NARRATIVES OF CONVERSION AND COERCION: AMERICAN PRISON
LIFE WRITING SINCE 1945

by

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Abstract

In this dissertation, I consider the relationship between the rhetoric of conversion that informs the American prison system and the pervasive use of the conversion narrative in the life writing of American prisoners. I argue that ever since the first penitentiary opened its gates at the beginning of the nineteenth century, prison reformers have relied on the conversion narrative to redefine the rehabilitative goals of the modern prison. Prison reformers, moreover, have historically deployed a variety of strategies—indeterminate sentencing, the “mark system,” the parole board, and the prison file, for example—to ensure that prisoners articulate their experiences behind bars according to a conversion narrative paradigm. Reflecting the discourse of the prison system, the prison life writing archive is rife with the tropes, subject positions, and narrative structure of conversion, particularly in the post-war period when conversion was reconfigured as “rehabilitation” and prisoners had to define themselves as rehabilitated before they would be released from prison. By exploring how the ideology of the prison is implicated in the life writing of prisoners and ex-prisoners like Jimmy Santiago Baca (A Place to Stand), Jack Henry Abbott (In the Belly of the Beast), and James Carr (Bad), I complicate how writing in prison is typically defined as emancipatory or inherently resistant. However, while some prisoners and ex-prisoners reinscribe the ideology of the American prison system by using the conversion narrative in their life writings, other prisoners use the conversion narrative in ways radically different from those that prison reformers intended. Their creative, frequently subversive deployments of the conversion narrative complicate traditional teleologies of citizenship, question the emancipatory role of prison writing, and reconfigure what can and what cannot be said in auto/biographical discourse.
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Introduction: “Do you think that I’ll be different when you’re through?”

On February 4th, 1969, Johnny Cash recorded a live album inside San Quentin, California’s notorious maximum security prison. *At San Quentin* was an unprecedented hit for Cash, whose foray a year earlier into California’s carceral system to record *At Folsom Prison* had been credited with revitalizing his stalled career. Like *At Folsom Prison*, *At San Quentin* foregrounds the enthusiastic, often ribald sounds of the prisoners who were in the audience. Their participation in the production of the recorded text is usually expressed in affirmative shouts and applause. One instance, however, stands out on the recording because the prisoners respond differently to one of Cash’s lyrics. In the song “San Quentin [#2] [Live],” as it was named on later track listings (*Essential Johnny Cash: 1955-1983*), Cash addresses the prison from the position of a prisoner. He sings the refrain, “San Quentin, what good do you think you do? Do you think that I’ll be different when you’re through?” Immediately, and almost in unison, the San Quentin prisoners shout back a resounding “No!” This unscripted call-and-response between Cash and his imprisoned audience speaks to a particular struggle between prisoners and the ideology of the American prison system, a struggle that I suggest is acted out in American prison life writing.

The refrain Cash sings in “San Quentin [#2] [Live]” invokes a concept called the “rehabilitative ideal.” The rehabilitative ideal was a sociological, criminological, and penological model that governed prison mandates from approximately 1945-1980. According to the terms of the rehabilitative ideal, the prison was supposed to rehabilitate prisoners either by means of medical or psychological treatment or by providing them with educational training that might encourage them to behave as rights-and-duties bearing citizens. During the era of the
rehabilitative ideal, prison reformers maintained that the “good” that the prison could “do,” to use Cash’s terms, was to rehabilitate prisoners in order to make them “different.” Thus, Cash’s lyrical indictment of the prison happens also to address an ideology that greatly influenced how prisoners in 1969 were supposed to experience their incarceration.

While “San Quentin #2” speaks to a defining feature of the American prison system because it invokes the rehabilitative ideal, the resounding “no” shouted by the San Quentin prisoners suggests a collective resistance to rehabilitation. The prisoners’ “no” indicates that their experiences of prison life bear little resemblance to the rehabilitation ideology that they were expected to adopt and adhere to throughout their imprisonment. If, as the prisoners claim, they were unchanged by their incarceration, it was either because they actively resisted rehabilitation or because the rehabilitative ideal was never effectively implemented. The failure of the prison apparatus to effectively or fully implement the rehabilitation ideal is convincingly addressed by sociologist and one-time California prisoner John Irwin, who explains that in this period of prison history prisoners “realized that under the guise of rehabilitation the correctionalists had gained considerable power over them and were using this power to coerce prisoners into ‘phony’ treatment programs and ‘chickenshit’ routines” (63). Certainly by the time Cash reached San Quentin in 1969, prisoners were largely disenchanted with the rehabilitative ideal because few prisons genuinely put rehabilitation programs into practice despite the prison system’s ongoing assertion that the ideal of rehabilitation guided prison mandates.

Despite their opposition to or disenchantment with rehabilitation, prisoners during this period consistently narrate their lives in terms uncannily similar to those prescribed by the prison’s rehabilitative ideal. The rehabilitative ideal—its language, themes, subject positions, and narrative—crop up in prison life writing with surprising regularity. Prison writers consistently
tell life stories about becoming what Johnny Cash calls “different” people through their imprisonment. Their life writings also detail how they transform themselves in ways that conform to, or closely resemble, the models of the prison’s treatment programs. For example, a distinctive feature of prison life writing is the trope of conversion through self-education. Prison autobiographies and prison memoirs frequently describe how autobiographers transform themselves by learning to read and write in prison. This trope of literary acquisition mirrors the educational programs that were central to the rehabilitative ideal. If prisoners’ rejected the rehabilitative ideal because it amounted to “phony” treatment and “chickenshit” routines, as Irwin argues, then why does the archive of prison life writing include so many self-narratives that use the rhetoric of rehabilitation? Is prison life writing regulated by the discourse of the American prison system? Or are prisoners doing something else with the prison’s discourse, perhaps redefining the concept of rehabilitation so as to contest the prison’s authority over their bodies, selves, lives, and stories?

In this dissertation, I answer these questions by exploring through the lens of the rehabilitative ideal the relationship between the discourse of the American prison and the life writing of prisoners. I suggest that the archive of prison life writing reveals a more complex negotiation of the prison’s ideology and discourse than the San Quentin prisoners’ boisterous rejection of rehabilitation would imply. Quite simply, the archive reveals that prisoners do not—perhaps cannot—reject the rhetoric of rehabilitation when writing about their experiences behind bars. Certainly, prison writers variously grapple with, contest, reify and sustain the ideological and practical implications of the rehabilitative ideal; but invariably, and importantly, they do so by using the rhetoric of rehabilitation in their life writing. In order to trace and explain the complicated cross-pollination of prison discourse and prison life writing, I focus on a narrative
paradigm—the conversion narrative—that underpins the rehabilitative ideal and that recurs repeatedly in prisoners’ autobiographical acts.

This dissertation argues that the concept of rehabilitation, for all its medical, psychotherapeutic, and pedagogical methodologies, is largely a secularized conversion narrative. The conversion narrative, according to autobiography theorists Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, “develops through a linear pattern—descent into darkness, struggle, moment of crisis, conversion to new beliefs and worldview, and consolidation of a new communal identity” (70). Likewise, prison reformers and penologists who developed the rehabilitative ideal conceived of rehabilitation as a “linear pattern” that prisoners were expected to follow throughout their incarceration. A prisoner’s rehabilitation, like a person’s religious conversion, was supposed to progress through the stages of fall, transformation, and socialization. Moreover, just as conversion is predicated on the trope of rebirth, on the naissance of an entirely new identity, rehabilitation was also supposed to change a prisoner into a fundamentally “different” person. It is because of the close narrative connections between conversion and rehabilitation that I call the narrative that prisoners were expected to follow during the course of their incarceration the “rehabilitation narrative”: the rehabilitative process that was demanded of prisoners by prison reformers and penologists reinscribes the tropes, metaphors, and subject positions of conversion, as well as its narrative formation.

As I have suggested, then, prisoners make frequent use of the rehabilitation narrative in their life writing; however, their use of the prison’s discourse is hardly uniform. In some cases, prisoners use the rehabilitation narrative unknowingly, ambivalently, or in ways that justify the rehabilitative ideology of the prison. In others, prisoners subvert the prison’s rehabilitative ideology by using—or misusing—the rehabilitation narrative in their life writing, in a move that
I call “corruption.” My use of the term corruption expands on Jean Genet’s explanation of how prisoners should use the language of the prison. In his introduction to George Jackson’s epistolary prison memoir Soledad Brother: The Prison Letters of George Jackson (1970), Genet writes: “the prisoner must use the very language, the words, the syntax of his enemy. . . . He has only one recourse: to accept this language but to corrupt it . . . skilfully . . .” (my emphasis 22).

Although many prisoners use the discourse of the prison in their life writings, then, there are ways to use that discourse while radically altering or “corrupting” the prison’s language, turning “the syntax of the enemy” into expressions of subversion, defiance, and resistance.

While the rehabilitation narrative constituted one of the most important “symbolic instruments” of the Post-War American prison system (Patterson 37), and while it often bears the traces of the prison’s ideology in its rhetoric of rehabilitation, the narrative of rehabilitation could also be corrupted by prisoners, uncoupled from its disciplinary foundations in the prison and made to serve alternative purposes in the life writings of prisoners. In the period of the rehabilitative ideal, just as in earlier and later phases of the American penal system, prison life writing exhibits exchanges, contestations, tensions, and convergences with prison discourse, in the process sometimes reifying and sometimes subverting the prison’s discursive authority.

In order to trace the intersections and clashes that occur in prison life writing between American prisoners and the prison, I draw from and qualify an ongoing critical debate about a genre called “prison writing.” Prison writing has received increased attention since, in 1978, H. Bruce Franklin defined prisoners’ texts as both a genre and an important site for critical study, in The Victim as Criminal and Artist: Literature from the American Prison. Although the term “prison writing” has come under some scrutiny of late—Dylan Rodríguez, for example, critiques “the common aestheticization of [prisoners’] work into a ‘genre’ of literary text” (82)—prison
writing continues to be the preferred nomenclature, particularly in the United States, for categorizing the poetry, drama, autobiography, non-fiction, fiction, criticism, and journalism written by prisoners.¹

In fact, the anthologization and analysis of prison writing has increased substantially since the 1990s. Recent anthologies of prisoners’ written work (and often visual art as well) include Franklin’s popular *Prison Writing in 20th Century America* (1998), Bell Gale Chevigny’s *Doing Time: 25 Years of Prison Writing* (1999), which consists of winning entries to the PEN writing contest for prisoners, and Tim Blunk and Raymond Luc Levasseur’s lesser-known but brilliant *Hauling up the Morning (Izando la Manana): Writings & Art by Political Prisoners & Prisoners of War in the U.S.* (1990). Critical anthologies that address prison writing have also been increasingly published in the last twenty years. Joy James’ influential interdisciplinary compilations—*States of Confinement: Policing, Detention, and Prisons* (2000), *Imprisoned Intellectuals: America’s Political Prisoners Write on Life, Liberation, and Rebellion* (2005), *The New Abolitionists: (Neo)Slave Narratives and Contemporary Prison Writing* (2005), and *Warfare in the American Homeland: Policing and Prison in a Penal Democracy* (2007)—are particularly rich examples of anthologized studies of the prison and prison writing that interweave analyses of the prison and prison culture by non-imprisoned intellectuals and academics with the critical work of “imprisoned intellectuals.”

Along with a rise in the publication of prison writing compilations, the last five years has also seen an upsurge in rigorous single-author monographs that explore the relationship between the discourse of the prison and prison writing. Dylan Rodríguez’s *Forced Passages: Imprisoned Radical Intellectuals and the U.S. Prison Regime* (2006), for example, theorizes why and how “imprisoned insurgents, insurrectionists and (proto)revolutionaries” develop a form of “prison
praxis” to contest the U.S. “prison regime” (2). Rodríguez argues that prison writing is not an inherently emancipatory act but is freighted instead with the ideological, political, and cultural weight of a system that frequently requires prisoners to write according to the prescribed scripts that are folded into the prison’s discursive apparatus. Rodríguez’s critique of conventional notions of prison writing has been particularly useful in the development of this dissertation, which likewise seeks to explore the disciplinary valences of prison writing and to challenge the received notion that prison education and prison writing are, simply because of the value of literacy, in the best interests of the prisoners.

