incorporated prison iconography into their albums.[[7]](#endnote-7)

In their constructions of race and conceptions of freedom, dissident prisoners fused the geopolitics of the South and the North. As the bastion of chattel slavery and the region where the rigidity of racial hierarchies was most visible and most violent, the South’s political geography seemed to mirror that of the prison. Southern modes of confinement had tethered race to crime since the dismantling of Reconstruction, while northern journalists and social scientists developed the ideological basis to equate blackness with criminality.[[8]](#endnote-8) The connection between slavery and imprisonment did not begin with twentieth-century prisoners but rather with eighteenth- and nineteenth-century slaves. Indeed, African slaves identified their confinement as a prison from the point of kidnap, across the Atlantic, and onto the plantation.[[9]](#endnote-9) While slavery may indeed be the “master metaphor” of black political critique since the mid-nineteenth century, invoked to explain all manner of racism, its saliency increased when leveraged from within the social death of the prison.[[10]](#endnote-10) Further, when transported to the Pacific Coast, the linking of enslavement and imprisonment challenged the premise of western (and specifically Californian) racial liberalism. Invocations of slavery among California prisoners, subsequently echoed by prisoners around the country, served to position slavery as central to a wider world of state violence and colonialism that extended well beyond the American South.

Prisoners used a critique of slavery to establish anti-blackness as a fundamental component of the American West. Prisoners challenged the ability of states such as California to juxtapose their progressive racial climate against the supposedly backward South. The location of the critique’s emergence was not incidental to its impact. Those incarcerated in American prisons have, since the end of Reconstruction, been disproportionately black.[[11]](#endnote-11) And southern prisons in the 1960s came in for some deserved critique for their brutality.[[12]](#endnote-12) Such criticisms emerged in the context of a national focus on the horrors of the Jim Crow South, and they were easily folded into a narrative of distinctly *southern*--as opposed to generically American--cruelties. But when prisoners such as Angela Davis and George Jackson, Ruchell Magee and Fleeta Drumgo and many others spoke up, the critique was harder to write off as some kind of regional excess. All the more so given the California setting, since national narratives about slavery leave out the Pacific Coast entirely. In popular mythology, the West Coast was the land of fresh starts and benighted liberalism, of multiracial democracy and free love. Prisoners challenged this mythology of western progress by identifying it with the regressive system of slavery. Rather than multiracial progressivism, prisoners described a Pacific Coast rooted in white supremacist violence, characterized by the cruelest of racial hierarchies and the basest of punishments. And that this critique emanated from a population who most symbolically typified the lack of freedom made it all the more profound. People unaccustomed to looking West for slavery took notice.[[13]](#endnote-13)

Southern Roots and Western Routes

As California prisoners described their “enslavement,” they also extended the counter-intuitive use of the jail as a beacon of freedom for southern civil rights activists. Black activists in the South used the jail to publicize the abuses of segregation in the 1950s and 1960s, creating what literary scholar Houston Baker has provocatively labeled a “public sphere of incarceration.” Beginning in the 1950s, Baker argues, black activists succeeded in turning “white policing and surveillance”--the mechanisms of the criminal justice system--into “a public arena for black justice and freedom.”[[14]](#endnote-14) In Baker’s analysis, jail was the fulcrum of black visibility breaking open the segregationist stranglehold on black life in the South. Such spectacles, which of necessity passed through the jail cell, moved the “liberation struggle ... from ‘invisibility’ to legal civil rights victories.”[[15]](#endnote-15) Jail was a rite of passage for grassroots and prominent activists, including Martin Luther King, whose “Letter from a Birmingham Jail” (1963) became one of the hallmark texts of the civil rights movement, part of a canon that political scientist Joy James has dubbed “American prison notebooks.”[[16]](#endnote-16) Jail revealed the absurdity of the segregationist South, and as such was a worthy sacrifice in the broader black freedom struggle. The use of civil disobedience to challenge the Jim Crow regime turned what had traditionally been among the most taboo locations, the jail cell, into a vehicle to make public black oppression, commitment and subjectivity. Civil rights activists did not take up the mantle of prisoner rights so much as use the jail as a strategic political metaphor of racial oppression and black liberation. I do not mean to equate the nonviolent activist briefly occupying a southern jail cell for violating the norms of Jim Crow with a northern prisoner facing an indeterminate sentence for crime born of poverty and racist policing. There were clear contextual and political differences between the two. Yet the latter person’s ability to contest the prison owed in some measure to the tenacity of those in the former category.

While some southern civil rights activists went to jail for freedom, other black southerners went West in pursuit of it. Indeed, many of the most well-known imprisoned black activists and spokesmen of the period were raised in the South. As scholars have recently shown, the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense, which greatly contributed to prison activism, had southern origins, taking its name from an organization in Lowndes County, Alabama. The overlap was deeper than the name. As historian Donna Murch argues, the Panther emphasis on education and self-defense imported southern mores into the urban American West.[[17]](#endnote-17) The two Panther leaders who were arguably most responsible for emphasizing the prison as a political site of struggle imbued with racial meaning were born in the South. Eldridge Cleaver ended up in Watts by way of Little Rock, Arkansas. Huey Newton was born in Louisiana, the youngest of seven kids to sharecropper parents before moving to Oakland.[[18]](#endnote-18) Soledad Brothers John Clutchette and Fleeta Drumgo were from the Deep South; Clutchette was born in Texas and Drumgo in Louisiana. Both moved to Watts with their respective families as children.[[19]](#endnote-19) Another Louisiana native, Geronimo Pratt arrived at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) on the GI Bill after serving in the Vietnam War. Pratt developed the military capabilities of the LA Panthers prior to being framed for murder and spending twenty-seven years in prison. Johnny Larry Spain--who, like George Jackson, became a Black Panther after his incarceration and was among six prisoners charged with killing three guards and two prisoners the day Jackson was killed--was born to a white mother and a black father in segregated Mississippi. The target of physical abuse at school and verbal abuse by his mother’s white husband, Spain was sent to live with a black family in California. Willie Tate, another of the six prisoners, was born in Selma, Alabama, and lived as a child in Texas before moving to California.[[20]](#endnote-20) Other than Newton, whose family migrated to the Bay Area, most of those who became central to prison protest were southerners who migrated to Los Angeles, especially Watts. California prison radicalism, then, is the history not just of general westward migration but of postwar Los Angeles specifically.