Like Rodríguez’s analysis of the prison’s effect on prison writing, John Sloop’s *The Cultural Prison: Discourse, Prisoners, and Punishment* (1996), Auli Ek’s *Race and Masculinity in Contemporary American Prison Narratives* (2005), Peter Caster’s *Prisons, Race, and Masculinity in Twentieth-Century U.S. Literature and Film* (2008), and Caleb Smith’s *The Prison and the American Imagination* (2009) explore how narratives about imprisonment—including films, television shows, novels, magazines, and autobiographies—reflect or complicate penological and criminological discourses, a critical conversation with which my work is engaged. Like me, Sloop, Ek, Caster, and Smith all analyze prison life writing. But they do so in order to explain popular conceptions of the figure of the prisoner and the prison—what Smith calls the “poetics” of the penitentiary. By comparison, I am less interested in exploring popular representations of imprisonment than in exploring how and why the prison’s discourse finds its way into the life writings of imprisoned Americans.

My dissertation specifically addresses prison life writing because the relationship that is posited between self (*autos*), life (*bios*), and writing (*graphe*) in autobiography necessarily involves institutional discourse in ways that might not be so obvious in other genres. A prisoner
who writes about his or her life invariably draws on the discourse of the prison, as Amanda Crawley explains in “Grammatical Fictions: Reading and Writing the Self in Prison.” Crawley argues:

In order to articulate the self, the prisoner not only faces the coercion of normative, unificatory narratives but is also confronted by a system that admits to and provides a vocabulary of transgression. Thus, no longer an exile, the prisoner is able to secure an identity within discourse. It is precisely this discourse of transgression and correction which the prisoner will be coerced into assuming as he or she enters the prison.” (305)

As Crawley rightly notes, the prisoner is, from the moment of entry into the judicial system, “coerced” into adopting the vocabulary of “transgression and correction” in order to form inside the prison a coherent narrative of selfhood. Within the prison, prisoners encounter, and to an extent are defined by, an array of discursive fields, including legal discourse, which defines prisoners according to their criminal acts, the classification systems by which prisoners are organized into types, and the narratives of the prison administration, prison psychiatrists, counsellors, sociologists, and, if available, educators. As I have suggested, during the era of the rehabilitative ideal these official discourses were strategies for producing the rehabilitation narrative in prison discourse but also in prisoners’ autobiographical acts as well.

American prison life writing is an aesthetically, culturally, and politically important field of study—more important than ever before. There are currently more Americans behind bars than at any other point in the nation’s history—more and more lives are being circumscribed by the subject-making, narrative-defining authority of the prison. Analyses of the prison’s capacity to define how lives are narrativized, as well as explorations of how life writing, as a particular
form, can deconstruct the prison’s categories of transgression and correction, are timely indeed. And yet there are no monographs devoted to the critical examination of American prison life writing. While there are several essays on the topic, the absence of a monograph indicates that the genre of prison life writing continues to be a footnote in the field of American literary study. Rather than a cultural niche or a literary curiosity, however, prison life writing is a kind of barometer of American identity, if only because so many Americans are incarcerated or are affected by the carceral apparatus in some way. One of the aims of my dissertation is to bring to the fore the problematic intersections between the discourse of the prison and prison writing; but I also hope to address the political, cultural, and aesthetic brilliance of prison life writing, which continues to be an underexamined area of literary study.

While there is surprisingly little written about prison life writing in America, there are several important scholarly contributions to prison life writing that were produced outside the framework of the American penal system. Barbara Harlow’s *Barred: Women, Writing, and Political Detention* (1992) is perhaps the most celebrated analysis of prison life writing. Harlow’s theorization of Irish women political prisoners’ resistance writing is certainly influential in my analysis, just as it has proven influential for all literary scholars working in this field, but her focus on political detainees eclipses some of the non-political concerns with which “regular” prisoners must contend. For example, political detainees enter the prison with a political narrative intact—a narrative that locates them outside the usual position of “criminal” that marks the majority of American prisoners. While many of the prison writers that I discuss do become politicized during their incarceration, their political identities always either complicate or are complicated by the ways they have been defined as criminals by the state. My work is also informed by Deena Rymhs’ analysis of the life writings of Canadian Aboriginal
prisoners (and residential school survivors) in *From the Iron House: Imprisonment in First Nations Writing* (2008). Rymhs theorizes how Aboriginal prisoners use autobiographical modes as individual, cultural, historical, and political responses to their victimization by the state and by the Canadian settler population, which have used various forms of imprisonment to divest Aboriginal peoples of their land, wealth, and power.

Like *From the Iron House*, most studies of prison life writing engage specifically with texts that articulate modes of resistance to prison discourse. While I do consider prison life writing through the lens of resistance, I also explore how prisoners’ writings can, perhaps quite unintentionally, reify the prison’s rehabilitative ideology. Thus, my work challenges the claims made perhaps most frequently by theorists of prison writing: that “the act of writing itself resists the rationale of the prison and the state power it represents” (Kaplan 121) or that “prison narratives counteract the established logic of imprisonment” (Ek 6). Instead, I argue that prison narratives, autobiographical acts, and even autobiographical selves can reinscribe “the rationale of the prison” or entrench “the established logic of imprisonment” even as they resist the prison’s rationale, logic, ideology, or discourse.

Because I trace how the discourse of the prison regulates the life writing of prisoners, my work investigates similar territory as autobiography theorists who examine how selves, lives, and narratives are policed by genre, narrative, or discourse. Caren Kaplan, in her influential essay, “Resisting Autobiography: Out-Law Genres and Transnational Feminist Subjects,” argues that establishing a genre necessarily involves establishing and enforcing norms and laws; her analysis of the normative codes that regulate genre is suggestive for my analysis of the norms and rules of prison life writing, even as her suggestion that prison writing is inherently resistant is one that I critique (116-117). In a similar vein to Kaplan, Paul John Eakin argues in “Breaking Rules: The
Consequences of Self-Narrative” that life stories are rule-governed discourses that discipline not only the autobiographical subject but the autobiographer as well. Writing about genre in general, Judy Segal similarly examines the disciplinary function of genre’s normative codes: in “Breast Cancer Narratives as Public Rhetoric: Genre Itself and the Maintenance of Ignorance,” Segal argues that the genre of breast cancer narratives polices the life stories of breast cancer survivors, inhibiting the development of non-normative narratives. The theories developed by Kaplan, Eakin, and Segal all inform my discussion of how genre and narrative can regulate how imprisoned lives become stories.

Moreover, because I am interested in exploring how genre and narrative produce life writing—that is, how genre and narrative not only proscribe but also prescribe how lives are narrated—my study intersects with the work of autobiography theorists like Leigh Gilmore who see power as productive as well as restrictive. In The Limits of Autobiography: Trauma and Testimony (2001), for example, Gilmore argues that genres that are interconnected with the law and other discourses of power both censor and make demands of speaking or writing subjects: “Because testimonial projects require subjects to confess, to bear witness, to make public and shareable a private and intolerable pain, they enter into a legalistic frame in which their efforts can move quickly beyond their interpretation and control . . .” (7). Like testimony, prison life writing can also bear meaning that is “beyond [the] interpretation and control” of the prison writer. I am, however, less interested than Gilmore in analyzing how autobiographers “move away from recognizably autobiographical forms even as they engage autobiography’s central questions” (7). Instead, I explore how autobiographers use recognizable and highly traditionalized autobiographical forms like the conversion narrative; I examine what forces compel them to do so; and I consider what this negotiation of a genre’s normative codes
ultimately means for the autobiographer and for the discursive formation in which she or he is located.

This dissertation addresses the relationship between prison discourse and prison life writing in four chapters. In Chapter One, “Conversion and the Story of the American Prison,” I establish a genealogy of the conversion narrative’s role in the discourse of the American prison system. From the early days of the penitentiary in the late eighteenth century to the era of the rehabilitative ideal, prison reformers used the tropes, metaphors, subject positions, and narrative formation of conversion to explain how the prison could change criminals into citizens. I argue that the concept of conversion has been the most defining theoretical feature of the American penal system since it was established in 1776 right up to 1980, where my study ends, and I show that the narrative of conversion can be divided into three distinct stages: that of the conversion narrative, the reform narrative, and the rehabilitation narrative. In each of these three periods, the narrative of conversion, in its various guises, informed, coerced, and disciplined the entry of a prisoner’s life into discourse, including into the discourse of prison life writing. I conclude by providing three case studies of prison life writings that employ the rehabilitation narrative—Caryl Chessman’s Cell 2455, Death Row, Malcolm X’s The Autobiography of Malcolm X, and George Jackson’s Soledad Brother—to show that prisoners use prison discourse in varying ways, with very different political and ideological consequences.

In Chapter 2, “From ‘Primitive Manhood’ to ‘Humanity’: Rehabilitation, Education, and Citizenship in Jimmy Santiago Baca’s A Place to Stand,” I analyze Jimmy Santiago Baca’s 2001 prison memoir to explore how writing about the prison can unintentionally reiterate what Genet calls the “language” of the prison system despite revealing the prison system’s brutality and its participation in structural racism. Even as it represents the relentless brutality of the prison, A
Place to Stand: The Making of a Poet validates both the prison’s rehabilitative function as a site for the production of American citizenship and its control function as an institution that contains threats to the American civic body. In Baca’s memoir, the more he changes through prison to embody the qualities of a rights-and-duties bearing citizen, the more he represents the other prisoners as inhuman and requiring social control. In the trajectory of Baca’s narrative, the contrast between what Baca represents as his humanity and the other prisoners’ primitivity articulates a division between citizenship and criminality that is both literally and figuratively maintained by the prison wall. Even though A Place to Stand was published after the end of the rehabilitative ideal, I include a discussion of it here because it is situated temporally during the period of Baca’s imprisonment, when the rehabilitation narrative still dominated prison mandates. Perhaps more importantly, Baca’s memoir consolidates many of the tropes of rehabilitation that appear elsewhere in the prison life writing archive.

In Chapter 3, “Narratives of Murder: Jack Henry Abbott and In the Belly of the Beast,” I examine how Abbott’s 1981 epistolary autobiography uses the rehabilitation narrative while diverting its teleology of criminality-change-citizenship. Abbott not only refuses to produce a narrative of rehabilitation, he also defines himself as a likely recidivist. Abbott identifies himself as irredeemably brutal because he has been acclimatized to the brutality of prison; he is, in his terms, “a product of prison conditions” (emphasis in original 28). Thus Abbott subtly critiques the emancipatory claims of many prison education programs that justify their projects by arguing that “books change lives.” In addition, Abbott’s refusal to conform to the rehabilitative ideal provides an important counterpoint to Baca’s story of conversion catalyzed by education, transcendence of the prison’s material conditions, and eventual release from prison and emancipation from his pre-carceral criminal lifestyle. And yet, despite Abbott’s clear rejection of
the telos of rehabilitation, *In the Belly of the Beast: Letters from Prison* was read upon its publication according to “the multitude of narratives” that adhered to the rehabilitation formula (“Tales of Murder” 203). When Abbott inadvertently proved his rejection of the rehabilitative ideal by committing murder only several weeks after his early release from prison, *In the Belly of the Beast* came to signify the failure or falsification of the rehabilitation narrative in American popular discourse. The subsequent public debate about crime and punishment, one that involved high-profile figures such as Norman Mailer (who had earlier taken Abbott as his protégé) and Susan Sarandon (who had named her son after Abbott), ultimately facilitated the development of the conservative prison policies that enabled an unprecedented growth of prisons across the nation.

In Chapter 4, “Bad Motherfucker”: Lying, Badmen, and Breaking the Rules of Genre in *The Autobiography of James Carr*, I argue that James Carr’s autobiography *Bad* breaks the rules of prison life writing, recodifies the rehabilitation narrative, and disrupts the way prison experience typically enters into discourse. While most prison writers justify or express contrition for their involvement in violent crime, Carr instead *boasts* about beating, raping, and murdering prisoners and non-prisoners. By revelling in his reputation of being a “bad motherfucker,” Carr transgresses the tacit rules that regulate the ways predatory violence can be recorded and represented in official autobiographical discourse. I suggest that Carr manages to break the rules of the prison life writing genre because he develops a hybrid form of self-narration that employs both the normative conventions of the life writing genre and the non-normative mode of “lying,” which is a model of storytelling that is popular in prison. By mixing genres in this way, Carr is able to speak from a subject position that is accepted in one genre while at the same time denounced in another: so, when Carr takes the position of the “hard man,” a taboo, violent,
irredeemable African American figure that is celebrated within the genre of lying, he simultaneously breaks out of the subject position reified in prison life writing of the rehabilitated prisoner. Curiously, by taking the problematic position of the hard man, Carr opens up new ethical territory that is otherwise bracketed in prison life writing. Whereas most prison life writing seeks to qualify or contest the culpability of the autobiographer through a retelling of his or her crimes, Bad not only acknowledges Carr’s involvement in heinous violence but also defines the two white men who help him produce his as-told-to autobiography as complicit in the brutality that they have helped coax into discourse. By rejecting the usual terms of prison life writing, and by recodifying the rehabilitation narrative, Bad establishes a new hermeneutics for the genre.

By way of a conclusion to this introduction, I would like to make a few comments about the practical limits of my work. My study focuses almost exclusively on the experiences of men behind bars. I explore the experiences of men simply because the vast majority of American prisoners are men. This is not to say that the experiences of incarcerated women are less significant than their male counterparts, or that my research is only applicable to the experiences of men in prison. To take up questions of how the rehabilitation narrative applies to women prisoners would be to consider an important but unique relationship between women prisoners’ life writing, prison discourse, and social norms, because throughout most of the prison’s history, women have been considered incapable of rehabilitation. When rehabilitation was applied to women, as it was in the era of the rehabilitative ideal, the narrative that seems to underpin these efforts deviates from the rehabilitation narrative and its antecedent of the conversion narrative; instead of being fundamentally transformed, women were to be trained to return to the domestic life that they were, according to the rhetoric of the age, “naturally” inclined. This narrative of
domesticity, which held that an incarcerated woman had simply lost her way and needed to be returned to the position in society that she had either initially occupied, should have occupied, or that she was destined to occupy seems more like the *Bildungsroman* than the conversion narrative.

Also, while my work takes race into account, I have not foregrounded race in this dissertation. While the analysis of race and power is of great import, particularly within studies of the American prison system, it is not a governing theme of this study simply because most analyses of American prison writing already focus their research through a racial lens. However, in the course of my analysis I have realized that virtually no critical work has considered how whiteness is negotiated, changed, or challenged in the American prison system. The absence of whiteness studies in prison studies is a particularly interesting theoretical gap given that prison communities have, since the 1980s, inverted the non-carceral racial demographics so that whites constitute a racial minority in the prison. Theorists of whiteness studies would do well to consider how the rights, privileges, and claims to normality that are associated with whiteness on the outside are inverted or challenged in the prison—often by whites themselves.

Finally, I never use the term “inmate” in this study because it is a derogatory word for some prisoners, at least for many of the prisoners who have been included in this study. As James Carr says in *Bad*, “[i]n the early ‘50s, liberal penologists, people with Ph.D.s and so forth, had begun to talk about ‘rehabilitating’ cons instead of just caging them up. They started using the word ‘inmate’ instead of convict, as if we were on some fucking ship or something. The guys who went for this rehabilitation shit . . . were called ‘inmates’ by the cons” (66). By comparison, “con” and “convict” are labels of esteem; in some prisons, these terms even index high-rank
among prisoners. Thus, while *inmate, con,* and *convict* are all loaded words, “prisoner” seems to be a relatively neutral term.

With regard to terminology preferences, it should be noted that I do use the terms prison writing, prison writer, prison autobiographer, prison life writing, prison memoir, and prison autobiography, albeit with some hesitation. To use terms such as *writer* or *autobiographer* implies a greater degree of control over their subject matter than is available to writers within the prison—or to any writers, for that matter. That the prison plays an influential role in the texts and the discursive selves of prisoners is, I think, often overlooked by studies that interpret prison life writing as emancipatory, inherently resistant, or somehow free from the discursive and ideological influences of the system that disciplines and “subjects” its imprisoned subjects. Indeed, as I have already acknowledged, critics like Dylan Rodríguez have questioned the appropriateness of terms such as *prison autobiography* precisely because “the broad categorical designation for incarcerated cultural production… legitimates and reproduces the discursive-material regime of imprisonment” (84). However, by qualifying any reference to writerly production or self-narration with the adjective *prison,* I acknowledge the role of the writer as producer while also registering the degree to which the prison as an institution does in fact modify the text or the discursive self of an imprisoned writer. To refer to “prisoner writings” as opposed to “prison writing” is to convey a quite different meaning: where the first term refers to writing that is produced by the prisoner, the second term underscores the degree to which the prison regulates how the prisoner writes. Given that this dissertation emphasizes the interplay and cross-contamination between the discourses of the prison and the discourse of prisoners’ writings, the lexical pairings of institutional power and individual desires in terms such as *prison autobiography* reminds the careful reader of the nuances of my analysis. While this dissertation
foregrounds the prison’s influence on prison writing and prisoners’ discursive selves, it also seeks to explore precisely how prisoners use their determination by the prison—a usage that consistently interrupts the prison’s control over their bodies, lives, and stories.
Chapter 1: Conversion and the Story of the American Prison

Such master narratives have inscribed themselves in the texts as well as in our thinking about them; such allegorical narrative signifieds are a persistent dimension of literary and cultural texts precisely because they reflect a fundamental dimension of our collective thinking and our collective fantasies about history and reality.


I was in prison, and ye came unto me.

— *The New Oxford Annotated Bible*, Mathew. 33. 25

In May 2007, Paris Hilton—A-list celebrity, socialite, and heiress to the Hilton empire—was sentenced to forty-five days in jail for violating the terms of her probation in a drinking and driving case. Immediately after her conviction, her lawyers managed to get her sentence reduced to twenty-three days, of which Hilton served three before being sent home because of an unspecified medical condition, with permission to serve the remainder of her time under house arrest. Several days later, and in part because of public outcry, Hilton was admitted once again to Los Angeles County Jail to serve out her sentence behind bars. After her readmission to jail, Hilton’s stance suddenly changed, and she decided not to appeal her sentence. In her first jail-house interview, which she conducted with Barbara Walters, Hilton revealed that her imprisonment was, in fact, a blessing. She had undergone a radical self-evaluation and transformation in her cell. “I’m not the same person I was,” she explained: “God has released
me”; “I know now that I can make a difference, that I have the power to do that. I have been thinking that I want to do different things when I am out of here. I have become much more spiritual. God has given me this new chance” (qtd. in Gumbel). In other words, she had fallen, and through her days of isolation in jail she had found God. No longer “the same person,” she had been reborn, ready to be accepted back into the fold of the community outside the jail.

Hilton’s description of her sudden religious conversion follows a narrative that is adopted frequently by prisoners, although Hilton’s apparent conversion occurred so rapidly as to be something of a caricature, an exaggerated version of a now classic narrative structure—the prisoner conversion narrative. By defining her brief jail term according to the parameters of the conversion narrative, Hilton gaudily exaggerates the contours of a narrative tradition in the American carceral system that has, over the past 200 years, become a form of common-sense.  

Hilton’s proclaimed conversion complicates H. Bruce Franklin’s claim that the conversion narrative is simply an “archaic tradition” of American incarceration. In his seminal history of American prison writing, *The Victim as Criminal and Artist* (1978), Franklin suggests that, with the exception of Charles Colson’s *Born Again* (1976), “whatever wider significance this confessional mode may once have had, it had become of little consequence even by the middle of the nineteenth century” (128). Hilton’s interview, however, suggests that the conversion narrative continues to be a significant, even popular narrative about the American carceral experience. Although there was predictable public scepticism over the timeliness of her sudden transformation, no one questioned the validity of the conversion narrative itself. No one questioned whether the conversion narrative was an appropriate template for how incarceration should or could be experienced and shared. For Hilton and her audience, the conversion narrative was a current, recognizable, even necessary script for explaining her time behind bars.
Hilton’s interview and the ensuing debate about her conversion suggest that the conversion narrative seems “of little consequence” only because it has become a normalized part of the discourse about incarceration in America. Perhaps as a result, the influence of the conversion narrative on prison writing and the American imaginary is easy to miss.

Consider the frequency with which prisoners or former prisoners employ the tropes and rhetoric of conversion, or reproduce the conversion narrative to describe their prison experiences. While radically different, and, I should stress, far removed from Hilton’s performance, The Autobiography of Malcolm X (1965), Charles Colson’s Born Again, Eldridge Cleaver’s Soul on Fire (1979), Sanyika Shakur’s Monster (1994), and Stanley “Tookie” Williams’ Blue Rage, Black Redemption (2004) all define incarceration as a site of spiritual redemption and personal transformation. The phenomenon of prisoner conversion is not restricted to testaments of religious transformation, either. Piri Thomas’ Down These Mean Streets (1967), Rubin “Hurricane” Carter’s The Sixteenth Round (1974), and Nathan McCall’s Makes Me Wanna Holler (1994) all define prison as a site of radical, secular self-transformation that accords with the general paradigm of the religious conversion narrative.

The prisoner’s conversion narrative, whether religious or secular (a distinction I develop below), is recognized within and without the prison and can be found in pulp non-fiction, award-winning autobiographies, small-press prison periodicals, and in journalism. Because conversion narratives abound in prison writing and in popular depictions of imprisonment, the trope of rebirth, radical change, or re-socialization through incarceration takes on the status of truth, policing how prison and post-prison life enter into discourse. It is, however, a truth at odds with the majority of prisoner experiences: most prisoners are returned to prison or some form of incarceration within three years of their release, which suggests that prison is not a site of
positive transformation but that, for the most part, criminal or criminalized behaviour continues unabated after incarceration. While I am in no way discounting the validity of the conversion experiences of the men and women who are or who have been incarcerated in America, it is important to note the disparity between the popularity of narratives of conversion and the statistical reality lived by the majority of American prisoners. As rates of recidivism suggest that positive changes in criminal or criminalized behaviour rarely occur, why has this narrative of change endured for so long? Why is the conversion narrative a normalized way to experience (or to narrativize the experience of) incarceration? What ideological work does the conversion narrative perform? And whose interests does this narrative ultimately serve?

In this chapter, I argue that the conversion narrative continues to have currency in the prison writing genre—particularly in the memoir/autobiography subgenre that is the focus of this dissertation—because it is also produced in the discourse of the prison system itself. The conversion narrative is a defining feature of the nineteenth-century penitentiary, the post-bellum reformatory, and the correctional institution of the twentieth century. Ever since officials at Pennsylvania’s Walnut Street Jail experimented with solitary confinement to induce penitence in their prisoners in 1790, prison reformers have used metaphors of conversion in order to conceptualize how incarceration might change criminals into citizens. Paris Hilton’s performance of a sudden jailhouse conversion invokes “a strong metanarrative” that accords with a major premise of the American carceral system: that incarceration can “provide a renewal of both life and meaning” (Sloop 2). The frequency with which the conversion narrative appears in prisoners’ autobiographies also registers the extent to which prisoners’ writings are in dialogue with, or have even been coerced to reproduce, the vocabulary of conversion that I suggest is central to the discursive project of the American prison.
In this chapter, I explore the relationship between prison discourse and prisoners’ writings by first providing a brief genealogy of the conversion narrative in the American prison system. I then focus on the post-World War II era of the “rehabilitative ideal” and its effect on prisoners’ autobiographies. Prisoners who have conversion experiences in prison and go on to write about them do so in what Erving Goffman calls a “total institution” that has a vested interest in producing dramatic transformations in the discursive selves of its imprisoned subjects. This is not to suggest that every prisoner’s conversion is simply an effect of the prison’s transformative, coercive, or discursive powers; just as conversions in prison may be opportunistic, obedient, or subversive, they may also be completely genuine. But whatever their value or legitimacy, prisoners’ conversions need to be considered in relation to the institution in which they are performed—an institution that, despite its correlative punitive function (or because of it), looks to produce discursive conversions as well.