Angela Davis provided perhaps the clearest example of how Pacific Coast radicalism arose from a combination of southern lineage and western violence. Born and raised in Birmingham, Alabama--home to many of the pitched battles and white terrorism that targeted civil rights activists--Davis came to California as a doctoral student in philosophy at UCLA, where she joined the Communist Party. Davis would soon cross paths with Ruchell Magee, another transplant born and raised in the South. Both were associates of George Jackson. In August 1970, Magee was a witness in the trial of a fellow San Quentin prisoner James McClain when Jonathan Jackson, George Jackson’s brother, entered the Marin County courtroom with a satchel of guns. Magee quickly joined the 17-year-old Jackson in seizing hostages and was the only surviving participant after San Quentin guards opened fire on the group. Because several of the weapons were registered in her name, Davis was charged with knowingly supplying the guns that the young Jackson used.[[21]](#endnote-21) Davis and Magee became co-defendants for about a year, until their cases were severed due to differing legal strategies.

At the time Davis was a young, promising and highly visible professor at UCLA, known for her prison activism on behalf of the Soledad Brothers and because of her highly publicized fight to remain on the faculty after an informant for the Federal Bureau of Investigation and the *San Francisco Examiner* had exposed her as a member of the Communist Party in 1969. As a well-known prison activist, professor, and Communist, a black Marxist cultural critic and protofeminist, her case enlisted the support of civil rights and Black Power activists, women’s groups, and communists from around the world. Magee, however, was unknown to most people besides other prisoners. Their different strategic assessments, based on the difference between trying to *stay* out of prisonversus trying to *get* out of prison, led them to sever their charges in July 1971 and stand trial individually. Before and after their cases were severed, however, Davis stressed her solidarity with Magee and objected to media depictions of them as fundamentally at odds.[[22]](#endnote-22)

[Insert photo of Angela Davis about here]

Both Davis and Magee shared a belief in prison as a form of slavery, viewed the courthouse encounter as a slave rebellion, and fought to serve as their own attorneys. Self-defense in court was fundamental. It flouted the expected courtroom decorum and equipped the prisoner with greater agency in articulating a political position, turning the court from an instrument of elite rule into a vehicle for the spread of insurgent politics. In casting her trial as a fight over slavery, Davis suggested that black life--in the collective sense, not in terms of her individual self--hung in the balance. “My life is at stake in this case--not simply the life of a lone individual, but a life which has been given over to the struggles of my people, a life which belongs to Black people who are tired of poverty and racism, of the unjust imprisonment of tens of thousands of our brothers and sisters,” Davis wrote from her jail cell.[[23]](#endnote-23) She argued that the courtroom, through her individual predicament, represented something of the fate for all black people in America. For Davis, legal self-representation meant acting as co-counsel in her defense (“the prospects of justice and fairness in this case are inseparably joined to the issue of my self-representation,” she wrote),[[24]](#endnote-24) alongside an accomplished legal team that included longtime leftist lawyers Howard Moore, Leo Branton, Margaret Burnham, and Doris Brin Walker. The demand to serve as co-counsel in one’s trial, as with so many tactics prisoners utilized at this time, was far more concerned with subjectivity than legality. Davis, Magee, and other prisoners who served as their own attorneys (even if in tandem with professional lawyers) sought to use the space of the courtroom to demonstrate their humanity. It was an argument against the alienation of enslavement; by asserting their personhood, their rational mind or legal expertise, they challenged the slave system’s propensity to dehumanize through silence. By speaking on their own behalf they challenged the objectification that would have them be defendants. It was, in other words, self-defense in a literal sense, a challenge to the legal doctrine that held prisoners as “slaves of the state.”[[25]](#endnote-25)

The most formally educated of California’s imprisoned intellectuals, Davis also offered the most extensive theorization of the prison as a form of slavery. In court, Davis and her attorneys challenged the prosecution’s attempt to introduce into evidence a series of romantic letters she had written to Jackson while both were incarcerated; they argued that turning love letters into legal evidence reproduced the slave-system logic of criminalizing black women’s sexuality. Slavery had defined its female captives as sexual objects that lacked rational capacities. While the total domination of captivity, alongside the ideology of black sexuality as lascivious, allowed white slave owners to sexually assault their captives, the system of social death refused to label such violations as rape, much less to prosecute them as crimes. As Saidiya Hartman writes, because slaves were thought to be sexually available while also being defined as less than human, rape--as a criminal act of unwanted sexual contact that violated a person’s sense of self--did not apply to them.[[26]](#endnote-26) The corollary, as seen in the Davis case, was that slaves were also incapable of love. By using her love letters to Jackson to demonstrate a criminal conspiracy, the prosecution foreclosed the possibility of black romantic intimacy. Here, in the denial of black love, was the gendering racism of the larger criminal justice system dating back to the plantation logics of the licentious sexuality of slaves. Davis’s attorneys were able to get most of the letters barred from evidence, and, in an attempt to restore the possibility of black sexuality, they turned what was left of it into a poem that they read to the jury as part of the closing statement.[[27]](#endnote-27)