In theory, the prison is a system for punishing, controlling, and changing people. Erving Goffman describes prisons and other “total institutions” as “the forcing houses for changing persons; each is a natural experiment on what can be done to the self” (12). Likewise, in *Discipline and Punish: the Birth of the Prison* (1975), Michel Foucault observes that the dual function of the prison system has always been “the deprivation of liberty and the technical transformation of individuals” (233). Foucault argues that a disciplinary technology emerged in the late eighteenth century that attempted to transform prisoners into “docile bodies” and into members of a delinquent criminal underclass that could be closely observed and managed. Moreover, he demonstrates that narratives such as the criminal *faits divers* and the detective novel have contributed to the production of a popular conceptualization of the delinquent, which ultimately normalizes the prison and the police (286).
Notably, Foucault does not examine the role of narrative in the disciplinary mechanisms within the prison itself; that is, within the mechanisms that constrain, produce, and promise to transform prisoner subjectivity. Foucault’s emphasis on systems as opposed to subjectivities perhaps diverts him from the necessary question of the prisoner’s own sense of place within the institutional apparatus; in this regard, John Bender’s analysis of the American prison system, grounded as Bender’s methodology is in a literary framework, usefully supplements Foucault’s influential treatise. In *Imagining the Penitentiary* (1987), Bender outlines a narrative of transformation that, in charting a change of state from one way of being to another, follows the same trajectory as the conversion narrative. Bender argues that “penitentiaries assumed novelistic ideas of character … [in order] to reconstruct the fictions of personal identity that underline consciousness” (2). Thus, in English prisons beginning in the 1780s, “[e]ach convict would be assigned upon entering one of the new penitentiaries to live out a [generic] program or scenario,” and “different stages of the sentence” were separated out “like the stages of a classic plot” (23). Once a prisoner had been incorporated as a character-type into an existing plot, “providence” would ensure that the known conclusion of the fictional narrative would transpire in the real life of the prisoner, too. For all his attentiveness to the institution’s reliance on the possible transformation of the prisoner into a fixed and predestined subjectivity, however, Bender severely under-represents the conversion narrative, only mentioning the conversion narrative’s close relative, spiritual autobiography, in passing. And yet, as I have suggested, the conversion narrative is formative of prisons generally and a guiding narrative of the American prison system in particular.

In his otherwise persuasive *The Prison and the American Imagination* (2009), Caleb Smith also neglects to take into account the importance of the conversion narrative to the
discourse of the American prison system. Smith makes no specific reference to the conversion narrative despite repeatedly underscoring that reformers, writers, and theorists in the early days of the American penitentiary saw the prison in terms of conversion: incarceration within the penal system was “organized around a narrative of rebirth,” we are told, and this was meant to culminate in the prisoner’s “glorious return to citizenship and humanity” (6). While Smith does examine the rhetoric of conversion, even as he makes no mention of the conversion narrative per se, his analysis of such rhetoric remains secondary to his analyses of “civil death”—the early law that prisoners were without legal identity—and citizenship. In fact, as I will show, civil death and citizenship are important aspects of the larger allegory of the prison system’s actualization of the conversion narrative, which posits a convicted criminal’s civil death as a necessary precondition for his or her claim to citizenship: in the rhetoric of conversion, one must be lost before one can be found. This rhetoric means that only through symbolic death—a condition that civil death clearly emulates—can a convicted felon convert, ascend, and be symbolically brought back to life as a citizen.

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This chapter is divided into four sections, which conform to four historical periods: the history of conversion in America (and elsewhere) before 1776; the ideology of conversion in the early American prison; the late nineteenth century to the mid-twentieth century, when the goal was prisoner reform; and the postwar era, which takes rehabilitation as its ideal. In all of these periods, important changes in prison management were the result of prison reform movements that used the conversion narrative, its tropes, and its metaphors to articulate how the prison might
transform its imprisoned subjects. I have established a general chronology to trace where the conversion narrative was adapted or updated in the history of the reform of the American prison system (for alternative historical formations, see Sullivan, Dilulio, Christianson, Skotnicki, or Friedman, for example). My goal is not to provide a thick history of the prison; instead, I discuss the entrenchment of the conversion narrative in the American prison as a discourse of rehabilitation that prisoners reproduce or manipulate in their autobiographical acts.

The first section of this chapter, *Conversions in America*, briefly considers the history of the conversion narrative before the birth of the prison. The next three sections are divided according to the particular prison reform movements that have reinscribed the conversion narrative in the prison: *Conversion: 1776-1870* examines the development of the prison conversion narrative in the early Pennsylvania and New York prison systems; *Reformation: 1870-1945* examines how the conversion narrative was reconceived by the “New Penologists,” who produced a “science” of the prison after the Civil War; and *Rehabilitation: 1945-1980* examines the role of the conversion narrative in the post-World War II era of the rehabilitative ideal. In order to develop the necessary nuances to this genealogy, I will refer to the “conversion narrative,” the “reform narrative,” and the “rehabilitation narrative.” The “conversion narrative” refers to the familiar narrative paradigm, but I will also use it in a more specific sense, in reference to the early Pennsylvania and New York prison systems. When discussing the period between 1870 and 1945, I will use the phrase “reform narrative” in order to refer more specifically to the narrative that accompanied and produced the rise of the prison reformatories. The final section will describe the “rehabilitation narrative” of the post-World War II era. The reform narrative and the rehabilitation narrative are essentially recodifications of the conversion narrative.
narrative: they invest the tropes, structure, and subject positions of conversion with scientific or medical language.

The concluding section of this chapter examines how prisoners use the rehabilitation narrative during the post-War era of rehabilitation, when prisoners’ release from prison was often contingent on their capacity to produce stories of rehabilitation in their files for the parole board. In some cases prisoners’ autobiographies reproduced the rehabilitation narrative so precisely as to participate in what David Guest in *Sentenced to Death: The American Novel and Capital Punishment* (1997) calls an “enabling discourse” that served to reify the prison system. Not all postwar prison autobiographies have used the rehabilitation narrative quite so complicitously, however. I also show that even as some prisoners use the rehabilitation narrative, they also divert its teleology of citizenship, invert its ethical positions or moral categories, or otherwise subvert the story that the prison reformers were trying to tell.

Indeed, the remainder of this dissertation concentrates entirely on the rehabilitation narrative. I focus my analysis on the rehabilitation narrative not because it is the culmination of the conversion narrative’s history in the discourse of the American prison but because it constitutes a point of emergence where an enduring and recurring discursive formation is consolidated and clearly articulated, affecting prisoners’ autobiographies in illustrative, representative ways. Thus, the rehabilitation narrative’s appearance in the discourse of prison reformers and in the autobiographies of prisoners does not signify an aberration in the history of prisoners’ writings but represents an example of a dialectic that is constitutive of much prison writing.

Finally, it is important to note that this chapter concentrates mostly on the rhetoric of prison reformers rather than on the practice of prison systems—that is, on the theories of how
prisons should be operated as opposed to how they actually are operated. In practice, the day-to-

day operation of an American prison has usually been governed by security interests, fiscal

management, and brute violence, not conversion, reform, or rehabilitation. The discursive

omnipresence of the conversion narrative, then, has obfuscated the lived effects of incarceration,

since it promises conversion even as the prison produces the conditions for, if anything,

recidivism. By examining how this narrative has changed and not changed over time, I

underscore that the conversion narrative is reproduced again and again in the prison system as

one of its most powerful strategies of power, control, and image-making. The conversion

narrative is an established language or syntax of institutional power that prisoners are coerced to

follow and reproduce in their files, their parole hearings, and in other autobiographical acts. As I

have suggested, however, prisoners’ use of the vocabulary of institutional power often opens up

new space for meaning-making and resistance.

Conversions in America

The conversion narrative, as I have suggested, is in its most general sense a tripartite schema of

fall, tortured conscience, and redemption. In the context of American history, the narrative has a
decidedly theological foundation, although there are varying formations of the conversion

narrative amongst different religious and secular communities. Patricia Caldwell, for example,

outlines the Puritan conversion sequence as “sin, preparation, and assurance; conviction,

compunction, and submission; fear, sorrow, and faith” (2).16 By comparison, Sidonie Smith and

Julia Watson describe a version of conversion that is amenable to secularism, writing that “the

conversion narrative develops through a linear pattern—descent into darkness, struggle, moment

of crisis, conversion to new beliefs and worldview, and consolidation of a new communal
identity” (Reading Autobiography 70). While Caldwell’s definition of the conversion narrative is specific to the Puritan faith community, Smith and Watson’s definition is usefully elastic and encompasses both religious and secular conversions, as well as the philosophical conversions that developed in early Grecian and Roman traditions and that later influenced Enlightenment narratives of conversion or self-making, such as Benjamin Franklin’s autobiography and Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s Confessions (1782).

In his unpublished doctoral dissertation, “‘A Lot Up for Grabs’: The Conversion Narrative in Modernity,” David Wehner notes that even though the conversion narrative is traditionally defined within Christian parameters, it is preceded historically by a form of philosophical conversion aligned with ancient Greek and Roman schools of thought and ways of life (13). Wehner cites Plato’s allegory of the cave as an example of this classical conversion narrative. In the cave, prisoners chained to a wall are forced to watch and comment upon shadows that move about in front of them; the prisoners repeatedly confuse the shadows with their originals, achieving as a result an imagined freedom. “The Philosopher’s utopian kallipolis contains a rigorous regimen of education,” writes Wehner, “and this education cuts the chains binding the dwellers and allows them to turn around and walk out of the cave into the sunlight” (12). Wehner cites Pierre Hadot who, in Philosophy as a Way of Life (1998), compares Plato’s metaphor of the cave to a set of exercises practiced by, among others, “Platonists, Aristotelians, Epicureans, and Stoics,” exercises which were intended to produce conversions: “The goal pursued in these exercises is self-realization and improvement. All schools agree that man, before his philosophical conversion, is in a state of unhappy disquiet. Consumed by worries, torn by passions, he does not live a genuine life, nor is he truly himself. All schools also agree that man can be delivered from this state” (qtd. on 14). These exercises are reproduced in Benjamin
Franklin’s 1791 autobiography, where Franklin details a process of self-making (or, as Foucault would call it, the “care of the self”) that should be understood as a “[p]roject of arriving at moral Perfection” (79). Thus, the philosophical conversion narrative emphasizes education and discipline as the necessary means for producing self-transformation, a regimen that, as I will show, is reflected in the conversion narrative that is embedded in the prison system, particularly in the postwar rehabilitation narrative.

When discussed in an American context, the conversion narrative is usually located within a purely Christian framework. While it is important to note that the experience of conversion is not the sole property of Christianity—Malcolm X and Mohammed Ali both underwent high-profile conversions to Islam, for example—the Christian tradition greatly influences how the conversion narrative is produced and rewritten in the United States, and particularly in the country’s prison system. 17 Aside from the resurrection, two touchstones are crucial to understanding the Christian conversion narrative: the Apostle Paul’s conversion experience on the Damascus road, which provides a template for the sudden, dramatic conversion experience, and Augustine’s conversion experience in the Confessions (398), which provides the template for a longer, “developmental conversion” (Holte 42). Paul’s conversion experience was sudden and total, a transformation from non-Christian (Jew) to Christian through a blinding act of God, while Augustine’s conversion was the result of a long search that took him from a sinful past to a new life. Augustine’s lengthy process of conversion has, in particular, provided a standard model for later converts looking to narrativize their conversion experiences. 18

The initiators of the religious conversion narrative in the United States were the Puritans, who settled in America in the seventeenth century and defined the often violent adversity of the
new land as transformative. Richard Slotkin describes the Puritans’ codification of hardship, victimhood, sacrifice, and retribution within the rhetoric of conversion as an enduring, deeply American motif of “regeneration through violence” (5). The metaphor of regeneration through violence is embedded in some later narratives of the prison, a different form of frontier territory described by Frank Lauterbach as a “carceral wilderness” (127). In a decidedly non-violent sense, the Quakers were also crucial to the development of the conversion narrative, particularly in the eighteenth century. In the Quaker spiritual journey, adherents explore their relation to the world and their communities through the doctrine of the Inner Light, which holds that divinity is within each individual equally, and can be accessed through quiet and prolonged contemplation.19 While early prison reformers drew on a variety of sources to theorize how criminals could be changed into responsible members of the community, the Quaker belief that conversions occurred when a person came into contact with the inner divine provided the theoretical cornerstone for the prison reformer’s concept of the penitentiary, which initially used solitary confinement to artificially produce the conditions for prisoners to confront the “God within” without any external impediment or distraction.

The Christian conversion narrative was secularized in the Enlightenment. Most notably, Rousseau’s *Confessions* (1782) remapped Augustine’s *Confessions*, revising the framing of conversion to focus on the individual as opposed to the individual’s relation to God and to the wider religious community. Augustine was transformed through Divine intervention; Rousseau, harkening back to the philosophical conversion of the Classical age, transformed himself. After Rousseau, as Peter A. Dorsey argues in *Sacred Estrangements* (1993), the conversion narrative became a way to express in narrative form “any radical change or new insight” (46). Dorsey writes:
For Augustine, God was the only source of grace, who in a radical act of transformation gave meaning and value to an individual’s life. For Rousseau, conversion, though an experiential reality, had variable consequences. It could change one’s ideas, define one’s personality, merge one with a community, or draw one into isolation. Less than an absolute good, conversion simply became a means by which one perceived the world. (48)

According to Dorsey, the secular conversion narrative underwrites or informs most modern autobiography (48-49). However, the secular conversion narrative still retains distinct features of its Christian antecedent, demarcating it from other autobiographical or narrative forms such as the Bildungsroman. Chief among them is the trope of the bifurcated self or the motif of rebirth.

Crucial to both the religious and the secular expressions of the conversion experience is a complete change from one way of being to another, which is usually described as a bifurcation of selfhood: an old (sinful or unenlightened) self is separated from a new (repentant or enlightened) self—what Evangelical Christians describe as a process of being “born again.” Malcolm X, for example, writes in his autobiography, “I would be startled to catch myself thinking in a remote way of my earlier self as another person” (170). Similarly, William James, in The Varieties of Religious Experience (1902), describes conversion as “a complete division . . . established in the twinkling of an eye between the old life and the new” (171). The subjective division that Malcolm X and William James describe is, as the etymology of the word convert suggests, a turn. In the religious conversion narrative, the turn is affected by God: one is called by God, and so one turns, and thus one is “subjected.” As Judith Butler explains in The Psychic Life of Power (1997), “[s]ubjection signifies the process of becoming subordinated by power as well as the process of becoming a subject” (2). In other words, one is made (or remade) a subject through
his or her subordination to God. In the secular conversion narrative, the turn is often effected through a combination of inculcation and discipline, which together produce a subject who is thereby subjected to the authority of a new community that shares his or her new values.

Through the adoption of particular prescriptions and proscriptions, the convert is constituted as a new subject; in being converted, he or she is made anew. (Consider, for example, Alcoholics Anonymous, which produces a new subject—the self-defined alcoholic—through the disciplinary mechanisms of the 12-step program.) The convert is also subjected to power because he is “tied to his own identity by a conscience or self-knowledge” that originates outside the self in a particular community or institution (“The Subject and Power” 212). Converted to a new set of beliefs, the convert is “converted” or “turned” into a new person while also being “turned” outward to the new community to which he or she belongs.

The “turn” of the conversion narrative produces exactly what the pioneers of the first penitentiary hoped would be produced through their prison: a new person befitting the standards of the community. The conversion narrative held a number of other appealing qualities for the early prison reformers too: it required an acceptance of one’s guilt, whether in relation to God or to the community; it involved submission to a higher power; it (re)confirmed normative societal values as true and just; and it provided a mechanism for returning a criminal to the community as a citizen. The pioneers of the first penitentiary wondered whether they could establish a system of social control that reproduced the conditions of this “turn” or conversion. Could the process of conversion be artificially created?
Conversion: 1776-1870

In Franz Kafka’s *The Trial*, a priest calls Joseph K. as he tries to leave the Cathedral:

“Joseph K.!”

K. started and stared at the ground before him. For the moment he was still free, he could continue on his way and vanish through one of the small, dark, wooden doors that faced him at no great distance. It would simply indicate that he had not understood the call, or that he had understood it and did not care. But if he were to turn round he would be caught, for that would amount to an admission that he had understood it very well, that he was really the person addressed, and that he was ready to obey. (230-231)

Of course, K. does turn around in response to the priest’s call. In turning to face the priest, K. acknowledges himself as the subject of a particular manifestation of power: certainly, he is subject to the power of the clergy, but he is also subject to both the judiciary and the prison, because the priest is not only a representative of the Church but also the prison chaplain. Indexed within the figure of the priest, then, are numerous institutions of power: God, the clergy, the law, and the prison. In K.’s “turn” towards the figure of the priest, and in the layered “higher powers” represented by the priest who demands that K turn toward him, we can read the pedigree of the first conversion narrative in the American penitentiary system. Just as the clerical, legal, and penal authorities are folded into the figure of the priest, the early formulation of the prison conversion narrative blended Biblical precedence and denominational practice with old notions of imprisonment and new methodologies of law and punishment in order to subject criminals to the authority of the community and resurrect them in the figure of the citizen.

The conversion narrative that developed in the American penitentiary system was, like its Puritan, settler predecessor, explicitly Christian. As Andrew Skotnicki argues in *Religion and the
Development of the American Penal System (2000), the two systems that dominated the penitentiary landscape until 1870—the Pennsylvania and the Auburn (or New York) systems—were the ideological products of the Calvinist denominations that predominated in those particular regions. The Pennsylvania system was influenced by Quaker theology; the Auburn system, Presbyterian (Skotnicki 6). The goal of the early prisons was to create some form of order out of the chaos of the existing jails, and to use confinement not only as punishment but also as a way to transform criminals into citizens. In both systems, the process for effecting this transformation was the conversion narrative, which provided a way to order the prison to ensure that a prisoner would progress from a fallen state to a redemptive one. But the Christian conversion narrative was not simply dropped into existing systems of punishment by these early reformers. The “origin” of the conversion narrative in the penitentiary was instead a confluence of disparate influences that played a role elsewhere in American (and European) punitive systems. With the penitentiary, the reformers developed an ideological and an architectural system for the transformation of individuals that wove several cultural, methodological, and doctrinal threads together, which I will consider in the following order: first, existing associations of punishment with criminal conversions staged, for example, in the popular gallows confessions of condemned criminals; second, Enlightenment theories of subjectivity; and third, two slightly different conceptions of how the conversion narrative was to be acted out by prisoners in the Quaker Pennsylvania system and the Presbyterian Auburn system.

The prison conversion narrative was preceded and influenced by existing associations of punishment with conversion. For example, in “‘Behold A Tragic Scene Strangely Changed Into Mercy’: The Structure and Significance of Criminal Conversion Narratives in Early New England,” Daniel E. Williams identifies a gallows confessional that was popular in early New
England called the “criminal conversion narrative.” As Williams explains, condemned criminals in early New England were expected to perform conversions at the scaffold before their execution. The criminal conversion narrative eventually disappeared as the scene at the scaffold took on different political resonances at the end of the eighteenth century. As Foucault establishes in *Discipline and Punish*, the scaffold became a location for resistance where convicts often took the opportunity to renounce authority as much as convicts confessed in accordance with the prescribed institutional arrangement. Foucault suggests that this period of crisis in the late eighteenth century prompted the rise of the penitentiary, a system that veiled punishment (and insurrection) from public view and redistributed the physical punishment of the scaffold throughout the disciplinary regimen of the emergent prison system.\(^{21}\)

The criminal conversion narrative of the old punitive spectacle did not die out, however; it found new life in the penitentiary. The “birth” of the prison system reconfigured the criminal conversion narrative into a drama of civil death and resurrection. Whereas the criminal conversion narrative was what Williams calls “a kind of roadmap to paradise” that facilitated the convert’s rebirth in a post-execution afterlife (829), the prison conversion narrative paved the criminal-convert’s way back into the fold of the community as a fellow-citizen-subject: a rebirth in social life.\(^ {22}\) As Caleb Smith argues, the prison cell became “the scene for a new political ritual, a drama of power and subjection for the modern social contract.” According to Smith, the prison system reproduced in the lives of its imprisoned subjects the drama that, for Jean-Jacques Rousseau, constituted “the foundation of political society”: the moment when the “animal,” or savage human, acceded to the social contract and, as a result, is transformed into a man (13). “In the modern age,” Smith continues, “the penitentiary would enact the abjection of the body and the birth of the citizen’s refined, self-governing soul” (14). The emergent political drama that
staged the birth of citizenship was performed according to the religious script of the conversion narrative, whose roots were in the old criminal conversion narrative of the scaffold. Ultimately, the convict was no longer to confess dramatically in public before an executioner or the stocks; he or she would enter the penitentiary as a social deviant and, years later, emerge transformed, a productive, useful, penitent citizen.

While the appeal of the penitentiary as a system for transforming people had its roots in existing associations of conversion with punishment, the penitentiary was also predicated on the Enlightenment theory that selfhood was plastic, that it could be moulded and shaped. Because Enlightenment thinkers like Hume and Locke defined identity as a kind of fiction, “it also could be considered subject to artificial creation” (Bender 37). This theory was extended by thinkers like Jeremy Bentham (in the Panopticon) and Cesare Beccaria (in his influential 1764 treatise *Essays on Crimes and Punishments*), who argued that identity could be transformed and character altered by changing the “‘succession of related objects’ from which, according to Hume, the idea of identity is fictionally extrapolated in everyday life” (Bender 38). In the United States, the Enlightenment theory of the plasticity of identity was wedded with the Quaker doctrine of Inner Light—the belief system organized around the notion that divinity existed within each individual. Enlightenment thinkers suggested that identity could be shaped and transformed; Quaker Christianity likewise maintained that contact with the inner divine could convert sin into salvation. This marriage between Enlightenment ontology and Quaker theology bore the first modern American prison: the Walnut Street Jail, which later became Eastern State Penitentiary (Cohen et al. 32).