Davis continued to challenge the salient sexual logics of slavery outside the courtroom. Writing from the Marin County jail, she offered an indirect response to the media’s focus on her gendered body and those of all black women. “Reflections on the Black Women’s Role of the Community of Slaves” (1971), one of several intellectual efforts Davis made in this time period to theorize slavery and freedom, was an attempt to counter the “black matriarch” thesis that held black women to blame for black subjection. That position was, she wrote, “an open weapon of ideological warfare” rooted in conceptions of the southern elite.[[28]](#endnote-28) The essay made several key interventions: shifting the focus away from seeing armed revolt as the only form of challenging slavery, whether in the nineteenth century or the twentieth, Davis argued that “survival-oriented activities were themselves a form of resistance. Survival, moreover, was the prerequisite of all higher levels of struggle.”[[29]](#endnote-29) Further, in describing the plantation’s gendered division of labor--where women and men worked in the fields but only women did domestic labor for both white masters and black slaves--Davis offered a much-needed feminist rendering of traditional accounts of slave life.

Her essay, then, was a response to the conservative gender politics that could be found both in mainstream sources such as the Moynihan Report as well as in writings by movement thinkers such as George Jackson and Eldridge Cleaver, the two hypermasculine initial spokesmen of American prison radicals, who declared black women as barriers to black liberation. Through a feminist analysis of slavery, Davis challenged the patriarchal conceptions of black womanhood across generations--from, as she later put it, the prison of slavery to the slavery of the prison. The prison, an institution that often racially segregated its already sex-segregated subjects, was an intensely gendered site. Davis’s essay opened the door to a more feminist critique of the prison through a rereading of the plantation. As her essay located the origins of the specious “black matriarchy thesis” in slavery, so too did her essay help advance feminist challenges to the prison as an institution itself rooted in the gendered racism of slavery.[[30]](#endnote-30) The essay also provided the space for other black women dissidents around the country to leverage a black feminist critique of slavery as part of a larger challenge to the sexism of white supremacist confinement. Former Black Panthers Safiya Bukhari (tried in Virginia) and Assata Shakur (tried in New Jersey), along with Joan Little in North Carolina, each drew consciously upon a long history of slave women’s resistance in challenging their imprisonment during the second half of the decade. While these cases did not capture as much attention as the Davis case, the women involved nonetheless leveraged similar critiques as part of their freedom campaigns. They described the slave as a contradictory category, at once reflecting the depths of racist repression and the horizons of radical redemption. Davis spoke out on behalf of each woman, both in her writing and as part of her work with the National Alliance Against Racist and Political Repression, which formed out of the National United Committee to Free Angela Davis.[[31]](#endnote-31)

Toward a Politics of Freedom and Abolition

For prisoner activists on the Pacific Coast, southern lineages merged with western experiences to shape their racial and radical politics, enabling them to understand the historical forces behind their confinement and to recognize confinement as a race-making institution. George Jackson (from Chicago, though with roots in Kentucky) was the most visible and eloquent on this matter, routinely defining prisoners as slaves who could transcend this condition through militant action. In letters and interviews, Jackson castigated the prison as the latest expression of black slavery. He claimed that “time has faded nothing. I recall the very first kidnap.”[[32]](#endnote-32) He argued that the American state was little more than a slave plantation. “Blacks are still doing the work of the greatest slave state in history,” he wrote in a posthumously published letter. “The terms of our servitude are all that have been altered.”[[33]](#endnote-33) When prison guards killed Jackson in a bloody and bizarre incident in August 1971, the unanswered questions about his death became further proof to some that slavery--understood as the near-total state of subjection--continued to characterize U.S. racial politics. For his supporters at the time and since, Jackson’s death was a cold-blooded murder orchestrated by the state that had long displayed its desire to destroy him. It confirmed slavery’s logic of the expendability of black life was still in play, and that slavery and imprisonment mutually defined the black condition. Guyanese historian and activist Walter Rodney summed up the prevailing sentiment when he wrote in a political obituary for Jackson that “ever since the days of slavery the U.S.A. is nothing but a vast prison as far as African descendants are concerned.”[[34]](#endnote-34) James Baldwin was equally profound in arguing that Jackson’s death confirmed the need to distrust the American state: “No Black person will ever believe George Jackson died the way they tell us he did.”[[35]](#endnote-35)

Other prisoners in the 1970s, including many of Jackson’s contemporaries and students, saw themselves as rebellious slaves and framed imprisonment as an extension of slavery. They defined blackness as both the source and the scourge of imprisonment. According to Soledad Brother Fleeta Drumgo, the prison was a “slave plantation” that bred passivity and attempted to indoctrinate its racialized subjects, “like we’ve been indoctrinated for 400 years.” Drumgo declared that such schemes would fail because those inside “recognize our blackness.”[[36]](#endnote-36) At San Quentin awaiting trial, Ruchell Magee described slavery as a structural and affective reality for its black victims. “To some degree, slavery has always been outlawed and condemned on the outside by the hypocritical mockery of chattering lips. But on the inside of people and prisons, where slavery is embedded and proudly displayed as a Western way of life and a privilege of god himself, slavery is condoned on all of its numerous levels.” [[37]](#endnote-37) Magee, who was sentenced to another life in prison in January 1974 and remains in prison as of 2012, continued to define his incarceration as proof of the slavery that structures American society.[[38]](#endnote-38)

Slavery could be found everywhere in how activists made sense of the prison as a tool of black subjection. Supporters of Angela Davis pointed to the massive media attention devoted to her capture to claim that her case was the current incarnation of the historical “response of slave owners to slave rebellions” and the Fugitive Slave Act.[[39]](#endnote-39) The visibility accompanying her arrest exemplified that slavery continued to define the terms of black life in the United States. “One might have hoped that, by this hour, the very sight of chains on Black flesh, or the very sight of chains, would be so intolerable a sight for the American people, and so unbearable a memory, that they would themselves spontaneously rise up and strike off the manacles,” author James Baldwin wrote in his poignant open letter to Davis. “But, no, they appear to glory in their chains; now, more than ever, they appear to measure their safety in chains and corpses.”[[40]](#endnote-40) Davis contributed to this association in several writings from her jail cell, including articles she wrote about slavery and sexuality, and about race and contemporary political repression. These articles contributed to a public persona of Davis as the epitome of black resistance to slavery. In interviews from jail, she described herself above all as “a Black woman …[who has] dedicated my life to the struggle for the liberation of Black people--my enslaved, imprisoned people.”[[41]](#endnote-41) Slavery continued to animate Davis’s description of repression even after her acquittal on June 4, 1972. As scholar Cynthia Young notes, Davis began her 1974 autobiography describing her flight, time underground and arrest--a narrative tool that “cannot help but echo slave narratives.” It was fundamentally about “physical freedom, escape from impending captivity.”[[42]](#endnote-42)

Such declarations, common to black prison radicalism of the time, held that race both explained incarceration and could serve as a potential basis to undermine theprison’scontrol. Slavery was an objective condition of confinement and an ideological condition of subjugation that could be transcended through a politics of resistance. From their experience in penal institutions, black prisoners challenged the prison as a mechanism of social control that tried to induce and compel consent to the prevailing rules of society. Jackson, for instance, told a reporter that “this camp brings out the very best in brothers--or destroys them entirely. No one leaves here unaffected.”[[43]](#endnote-43) To make the prison visible as a form of slavery was to seek the material, physical, and conceptual destruction of the prison, slavery, and apathy. Jackson wrote that the height of political consciousness was to recognize oneself as being trapped in a system of slavery yet to reject being a slave. “I have, I hope, trained all of the slave out of me,” he wrote to attorney Fay Stender.[[44]](#endnote-44) These prisoners framed slavery as an uninterrupted fact of black life in the United States; describing themselves as slaves enabled them to act as political agents. Used as a collective memory of oppression, slavery became a narrative tool in the development of black nationalism located within American prisons.[[45]](#endnote-45) It followed, therefore, that not only the prison but slavery itself could be undermined by such sharp declarations of black militancy and individual confrontation with the state. Blackness was a source of resistance, representing persistent confrontation with the slave state. Much as the expansion of slavery in the nineteenth century sparked struggles against the state as itself a racial regime, so too did black migration in the context of the growing carceral control generate a new round of battles over the legitimacy of state authority. In each case, black opposition to slavery pointed to deep structural logics of state power. The radicalism lay in opposing the system that enabled such bondage--whether chattel or carceral--to occur. In challenging their positions as slaves on the plantation or in the penitentiary, black activists rejected the American state’s claim to neutrality or beneficence. Prisoner critiques of American carceral slavery aimed to show that the civil rights demand for “freedom now” remained equally relevant in the age of “law and order” as it did in the age of Jim Crow.

The description of the prison as a form of slavery, while most associated with black prisoners, afforded antiracist coalition and theorization among other prisoners of color, particularly in the context of the American West. The San Quentin Six, as they came to be called, were six black and Latino men who were imprisoned at the San Quentin Adjustment Center on August 21, 1971. They were charged for the deaths of three guards and two prisoner trustees, men who were shot or had their throats slit in the melee accompanying George Jackson’s death. All told, they faced forty-six charges of murder, assault and conspiracy. Of the six, three had been born in the South (Fleeta Drumgo, Johnny Spain, and Willie Tate) and two traced their roots to the global South (Luis Talamantez is of Mexican descent; Hugo Pinell is from Nicaragua). (The sixth, David Johnson, was born and raised in San Diego.) The inclusion of two Latinos in the case served in part to expose the deep links between slavery and colonialism, within and beyond the U.S. borders. That the group defined their condition as one of enslavement elevated what was becoming a standard prisoner critique of slavery to relate to both imperialism and ghettoization.