The first American “penitentiary” was, along with its Enlightenment influences, a Quaker spiritual experiment based on reformation and penitence—as the name, “penitentiary,”
suggests—rather than corporal punishment. (Physical punishment never really disappeared, however; as Foucault suggests, it was redistributed.) The Walnut Street jail, which provided the template for Eastern State Penitentiary, was based on the work of the first prison reform group, the Philadelphia Society for Alleviating the Miseries of Public Prisons, of which Benjamin Franklin was a key member. In 1790 an experimental “Penitentiary House” of sixteen individual cells was built inside Walnut Street Jail. Thirty years later, the Walnut Street experiment was replicated in Eastern State Penitentiary, which housed two-hundred and fifty prisoners according to the Penitentiary House model (Cohen et al.). Eastern State Penitentiary used solitary, cellular confinement to encourage prisoners to reform through isolated labour and, more pressingly, through communion with God. The utilitarian belief in the transformative qualities of hard work was secondary to the religious belief that change occurred according to the Inner Light Doctrine: alone in their cells, prisoners were forced to turn inward, reflect, find the inner divine, and repent (Skotnicki 39). Early prison reformers imagined the penitentiary as an architectural system for enforcing a sequence of events in the lives of prisoners, which ultimately climaxed in conversion.23

Prisoners in Eastern State Penitentiary were expected to follow their “sentence” in both a legal and a linguistic or narrative sense: they were expected to conform to the conversion narrative and demonstrate that they were, in fact, penitent and reformed.24 After Eastern Penitentiary had been operating for four years, for example, its inspectors outlined the “plot” their prisoners were expected to follow:

We mark that at first the prisoner indulges in morose or vindictive feelings, and is guilty of turbulent and malicious conduct; but after a few weeks he adopts a more subdued tone, becomes reasonable, and his countenance indicates a more amiable
state of mind; is disposed to talk of his past life as one of misery and folly; begins to think that the barrier between him and good reputation is not impossible; and that there are those in the community, whose prejudices against the condemned are not so strong as to induce the withholding a friendly countenance to his attempt at restoration. In many, the retrospect of life becomes a horrible and loathsome subject of reflection—the sense of shame and feelings of remorse drives them to some source of consolation, and the ordinary means of stifling an actively reproving conscience being denied by reason of their solitariness, the comforts of the Bible and the peace of religion are eagerly sought for.

(qtd. in Christianson 136)

Built into the very walls of Eastern’s solitary, cellular confinement system is the tripartite schema of the conversion narrative: fall, tortured conscience, and redemption. The prisoner, whose crimes identify him as spiritually fallen, moves through a “guilty” state marked by “morose and vindictive feelings” and “turbulent and malicious conduct;” next, once he is in a more “amiable” and pliable state, his past life of “misery and folly” is codified within a moral framework that reflects his “shame and feelings of remorse;” and finally, compelled through the introspection of solitary confinement to seek the guidance of the Bible, the prisoner progresses to an ontological state amenable to the requirements of the prison system and, assumedly, of society beyond the prison walls.25

The transformation of the subject that is so firmly anticipated by the inspectors of Eastern State Penitentiary is predicated upon the same demarcation of past from present self that we find in the conversion narrative, a demarcation that is frequently framed in the most radical terms possible: death and rebirth. As Kabi Hartman notes, the conversion narrative is often developed
according to “a narrative arc of quasi-death, resurrection, and spiritual transformation” (44). The process of symbolic death and symbolic rebirth is written into the methodology of the penitentiary: the rebirth or symbolic resurrection must be preceded by a symbolic death, by the shedding of the prisoner’s previous and fallen self. Prior to 1764, real death in the form of capital punishment had been exercised for a number of different offences, including burglary, treason, rape, sodomy and buggery, counterfeiting, “as well as for a second conviction of any felony” (Cohen et al. 33). With the advent of the new penitentiary system, however, imprisonment replaced execution for many previously capital crimes. Death was not eliminated in this substitution but rather subsumed into the narrative of the prison, realized both in the form of symbolic death (or “death-in-life”) and in later post-bellum statutes drawn upon by Smith of “civil death,” which rendered a convicted criminal legally dead. In the post-bellum period, states enacted civil death statutes that meant that prisoners lost their legal identity. According to Richard Hawkins and Geoffrey P. Alpert in *American Prison Systems: Punishment and Justice* (1989), these “statutes meant the prisoners had no standing in legal action involving their property, marriage, custody of their children, or other matters outside the prison” (367). Prisoners could not enter into contractual agreements and they would not be recognized as subjects by the courts. They were effectively non-persons. Although civil death statutes happened much later, they were largely *de facto* in earlier periods as well, since prisoners at best had limited access to courts. Symbolic death and civil death are not necessarily that distinct.

Gustave de Beaumont and Alexis de Tocqueville, in their early inspections of American penitentiaries, describe how the metaphor of death was lived out by prisoners in the early penitentiary system:
The silence within those vast walls, which contain so many prisoners, is that of death. We have often trod during night those monotonous and dumb galleries, where a lamp is always burning: we felt as if we traversed catacombs; there were a thousand living beings, and yet it was a desert solitude. (32)

This “death” was not to be final; it had a teleological function in the conversion process. “In this closed cell,” writes Michel Foucault, “this temporary sepulchre, the myths of resurrection arise easily enough” (239). The prisoner dies symbolically and legally in order to be resurrected as a member of free society, a citizen-subject.

Beaumont and Tocqueville’s description of “those monotonous and dumb galleries” as tombs could easily have been made in reference to Eastern State Penitentiary with its “catacombs” of segregated cells. However, Beaumont and Tocqueville were instead walking through a competing early nineteenth century penal system, one that was developed at New York’s Auburn Penitentiary, which was constructed in 1816. Despite divergences or oppositions between the Quaker-influenced Pennsylvania system and the Presbyterian Auburn system, both carceral formations shared an underlying premise: as Skotnicki points out, the “moral and religious conversion of the inmate was a mainstay in the rhetoric of both penal systems, reflecting the common Calvinist heritage of both Puritans and Quakers” (50). Like Pennsylvania, Auburn fused Christian theology with Enlightenment principles: through social and legal death, sin was converted into salvation, animal into man, criminal into citizen.

In fact, Auburn borrowed much from its Pennsylvania predecessor, particularly the distinctly Quaker emphasis on silence as a necessary precondition for conversion. But Auburn changed the degree to which prisoners came into contact with other prisoners. The Pennsylvania model was strictly solitary (it is often called the “separate system”), but Auburn’s congregate
model required complete separation only at night, with the prisoners working collectively during the day—albeit working in complete silence. In a symbolic sense, then, the Auburn system sped up the cycle of death and rebirth upon which early penitentiaries were predicated, playing it out every twenty-four hours: for, “[a]fter night and silence” in the cells at Auburn, the prisoner returned daily to work and to “the regenerated life” (Discipline 239). According to Beaumont and Tocqueville, this alteration between silent companionship and solitary confinement was a design that eliminated the disadvantages of the Pennsylvania system (most particularly, the potential for complete isolation to cause madness) while maintaining the advantages of its predecessor by enabling solitude and quiet reflection, as these were believed to create the right conditions for conversion:

[The] idea was not given up, that the solitude, which causes the criminal to reflect, exercises a beneficial influence; and the problem was, to find the means by which the evil effect of total solitude could be avoided without giving up its advantages. It was believed that this end could be attained, by leaving the convicts in their cells during night, and by making them work during the day, in the common work-shops, obliging them at the same time to observe absolute silence.

(6)

Through silence, the prisoner would, as in the Pennsylvania system, still have the opportunity to find redemption—although not necessarily by connecting with an Inner Light. Quiet introspection at Auburn likely had more to do with uncovering evil in the self than good, since it emerged out of a Puritan tradition that held that original sin, not an inner divine, was at the root of human nature.
As well as the greater degree to which a prisoner came into contact with other prisoners, the Auburn system differed from the Pennsylvania system by emphasizing labour as the means by which the prisoner might come to his or her conversion—a conversion often still coded in predominantly religious language, but more often than not, also in practical, utilitarian terms.29 The Protestant work ethic, in terms redolent of Max Weber’s seminal treatise *The Protestant Ethic and the “Spirit” of Capitalism*, provided the ideological backbone for the growing political demand that penitentiaries reduce their dependence on taxpayer money by increasing the labour-potential of the prisoners. In fact, the prospect that the Auburn model could be self-sufficient ultimately ensured that it became the accepted standard for prison design for the nation, while the less economically sound Pennsylvania model slowly became obsolete.30

The demand for prisons to be economically self-sufficient if not profitable also increased the level of violence used to coerce prisoners to work. Discipline at Auburn consisted not only of strictly enforced silence, but also of lockstep marching; long, exhausting work hours; regular whippings (even for minor offences); the use of iron stocks; prolonged incarceration in a dark cell with only bread and water for subsistence; and other, more creative disciplinary implements, such as the “shower-bath,” which involved repeatedly dumping near-freezing water from a significant height onto a restrained prisoner (Sullivan 10; Christianson 137).31 Violence was easily absorbed into the existing vocabulary of conversion. Echoing Slotkin’s reading of the Puritan conversion as “regeneration through violence,” Skotnicki points out that the strict disciplinarians who oversaw the Auburn system (those firm-handed descendants of the Puritans) believed that the “convict needed to feel the wrath of God as a pretext for conversion” (71). As Horace Lane writes in his 1835 prison memoir, *Five Years in State’s Prison*, “[a]ffliction renders the creature tasteless, and the world barren.” In that affliction “dispels the intoxicating juice of
carnal pleasures, and sensual delights,” it has a chastening effect that curtails desire and induces conversion: affliction, Lane writes, “brings us to the feet of Jesus” (20). Although Lane’s idea of “affliction” was different from the brutality of many prison guards of the era, both defined pain as a necessary precondition for conversion. While likely used primarily for punitive purposes, violence could still be framed within the rhetoric of conversion: the prisoner needed to be broken before he or she could be mended and made anew.

**Reform: 1865-1950**

The abolition of slavery in 1865 changed the scope of American prisons. In the South, the prison system picked up where slavery left off: the quick transition from slave plantation to prison plantation, from slave chain-gang to prisoner chain-gang indexes the ease with which the existing penal system adopted the institutional function of slavery. The potential economic disruption to the Southern states when slavery was officially curtailed was mitigated by the existence of the prison system, as prisoners began to perform some of the labour previously performed by slaves. Southern prisons, unlike their Northern counterparts, paid little lip-service to the notion of conversion or reformation. Rehabilitation as a program for prisons “was generally confined to the wealthier states of the North until the thirties,” writes Williams Banks Taylor in *Down on Parchment Farm: The Great Prison in the Mississippi Delta* (1999). Any attempt to systematize a process specifically for the conversion or reform of a prisoner in the Southern carceral system was largely non-existent until the twentieth century.

Even in the Northern prisons, conversion or reform was not an ideal that was universally applied: despite the vast body of African American conversion narratives often cited by abolitionists, black prisoners “were not even acknowledged as ever having been epistemological
and moral agents. Thus, they could not even fall from grace, a state they were deemed incapable of attaining in the first place” (Davis 39). The exclusion of African American prisoners from conversion and reform was codified in 1865 in the Thirteenth Amendment, which ascribes an ontological status to criminals akin to that of slaves. The rhetoric of the Amendment would seem to prohibit or disavow any efforts toward reform since the slave was, by definition, irredeemable.33 Despite abolition, black prisoners were still considered, in ontological terms, less than human. Of course, the American prison system had from the start been predicated upon hierarchies that marked out those who had the potential for redemption from those who were considered to be irredeemable. In the post-bellum period, however, the distinctions within this hierarchical system intensified along racial lines, entrenching within the prison the subordinate position of African Americans in relation to white Americans, and articulating the redemptive potential of white prisoners in contrast to the supposed irredeemableness of black prisoners.

While the 13th Amendment in fact implies that all prisoners were akin to slaves (and, consequently, irredeemable), efforts at reforming white or European American prisoners increased in the post-bellum period, beginning with two significant interventions: first, Enoch Wines and Theodore Dwight’s 1867 Report on the Prisons and Reformatory Discipline (more simply, the National Prison Congress), held at Cincinnati, Ohio, in October of 1870. Wines and Dwight produced their report after receiving the authorization of the New York Prison Association (NYPA) to tour prisons in the northern states and parts of Canada. Seventy volumes of documentation and their six-hundred-page Report were the results of the survey (Sullivan 17). The recommendations they made were rearticulated three years later at the National Prison Congress in Cincinnati, where an emerging group of prison professionals
gathered to discuss how to reform America’s fledgling prison system. The Congress gave credence to Wines and Dwight’s methodology, defined by Wines as the “scientific study of crime” or the “new penology” (qtd. in Sullivan 18).

Together, the Wines and Dwight Report and the National Congress signalled a new age of prison management, an era that was to be defined by the findings of prison experts and their “scientific” methodology. These “new penologists” did not reject the old conversion paradigm so much as change its point of application: no longer would the prison system compel conversions, whether through the application of physical force or by other means; instead, the new prison system would provide the conditions for prisoners to produce their own “reformation.” What had devolved in the preceding years into a system of “fear” would, according to Wines and Dwight, be reshaped into a system of “hope” (72). The violence of the lash and the shower-bath, as well as other forms of physical punishment, had only incited hate and rebellion, they argued; what was needed was a methodology that incited the desire for change on the part of the prisoner. Consequently, Wines and Dwight called for something that marked the prisoner’s “manhood”—his humanity, virtue, and dignity—rather than his body (Wines and Dwight 167). The tenor of their argument was likewise taken up by other advocates of reform, including, for example, the famed prison reformer and first warden of Elmira Reformatory, Zebulon Brockway. In “The Ideal of a True Prison System for a State,” a seminal paper delivered at the National Congress, Brockway argued against existing prison punishment and called instead for a “law of love” (42). The implementation of this new “law of love” at New York’s Elmira Reformatory, the first testing ground for these innovative penal theories, was in no way gentle, however; rather, it involved a strict system of discipline:
The object of all reformatory prison treatment is to conquer, in the prisoner, his habits of evil; to train him in the ways of virtuous industry; to sunder the tie that binds him to his associates in crime; to extinguish in him the desire and the tendency to herd with them again, and so to discipline him that he may go back into the world with some settled principle and some steady purpose of virtue.35

(Wines and Dwight 70)

In the “science” of the new penologists, Foucault’s description of discipline as an exercise for producing “docile bodies” takes shape in the United States prison system. There are two differences that are worth highlighting between Foucault’s account of discipline in Discipline and Punish and the way discipline was enacted in the American system in the latter-half of the nineteenth century, however. First, the new science of discipline in the American prison system was guided in large part by religious principles and given shape by the religious conversion narrative—albeit in increasingly secular terms. Second, Discipline and Punish often seems to posit an inagential prisoner as the object of prison discipline, but what is compelling about the system established by the “new penologists” is the way the prisoner seems to regain, at least in the penologists’ rhetoric, a significant amount of agency in prison. According to Wines and Dwight, reform is accomplished “by placing the prisoner’s fate, as far as possible, in his own hands; by enabling him, through industry and good conduct, to raise himself, step by step, to a position of less restraint” (73). Prison was no longer to be restrictive, argued Wines and Dwight; it was to be productive. In fact, the new prison was no longer even considered a prison to the new penologists. According to Brockway, in a comparison that was to resonate throughout the twentieth century, it was “so little like an ordinary prison and so much like a college or a hospital” that it was considered to be a new form of institution (qtd. in Pisciotta 616).
Although *Discipline and Punish* does not account for the conversion narrative and the law of love upheld by the new penologists, Foucault’s concept of discipline does account for the new penologists’ hoped-for effects of their techniques: the prisoner’s internalization of an external authority. According to this new system, and in an extension of Puritan models of self-accounting, the prisoner policed him- or herself. While earlier systems emphasized the role of the prison in controlling and managing the prisoner, the new reformatory technology produced the appearance of inviting the prisoner to undergo his or her own reformation—although, as Foucault would have noted, prisoner conversions unfolded according to a carefully controlled narrative script, one that was embedded and enforced in three new forms of prison management: the indeterminate sentence, parole, and the mark system. These three forms of prison management were to cast a shadow over prisoners’ writings not only in the nineteenth century but also for the majority of the twentieth century, particularly once they were finally implemented across the country after the Second World War.

The indeterminate sentence was a means of controlling every aspect of a prisoner’s life by requiring the prisoner to repent and convert convincingly if he or she were ever to be released. Prisoners serving indeterminate sentences would be given set minimums and set maximums; these were far enough apart that prisoners could be held until they had proven their reform or until the end of their maximum sentence, whichever was sooner. Prisoners who were given a maximum sentence of life imprisonment could be held in a constant state of waiting, never knowing whether or not they would or could be released. Prior to the implementation of this new system, a person convicted of forgery might receive a determinate sentence of five years in prison. Under the new system of indeterminate sentencing, a conviction for forgery might earn the prisoner an indeterminate sentence of five to twenty years in prison. With the indeterminate
sentence in place, prisoners had to produce evidence that they had undergone some degree of reform if they were to be released. Consequently, the ways by which the authorities could be convinced of reform became of primary importance to prisoners. If ever there was a technology for producing narratives of reform in the texts of imprisoned men, a sentence that depended on the production of such a narrative would certainly be it.

Parole, meanwhile, was a form of conditional release—one that still operates in some states, in fact. The term “parole” has its origins in twelfth-century France, where as a noun it was used to mean promise. In judicial, military, and penal usage, parole has its origins more specifically in the French phrase parole d’honneur, that is, “word of honour.” A parole d’honneur refers not just to a small promise but to a weighty, unwritten contract between one person and another, the idea being, in the term’s development within the prison system, that a prisoner can be released if he or she promises to comply with a set of conditional demands. To delve further into the term’s history, it has roots in the Latin words paraula (word), paravola (speech), and parabola (original story, or parable) (OED 248). Parole, in other words, is intimately linked both with an individual’s story of self and with a paradigmatic story—in this case, the paradigm is prescribed by the prison system to be followed or reiterated by a prisoner before the prisoner is to be released. A prisoner’s performance of reform from criminal to citizen must match the guidelines established by the prison authorities for changing from a criminal to a citizen. The general structure of these guidelines, or of what we might call the prison’s paradigmatic narrative arc, was loosely set out in a system developed in the early 1850s by Sir Walter Crofton in Ireland, called simply “the Irish system”: “There are four distinct stages of a prisoner’s progress, under this system—the first intensely penal; the second less so, but still strongly partaking of that character; the third but slightly penal; and the fourth [parole] losing the
penal aspect entirely, unless subjection for a time to police supervision may be so regarded in a
degree” (Wines and Dwight 73). The Irish system was adopted by the new penologists and
applied to American prisons as a way of guiding prisoners toward their reformation. In providing
the material articulation of an expected and approved narrative of development from criminal to
citizen, the Irish system modeled a specific reform narrative that prisoners were expected to
follow. The form of this particular reform narrative was regulated by the mark system.

The mark system, which was developed in 1840 by Alexander Maconochie in the
Norfolk Island prison colony just off Australia, was a way to classify prisoners, determine their
progression or digression, and provide evidence of their fitness for early release. In basic terms,
prisoners would receive marks for good conduct, lose marks for bad conduct, and be classified
according to their scores. The prison at Norfolk Island was divided into three divisions (as set out
by the “Irish system”; the fourth division was parole), each with its benefits and privileges.
Prisoners who received high marks would be consigned to the first division; they would hold
significant privileges in the prison, one of which was to demonstrate power and superiority over
prisoners in lower divisions by functioning as prisoner-guards, or “patrolmen.” Prisoners who
received low marks would have few, if any, privileges. Those who were between the first and
third divisions (new prisoners were always consigned to the mid-level) were understood either to
be ascending toward greater privileges and, ultimately, release or parole or to be descending
toward near-isolation until such time as they reached the maximum year of their sentence
(Pisciotta 617). While there have been several ways of explaining a prisoner’s descent—
degeneration is one such example—the goal of the mark system was actually to provide the
conditions for a prisoner’s ascent. To rise in the prison hierarchy, the prisoner had to garner
marks by performing tasks that were set out by the prison system. Educational excellence, hard work, or general demeanour were ways of achieving marks.

The prisoner’s marks would be recorded in the prison’s “conduct ledger” and in the prisoner’s own “passbook,” both of which were early versions of the prisoner’s file (Pisciotta 616). The conduct ledger and the passbook were essentially both biographical and autobiographical texts: in that the books constituted stories told by the prison system about prisoners, and retained in written form, they were biographical; but to the extent that prisoners self-consciously participated in educational programs, religious observances, hobbies, counsellings sessions, and other daily activities with these texts in mind, they were autobiographical, too. The conduct ledger and the passbook were expected to disclose to their implied readers—the prison administration and the parole board, both of whom used these texts to judge prisoners’ progress—a narrative of reform that accorded with established convention: change over time, a transformation of self that was both viable and enduring, and a process of reform according to the stages of development set out in the levels and gradations of the mark system.36 As with the conventional conversion narrative, prisoners were expected to progress through stages of development and change; thus, the mark system was a kind of “morphology” of reform, one which would advance the prisoner not simply toward a few behavioural changes but toward a radical transformation of self.37

Zebulon Brockway explains how fundamental a conversion the new penologists were hoping for: “Reformation involves such change in the constitutional tendencies, that the impulses and desires are revolutionized and become permanent, with their preponderance decidedly to the right” (45). There are no partial changes in Brockway’s treatise: the transformation of the prisoner’s impulses and desires is not only fundamental (they are “revolutionized”) but
“permanent.” What is retained is the rhetoric of an old self made anew: through the “correction or amendment of life and manners . . . those who were obnoxious and troublesome [would be made] acceptable or useful citizens” (44).

Brockway, who was a born-again Christian, wanted to see his prisoner-charges experience the conversion that he himself had undergone in the 1850s. As Philip Jenkins writes in “Temperance and the Origins of the New Penology,” “[a]fter his conversion, Brockway found a new sense of mission in promoting the moral welfare and reform of his prisoners”—although, in 1894 Brockway was found by the New York State Board of Charities to have been regularly beating his charges at Elmira (560). Nevertheless, for Brockway, reform was intimately tied to the Protestant notion of “spiritual rebirth” (“Temperance” 560). A glance at the religious influence of the congress of 1870 shows that Brockway’s notion of reform was not peculiar to him. As Jenkins demonstrates, the Congress was dominated by Republicans, “the party that had surged to power on the political Puritanism of the late 1850s.” There were also thirty-five members of the clergy in Congress; the clergy accounted for one-seventh of the attendees (“Temperance” 560). “In this environment,” writes Jenkins, “religious and moralistic explanations of crime were going to be found congenial.” Moreover, “[g]iven the recent successes in enacting Puritan legislation, much sympathy was also shown to theories which gave discretion to public authorities to judge when an offender had been made fit for Christian society” (560). Consequently, just as “initial speeches to the congress made clear, the aim was to create regenerate men and women” (emphasis added; “Temperance” 561). The idea was not to be a better person but an altogether different person as a result of incarceration.

Although the techniques had been refined, the language scientifically updated, and the emphasis changed, the amendments to the methodology of the prison system had the same goal
in mind as the earlier penitentiary: a criminal’s rebirth as a citizen in “Christian society.” In the hands of the new penologists, the tropes, metaphors, and subject positions of conversion were retooled and invested in the reformation narrative.

Rehabilitation: 1945-1980

Despite significant interest in the ideas of the new penologists and in the advances of Elmira Reformatory, the new penologists’ theories were slow to gain traction across the country (Hawkins and Alpert 187). After the Second World War, however, the penological science of reformers like Zebulon Brockway caught the attention of mid-century penologists, prison officials, and politicians in part because the psychological and social sciences of the post-war period popularized the belief that human behaviour could be “treated” and changed (Irwin 38-39). Consequently, the American Prison Association signalled its acceptance of the treatment-focused theories of the new penologists by changing its name after the war to the American Correctional Association (Caster ix). Prisoners were to be “corrected” according to the American Correctional Association’s mandate, not punished. The focus of the post-war American prison was to be shifted as much as possible to fix upon the individualized treatment, the “rehabilitation,” of “offenders.” The “rehabilitative ideal” had a dramatic effect on prisoners’ self-representations and autobiographical acts until the early 1980s. Indeed, the metaphors of conversion entrenched in theories of rehabilitation continue to affect how prison life enters into discourse (as I will show in Chapter 2 with Jimmy Santiago Baca’s A Place to Stand, for example).