The six were indicted after Jackson’s death in 1971, but the trial would continue until 1976. It was the longest and most expensive trial in California’s history up to that point. While the struggle over legal representation did not define the San Quentin Six trial in the way it had with Magee and Davis, the specter of slavery continued to loom large over the case. The men hoped, like their predecessors, to use the courtroom to bring prison conditions to light: the long-term isolation, the repression of political activity, the constant humiliation and death threats. This was the slavery of prison, they argued. The defendants were shackled throughout the trial. The trial judge, Henry Broderick, authorized the men to be shackled for the length of the trial after jurors said the sight of men in chains would not prejudice them. The prisoner-as-slave was in part an argument about accoutrements, and the use of chains became a central challenge in the case of the San Quentin Six. After fighting for their right of legal self-representation, the men fought for their physical self-representation--their bodily integrity in court. With the exception of Tate, who had been paroled two months before the trial began, five of the defendants, “appeared in court chained and shackled to their chairs [which were bolted to the floor]. … [These five] defendants were transported together from San Quentin to the Hall of Justice in a specially constructed bus in which each was enclosed in a separate compartment. In the courtroom they sat behind a bulletproof screen.” The divider was thick enough that a public address system was necessary for the spectators to hear the proceedings.[[46]](#endnote-46)At various points throughout, the defendants were chained not just at the hands and feet but at the hips and neck as well. Police also shaved the heads of the five imprisoned defendants in advance of the trial, further displaying them as wards of the state. Willie Tate said the trial was dominated by the “symbols of slavery.”[[47]](#endnote-47) This treatment continued outside of court: lawyers for the men protested that their clients were chained and removed by a plexiglass barrier during their legal meetings. This arrangement forced the individuals involved to yell in order to be heard. Doing so, the attorneys protested, violated attorney-client privilege by making the content of their meetings known to the guards who watched the meetings from directly outside the room in which they took place.[[48]](#endnote-48)

[Insert photo of San Quentin 6 demonstration about here.]

The defendants, lawyers, and supporters all decried the case as one of western slavery in full effect, and a 1975 ruling by Federal Court Judge Alfonso Zirpoli held that the men’s conditions of confinement amounted to cruel and unusual punishment.[[49]](#endnote-49) Jurors in their criminal case seemed to agree that the men suffered abuse, but their mixed verdict suggests that they did not believe that the men were enslaved. Drumgo, Talamantez, and Tate were acquitted entirely and soon released from prison. The three of them had been intimately involved in California’s radical prison movement: Drumgo was a Soledad Brother, Tate had been a jailhouse lawyer, and Talamantez served as a peacekeeper between black and Latino prisoners and as a thorn in the side of prison officials. The men had been sent to prison on lengthy or life sentences for minor crimes; their release ended long nightmares for each of them.[[50]](#endnote-50) Spain was found guilty of conspiracy and two counts of murder, Pinell of two counts of felony assault, and Johnson of felony assault on a guard. Johnson received a suspended sentence and three years probation and, since he would have been paroled years earlier had it not been for this case, was released from prison. Spain, the youngest of the defendants at 26 and the only one who was a member of the Black Panther Party, and Pinell, 30 and perhaps the one closest to George Jackson, were both sentenced to life in prison.[[51]](#endnote-51) In an analysis of the trial at the time, prison left-wing journalist Karen Wald hypothesized that the mixed verdict was a product of the mid-1970s suspicion of both the powerful and the powerless.[[52]](#endnote-52) The case, in any respect, marked a turning point in prisoner challenges to slavery. In the early 1970s, prisoners used the courtroom to leverage critiques of slavery as commentary on the subjectivity of confinement. While such claims continued to animate prisoner publications, legal claims beginning with the San Quentin Six case and lasting into the early 1980s pursued a narrower and more technical charge of slavery. Here, prisoners across the Sunbelt challenged the accoutrements of incarceration and the use of forced labor inside. This effort crystallized in the 1980 Supreme Court decision in *Ruíz v. Estelle* that put the Texas state prison system into federal receivership as a result of the violently racist system of punishment and coercive labor inside.[[53]](#endnote-53)

Activists who were not incarcerated also embraced the analysis of the prison as a form of slavery, in the process contributing to seeing the Pacific Coast as a product of chattel state violence. Like the people they supported inside prisons, these outside agitators looked to the legacy of slave resistance as models of action. This inspiration ranged from small acts of subversion to the symbolic terrain informing prison activism. Black journalist Reginald Major argued that he and other black people who attended the Angela Davis trial were “constitutionally incapable of making the line up [to be let into court] on police time. The tardiness was not so much a protest as the beginnings of resistance, a quiet ideological tensing up in rejection of absolute police authority.”[[54]](#endnote-54) Major’s assessment suggests that rejecting the temporal niceties of court was an act of resistance inherited from slaves. Other activists took up the mantle of slave resistance more formally. Much as prisoners championed Nat Turner as an archangel of revolutionary deliverance, prison activists who were not incarcerated took as inspiration those who helped slaves to escape their bondage. For instance, small collectives of prison activists in seven cities in the early 1970s organized themselves as the Harriet Tubman Prison Movement (HTPM). The group formed to provide free reading materials for prisoners, supply free transportation for families to visit their incarcerated loved ones, and support a minimum wage law for working prisoners. In focusing on literacy (here, in the form of access) and mobility (in the form of prison visits), the HTPM, as with other prison activists who pursued similar approaches, utilized some of the standard modalities for black empowerment against slavery.[[55]](#endnote-55) These tactics posited the memory of slavery and slave resistance as foundational to representational strategies of prisoners. That is, prisoners confronted the same state practices that denied slaves education and mobility. In fighting for these issues, prisoners and their supporters represented their struggle as an ongoing confrontation with slavery.

An iconic attachment to slave rebels has long been present within black radical discourse. But as members of the Black Power movement--including the Black Arts movement--prisoners had more than a symbolic purpose in invoking slavery and its discontents.[[56]](#endnote-56) This history informed their efforts at self-representation, both literally and figuratively. Prisoners labored to represent themselves in court and to publics that would otherwise not see them. This attachment to representation held that dignity and self-control were vital threats to the prison’s capacity to enslave. As a result, prisoners demonstrated self-determination where they could: adopting Swahili or Arabic names, becoming jailhouse lawyers, and serving as their own attorneys or co-counsel in court. These acts were less dramatic than escape attempts and attacks on guards, yet they were perhaps more important for they, like the work songs and familial bonds of the plantation, comprise the building blocks of a prisoner-slave community.[[57]](#endnote-57)

The prison protest reveals that the locus of black radicalism traveled in one generation from the rural and urban South to urban Los Angeles, and then again from the industrial metropolis to the small-towns where prisons were (and are) located. Much as the contemporary prison industrial complex creates an internal diaspora of people taken from the cityscape to the countryside, prison protest of the 1970s emerged from and in conversation with the southern diaspora. Their westward movement generated a movement within prisons that itself helped make sense of the ways racism continued to structure black life in the wake of civil rights legal victories. It was not the mere importation of southern experience; rather, prisoners melded their southern roots with their experiences of the carceral state in the ghettoes, juvenile detention facilities, and prisons of California and beyond. From the plantation of the rural South to the concrete jungle of the urban North and West, prisoners identified slavery as the conceptual and material building block of the American state and its attendant racial hierarchies. As they sought to undermine the prison’s power, these migrants hoped to abolish the American plantation in all its forms, in all its locations. It is here, the continental legacy of abolition, that bridged the southern plantation experience with the national prison experience.

1. As with any historical claim, periodizing prison activism is not without its challenges. In the formative, if problematic, book *The Rise and Fall of California’s Radical Prison Movement* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994), Eric Cummins dates its origins to the Caryl Chessman case in the 1950s. Other texts on prison radicalism usefully suggest that resistance of different kinds has always accompanied practices of confinement. See Heather Ann Thompson, *Blood in the Water: The Attica Uprising of 1971 and Its Legacy* (New York: Pantheon, forthcoming); Alan Eladio Gómez, “Resisting Living Death at Marion Federal Penitentiary, 1972,” *Radical History Review* 96 (2006): 58-86; Network of Black Organizers, ed., *Black Prison Movements USA* (Trenton: Africa World Press, 1995);Viviane Saleh-Hanna and Ashanti Omowali Alston, eds., *Journal of Prisoners on Prisons: Special Anniversary Issue: Black Panther Party, 1966-2006,* 15, no. 2, and 16, no. 1 (2006-2007). [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Jessica Mitford, “Kind and Usual Punishment in California,” *Atlantic Monthly*, March 1971, 52. See also Lee Bernstein, “The Age of Jackson: George Jackson and the Culture of American Prisons in the 1970s,” *Journal of American Culture* 30, no. 3 (2007): 310-323. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Steven Hahn, *The Political Worlds of Slavery and Freedom* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009). [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. My terminology of race radicalism and racial liberalism builds on the framework set forth in Jodi Melamed, *Represent and Destroy: Rationalizing Violence in the New Racial Capitalism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011); and Chandan Reddy, *Freedom with Violence: Race, Sexuality and the U.S. State* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011). [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Daniel Widener, *Black Arts West: Culture and Struggle in Postwar Los Angeles* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 57. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. James N. Gregory, *The Southern Diaspora: How the Great Migrations of Black and White Southerners Transformed America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005). [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Michael Streissguth, *Johnny Cash at Folsom Prison: The Making of a Masterpiece* (Cambridge: Da Capo Press, 2004); John Hayes, “Man of Sorrows in Folsom,” *Radical History Review* 98 (2007): 119-135; “San Q Rocks--Freemen Back Cons as Prison Seethes,” *Berkeley Barb* 6, no. 6 (February 9-15, 1968): 1. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. See Robert Perkinson, *Texas Tough: The Making of America’s Prison Empire* (New York: Henry Holt, 2010); David M. Oshinsky, *“Worse than Slavery”: Parchman Farm and the Ordeal of Jim Crow Justice* (New York: Free Press, 1996); Khalil Gibran Muhammad, *The Condemnation of Blackness: Race, Crime, and the Making of Modern Urban America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010); Cheryl Hicks, *Talk With You Like a Woman: African American Women, Justice, and Reform in New York, 1890-1935* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010). [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. See Stephanie M. H. Camp, *Closer to Freedom: Enslaved Women and Everyday Resistance in the Plantation South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 13; Angela Davis, “From the Prison of Slavery to the Slavery of Prison: Frederick Douglass and the Convict Lease System,” in *The Angela Y. Davis Reader,* ed. Joy James(Malden: Blackwell Publishers, 1998), 74-95. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Thanks to Stephanie Camp for the formulation of slavery as perhaps *the* “master metaphor” of black intellectual life. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. In addition to the books listed in footnote 9 above, see Douglas A. Blackmon, *Slavery by Another Name: The Re-Enslavement of Black Americans from the Civil War to World War II* (New York: Doubleday, 2008); and Ethan Blue, *Doing Time in the Depression: Everyday Life in Texas and California Prisons* (New York: New York University Press, 2012). [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Heather Ann Thompson, “Blinded by a Barbaric South: The Ironic History of Penal Reform in Modern America,” in *The Myth of Southern Exceptionalism,* ed. Joseph Crespino and Matthew Lassiter (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009). [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. For an excellent study of the racial apartheid underlying California’s progressive veneer, see Daniel Martinez HoSang, *Racial Propositions: Ballot Initiatives and the Making of Postwar California* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010). [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Houston Baker, “Critical Memory and the Black Public Sphere,” in *The Black Public Sphere: A Public Culture Book,* ed. The Black Public Sphere Collective (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 18-19. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Ibid., 33. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. Joy James, “American ‘Prison Notebooks,’” *Race and Class* 45, no. 3 (2004): 35-47. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Donna Murch, *Living for the City: Migration, Education, and the Rise of the Black Panther Party in Oakland, California* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010). See also Hasan Kwame Jeffries, *Bloody Lowndes: Civil Rights and Black Power in Alabama’s Black Belt* (New York: New York University Press, 2009). [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. Dennis Hevesi, “Huey Newton Symbolized the Rising Black Anger of a Generation,” *New York Times*,August 23, 1989, B7; John Kifner, “Eldridge Cleaver, Black Panther Who Became G.O.P. Conservative, Is Dead at 62,” *New York Times*,May 2, 1998, B8. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. Min S. Yee, *The Melancholy History of Soledad Prison* (New York: Harper’s Magazine Press, 1973), 130-131. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. Jack Olson, *Last Man Standing: The Tragedy and Triumph of Geronimo Pratt* (New York: Doubleday, 2000);Lori Andrews, *Black Power, White Blood: The Life and Times of Johnny Spain* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1996); “The San Quentin Six” (circa 1974), pamphlet, 6-7, in Raúl R. Salinas Papers (hereafter RRS), Box 7, Folder 12, Green Library, Stanford University. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. For more on this case, see Dan Berger, *Captive Nation: Black Prison Organizing in the Civil Rights Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, forthcoming); Bettina Aptheker, *The Morning Breaks: The Trial of Angela Davis* (1975; rpt. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997). [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. Reginald Major, *Justice in the Round: The Trial of Angela Davis* (New York: Third Press, 1973); Sol Stern, “The Campaign to Free Angela Davis and Ruchell Magee,” *New York Times Magazine,* June 27, 1971. In a letter to Huey Newton from jail, Davis complained that the media were denying her support of Magee. Angela Davis to Huey Newton, April 3, 1971, in Huey P. Newton Foundation (hereafter HPNF), Series 2, Box 41, Folder 15, Green Library, Stanford University. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. Angela Y. Davis, “Notes for Arguments in Court on the Issue of Self-Representation,” in *If They Come in the Morning* (New York: Signet, 1971), 252. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. Ibid., 246. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. Robert Chase, “Slaves of the State Revolt: Southern Prison Labor and a Prison-Made Civil Rights Movement,” in *Life and Labor in the New, New South,* ed. Robert Zeiger (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2012), 177-213. [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 80-110. [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. The letters can be found in Angela Davis Papers, Carton 39, Folder: Letters to George Jackson, Mieklejohn Civil Liberties Institute (hereafter MCLI), Bancroft Library, University of California Berkeley. See also the summaries presented in Aptheker, *Morning Breaks*;Major, *Justice in the Round;* and Mary Timothy, *Jury Woman* (San Francisco: Glide Publications and Emty Press, 1975). [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. This article, exploring themes that had long interested Davis, appeared in *The Black Scholar* 3, no. 4 (December 1971) and is reprinted in James, *Angela Y. Davis Reader,* 111-128. The quote comes from page 126. [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
29. Ibid., 116. [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
30. Rebecca N. Hill, *Men, Mobs, and Law: Anti-Lynching and Labor Defense in U.S. Radical History* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008); Regina Kunzel, *Criminal Intimacy: Prison and the Uneven History of Modern American Sexuality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008). [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
31. Angela Y. Davis, “JoAnne Little: The Dialectics of Rape,” in James, *Angela Y. Davis Reader*, 149-160; Safiya Bukhari, *The War Before* (New York: The Feminist Press, 2010); Assata Shakur, *Assata* (London: Zed Books, 1987); Assata Shakur, “Women in Prison: How We Are,” in *The New Abolitionists: (Neo)Slave Narratives and Contemporary Prison Writings,* ed. Joy James(Albany: SUNY Press, 2005); Victoria Law, “Sick of the Abuse: Feminist Responses to Sexual Assault, Battering, and Self-Defense,” in *The Hidden 1970s: Histories of Radicalism,* ed. Dan Berger (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2010), 39-56; Emily Thuma, “Not a Wedge but a Bridge: Prisons, Feminist Activism, and the Politics of Gendered Violence, 1968-1987” (PhD diss., New York University, 2011). [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
32. George L. Jackson, *Soledad Brother: The Prison Letters of George Jackson* (1970; rpt. Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 1994), 233. For a critique of Jackson’s ability to “recall” the Middle Passage, see Robert Reid-Pharr, *Once You Go Black: Choice, Desire, and the Black American Intellectual* (New York: New York University Press, 2007), 127-128. [↑](#endnote-ref-32)
33. George Jackson, *Blood in My Eye* (Baltimore: Black Classics Press, 1990), 10. [↑](#endnote-ref-33)
34. Walter Rodney, “George Jackson: Black Revolutionary,” November 1971, reprinted in History is a Weapon, <http://www.historyisaweapon.com/defcon1/rodneyjackson.html>. (Accessed March 19, 2009) [↑](#endnote-ref-34)
35. Quoted in George Jackson, *Soledad Brother* (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 1994), x. [↑](#endnote-ref-35)
36. Fleeta Drumgo, quoted in “Interviews with the Soledad Brothers,” aired on KPFK on August 17, 1970, archived in the Prison Movement collection, audio file PM 058, Freedom Archives, San Francisco. [↑](#endnote-ref-36)
37. Students for a Democratic Society, “Tape on Ruchell Magee,” circa 1972, flyer, in New Left Collection (hereafter NLC), Box 56, Folder: Black Panther Party, Hoover Institution Archives, Stanford University. [↑](#endnote-ref-37)
38. See *Midnight Special* 3, no. 6 (June 1973): 23; Bettina F. Aptheker, *Intimate Politics* (Emeryville: Seal Press, 2006), 288-291. [↑](#endnote-ref-38)
39. Aptheker, *Intimate Politics,* 246. This speech appeared in the leftist news weekly *National Guardian* in October 1970. [↑](#endnote-ref-39)
40. James Baldwin, “An Open Letter to My Sister, Angela Y. Davis,” in *If They Come in the Morning*, 19. [↑](#endnote-ref-40)
41. Joe Walker, “Angela Davis: What’s on her Mind?” *Muhammad Speaks*, January 1, 1971, reprinted as a pamphlet by the Committee to Free Angela Davis, copy in Jessica Mitford Papers (hereafter JMP), Box 49, Folder 6, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas Austin. [↑](#endnote-ref-41)
42. Cynthia A. Young, *Soul Power: Culture, Radicalism, and the Making of a U.S. Third World Left* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 187. [↑](#endnote-ref-42)
43. “Iron Box: The Prison Life and Death of George Jackson,” audio file PM 023, Freedom Archives; originally a BBC program, aired on KPFA. Jackson’s insistence on the prison’s ability to influence everyone formed the basis of Michel Foucault’s famous work on the prison, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (1975). See Rebecca N. Hill, *Men, Mobs, and Law*, 296. [↑](#endnote-ref-43)
44. Jackson, *Soledad Brother*, 210. [↑](#endnote-ref-44)
45. See “Soledad Brothers Defense Fund,” pamphlet, n.d. (circa 1970), 7, in NLC, Box 57, Folder: Black Power. More generally, see Berger, *Captive Nation*; Robert Chase, “Civil Rights on the Cell Block: Race, Reform, and Violence in Texas Prisons and the Nation, 1945-1990” (PhD diss., University of Maryland at College Park, 2009). [↑](#endnote-ref-45)
46. Cummins, *Rise and Fall of California’s Radical Prison Movement*, 259-260; Bill Monning, “San Quentin 6: ‘Justice’ Shackled,” *The Conspiracy*, 3, 13, copy in National Lawyers Guild Papers (hereafter NLGP), Oversized Box 7, Bancroft Library, University of California at Berkeley. [↑](#endnote-ref-46)
47. “Johnny Spain Appeals 1976 San Quentin 6 Conviction,” *Black Panther,* May 20, 1978, 3; James R. Bendat, “The San Quentin Six Trial: Do Chains Have a Place,” *Los Angeles Times*, May 22, 1975, 7;Karen Wald, “The San Quentin Six Case: Perspective and Analysis,” in *Punishment and Penal Discipline: Essays on the Prison and the Prisoners’ Movement,*  ed. Tony Platt and Paul Takagi(San Francisco: Crime and Social Justice Associates, 1980), 169. Tate quoted in Alice Yarish, “What It’s Like to Be Free and One of the San Quentin 6,” *San Francisco Examiner and Chronicle,* July 13, 1975. [↑](#endnote-ref-47)
48. The Prison Law Collective, “Adjustment Center Challenge by SQ6,” *The Conspiracy,* April 1974, 13. [↑](#endnote-ref-48)
49. My discussion of the case builds on a series of interviews I conducted with the San Quentin Six defendants David Johnson, Luis Bato Talamantez, and Willie Sundiata Tate and the attorneys Fred Hiestand, Mark Merin, and Larry Weiss. [↑](#endnote-ref-49)
50. Drumgo’s nightmare, however, would continue in a different manner. He was gunned down on an Oakland street by two men in November 1979. See Aptheker, *Morning Breaks*, 287; Fleeta Drumgo funeral program, in Kendra and Franklin Alexander Papers (hereafter KFAP), folder: Davis, Angela, Southern California Library, Los Angeles. See also the October 4 (circa 1972) untitled press release, in NAARPR files, Box 3; “Who are the San Quentin Six?” (circa 1975), in KFAP, folder: San Quentin 1971-1972. [↑](#endnote-ref-50)
51. Spain was released from prison in 1988, four years after the attorney Stephen Bingham returned to the United States and was acquitted in the case. Because the original conspiracy rested on Bingham’s alleged involvement, his acquittal opened the door for Spain to appeal his conviction. See Andrews, *Black Power, White Blood,* for more on Spain. Pinell, however, remains in prison in California. As of 2011 he was incarcerated at Pelican Bay State Prison, a control unit prison within the prison. In July 2011 he was one of thousands of prisoners who embarked on a hunger strike at Pelican Bay. [↑](#endnote-ref-51)
52. Wald, “San Quentin Six Case.” [↑](#endnote-ref-52)
53. See Chase, “Civil Rights on the Cell Block,” and Perkinson, *Texas Tough*. [↑](#endnote-ref-53)
54. Major notes, however, that black journalists and spectators abandoned this formof resistance when the verdict in Davis’s trial was ready. Then, he writes, “we were up front.” Major, *Justice in the Round*, 290. [↑](#endnote-ref-54)
55. “Harriet Tubman Prison Movement,” circa 1973, pamphlet, in Tony Platt, private collection. [↑](#endnote-ref-55)
56. Lee Bernstein, *America is the Prison: Arts and Politics in Prison in the 1970s* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010); James Edward Smethurst, *The Black Arts Movement: Literary Nationalism in the 1960s and 1970s* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005). [↑](#endnote-ref-56)
57. John W. Blassingame, *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979); Sterling Stuckey, *Slave Culture: Nationalist Theory and the Foundations of Black America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988); H. Bruce Franklin, *The Victim as Criminal and Artist: Literature from the American Prison* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978). [↑](#endnote-ref-57)