The religious vocabulary that the new penologists fused with their science of the prison in the post-bellum decades was almost entirely subsumed by the language of the psychological,
medical, and social sciences that marked the era of the rehabilitative ideal that ranged roughly from 1945-1980. Nevertheless, rehabilitation bears the traces of its conversion and reformation antecedents, including the tropes, motifs, and subject positions of the traditional Christian conversion. In *Prison Within Society: A Reader in Penology*, which was published in 1968 when the rehabilitative ideal was in full swing, Lawrence E. Hazelrigg writes that the prison is, or should be, a “people-changing” institution so as “to fulfill its integrative function to larger society” (393). Penologists of the rehabilitation era repeatedly argued that prisons were in the business of “changing” imprisoned “people,” a metaphor that reinscribes a defining feature of the conversion tradition: what William James calls the “complete division” “between the old life and the new.” Once they were different people, prisoners could be brought into the fold, integrated into what the New York Parole Board during the 1960s and early 1970s called a “‘law-abiding,’ ‘honest,’ ‘upright,’ and ‘industrious’ life” (qtd. in McKay et al. 99). Jay Hall, Martha Williams, and Louis Tomaino’s “The Challenge of Correctional Change” in *Prison Within Society* summarizes the philosophy of rehabilitation that guides the “people-changing” institutions in the three decades after the war by describing the role of a new figure in the story of the prison, the “correctional worker”:

> The task of the correctional worker, when stripped to its most essential elements and presented in its most incisive form, is one of *changing* individuals from offender to nonoffender status, with the result that the public will then be protected and the offender can be considered rehabilitated. (emphasis in original 311)

According to the rehabilitation model, prison guards were “correctional worker[s]” who continued to focus on the control of the prison population but were also expected to participate in
the rehabilitation process so as to change “offenders” into “nonoffenders.” More than in any prison system since the birth of the modern penitentiary at the close of the eighteenth century, the mandate of the prison during the era of the rehabilitative ideal was, at least in theory, premised on the total transformation of prisoners from “offenders to nonoffenders” or from criminals to citizens.

Like the reform narrative of the new penologists, the rehabilitation narrative that plotted how the prison system would transform a criminal into a citizen reinscribed the structure and rhetoric of the conversion narrative even as its method was defined by penologists and criminologists as decidedly scientific. The 1971 Quaker-produced *Struggle for Justice: A Report on Crime and Punishment in America*, which challenged the fairness of the rehabilitative ideal, indeterminate sentence, and the draconian powers of the parole board, underscores how conversion is latent in the ostensibly scientific methodologies of rehabilitation. The authors write that the concept of rehabilitation, with its focus on the total transformation of “the whole personality” (44) and the rhetoric of “[r]emaking people” (45) “is akin to religious conversion” (46). Likewise, Hawkins and Alpert describe the rehabilitative ideal as a “control-by-conversion philosophy” (187). The science of rehabilitation that promised the total transformation of its imprisoned subjects is inextricably linked to the pedigree of the conversion narrative that was the guiding conceptual metaphor for the original penitentiary.

Precisely how people were to be changed was harder to define in practice for postwar prison reformers. Reformers, social scientists, and eventually prison officials ultimately defined two models for rehabilitating offenders: the medical model and the educational model (also described as the “economic model”; Hawkins and Alpert 191). Like many of the postwar rehabilitation theories, these models were based on the system established by new penologists
like Zebulon Brockway. Brockway often described prisoner-treatment in medical terms: prisoners were sick and prison was a kind of “antidote” (45) or “cure” (42). He also firmly supported the expansion of educational programs, including vocational or “industrial training,” as well as what he called “intellectual education,” or the “cultivat[ion] [of] the germinal faculties of the intellect and the moral nature” (51). His reformatory was to be understood, he said, as a “hospital” or a “college,” a displacement of the prison’s punitive function that was to recur in penological textbooks but not in the cells, yards, workshops, counselling sessions, or classes in most prisons across the country where prisoners were forced into attendance because non-attendance meant they might never be released.

The medical model was based on the notion that criminals were antisocial deviants, essentially different from regular citizens; however, the medical model also framed criminality as a pathology that could be treated and changed (Hawkins and Alpert 190). Treatment methods varied widely, from drug-treatment to surgery or counselling (MacNamara 440), but the most common forms of treatment employed “various behavioral [sic] or psychiatric methods to break down criminal values, . . . replacing them with values associated with free society” (Sullivan 76).39 The twentieth-century medical model seemed to provide a new, scientific form of treatment far removed from its religious ancestry, but the narrative of development it proposed—from sickness to cure or from “criminal values” to the values of “free society”—continued to pivot on the same structural divisions as the conversion narrative. Perhaps it is no coincidence, then, that the two most successful programs that were implemented under the medical model during the rehabilitation era were Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous, whose 12-step programs are semi-religious conversion narratives that bear a striking resemblance to early Puritan conversions.40
Along with the medical model, the education model took a number of possible forms in prison, depending on what kind of education was prescribed by the prison system’s classification committee, who decided the prisoner’s “treatment.” 41 Under the rubric of education, they could assign the prisoner to vocational instruction where he or she could learn a trade like “cooking, baking, butchering, auto mechanics, printing, welding, and so on” (Sullivan 70). Education also involved enrolment in elementary or high school classes, even college classes, which were offered by the prison system (Sullivan 70). In The Rise and Fall of California’s Radical Prison Movement (1994), Eric Cummins shows how increased attention and funding to prison libraries, educational programs, and educational-therapeutic programs like bibliotherapy, coupled with a surge of popular and academic interest in supporting the education of prisoners, linked the rhetoric of rehabilitation with the rhetoric of self-improvement and of enlightenment that were already associated in the American imaginary with education. Because “[r]emaking people is an educational function,” as the authors of Struggle for Justice argue, post-War prison reformers emphasized education as a main tenet of the rehabilitative ideal (45).

In particular, learning to read and write was considered to be a clear, irrefutable sign of rehabilitation in a system that often had difficulty defining what rehabilitation looked like. Reading and writing had in fact been used as a juridical or penal yardstick before the era of rehabilitation. In seventeenth century England, for example, convicted felons who could “call the book”—that is, read a passage from the Bible in front of the court—escaped capital punishment (Christianson 21). Over two hundred years later in the United States, by the time that new penologists like Zebulon Brockway were calling for the redefinition of the prison as a “college,” “it was well accepted nationwide that close control of an inmate’s reading and writing was
central to his reform,” writes Eric Cummins, a belief that reached the level of dogma after the Second World War (5).

Moreover, the capacity to read and write underpins how western societies define citizenship, which is the subject position that American prisoners abdicate upon entrance to a prison. “With its discursive, idealized alignment with modernity, democracy, and liberty,” writes Joseph Slaughter in *Human Rights, Inc.: The World Novel, Narrative Form, and International Law*, “literacy becomes the primary qualification and capacity for participation in . . . ‘a free society’—a society that writes about itself as a ‘lettered city’” (279). By this logic, a prisoner who learned to read and write during the rehabilitation era was also learning to participate in “free society” and was appropriating the qualities that underpinned citizenship. (Inversely, of course, those prisoners who could not read and write were unable to claim citizenship according to this logic.) In more emotive terms, the “ability to write well” was a “sign of goodness because it required what Benjamin Rush in the eighteenth century would have termed highly ordered ‘sensibilities,’ which a criminal by definition cannot have” (Cummins 52). Prisoners who learned to read and write, then, were demonstrating that they had changed according to one of the most recognizable and workable methods available to them for making evident their rehabilitation, proving their capacity to participate in the literate exchange that defined the ideal democratic citizen.

By learning to read and write, and by narrativizing the acquisition of the tools of reading and writing that defined civic exchange, prisoners also staged the nation-state’s conversion from savagery to civilization by way of the social contract, which Caleb Smith argues was part of the “poetics” of the penitentiary. “What the penitentiary provided,” writes Smith, “was an institutional scene for the incarnate performance” of the original but long-lost and thus
imaginary social contract (emphasis in original 49). I suggest that prisoners’ conversions-through-education during the era of the rehabilitative ideal re-enact the social drama that Smith argues is inherent to the penitentiary. The rehabilitated prisoner converts from illiteracy, an earlier condition “in humanity’s progress narrative,” to literacy, or “social and political maturity,” which “performs” the nation’s imaginary drama of the original social contract that brought about its conversion from orality to literacy, savagery to civilization (Slaughter 279).

Ultimately, education—particularly the acquisition of reading and writing skills—worked well with the transformative claims of the rehabilitative ideal, and stories of prisoners who learned to read and write in prison and who published their own work increased during the rehabilitation era to the point that a 1981 Saturday Night Live skit called “Prose and Cons” joked that great writers of the future were not educated in universities but made in prisons. There was, of course, a whole disciplinary apparatus established in the prison during the era of rehabilitation that policed prison writing. The elaborate methodologies like the indeterminate sentence, elements of the mark system (particularly the increased use of the prisoner’s file), and parole, which had been developed by the new penologists in the mid- to late-nineteenth century, were systematically and extensively put into place during the era of rehabilitation. Because of indeterminate sentencing laws, prisoners had to prove to the parole board at their (usually yearly) parole hearings that they were rehabilitated or they would remain in prison. Proof of rehabilitation had little to do with what prisoners said or did not say before the board, however. Rather, rehabilitation was largely dependent on prisoners’ files, and the degree to which these files revealed to the board an acceptable narrative whose teleology ended with a “law-abiding” life on the outside. If the parole board was unable to read a believable story of criminality-change-citizenship in a prisoner’s file then the prisoner would not be released until such a
narrative could be produced, an exegetical practice that policed prisoners’ self-representational practices, regulating how prisoners’ experiences of prison entered into official prison discourse. Consequently, writing about life in prison during the era of the rehabilitative ideal was always haunted by the auto/biographical “paratext” of the prisoner’s file and the panoptic readership of the parole board.

During the era of the rehabilitative ideal, moreover, the general public typically read prisoners’ experiences in ways commensurate with the parole board’s exegetical method. The prison was often read as a site of redemption, further defining how prisoners’ experiences entered into discourse because the public was interested in stories of change and self-transformation that accorded with the rehabilitative ideal that governed prisoners’ representational strategies inside the prison. In “Breast Cancer Narratives as Public Rhetoric: Genre Itself and the Maintenance of Ignorance,” Judy Segal writes,

People do not fashion their narratives out of just the events of their lives; narratives are structured using available narrative knowledge. Then, because of the willingness of people to tell certain kinds of stories and receive them and repeat them and even ironize them, these stories make other stories much harder to tell . . . . (6)

The stories that circulated outside the prison about the prison constituted the “available narrative knowledge” that prisoners likely had to use if their experiences were to enter discourse, or at least enter discourse in a recognizable, acceptable, and thus intelligible form. The rehearsal of these familiar, regularized stories “suppress[ed] or displace[d] other stories,” like the stories of the vast majority of prisoners who remained unchanged whilst imprisoned (Segal 3). When set alongside the indeterminate sentence, the prisoner’s file, and the parole board, all of which
worked to ensure that narratives of rehabilitation entered into the official discourse of the prison, the frequency with which prisoners’ writings during this period or about this period employ the rehabilitation narrative in their autobiographies suggests how epistemic the concept of rehabilitation was during the era of rehabilitation. Even prisoners’ autobiographies that challenged the discourse, rhetoric, or ideology of the prison system negotiate the rehabilitation narrative, perhaps because even those who challenged the prison were also expected by their reading public to have “changed” into different “people” in one form or another as a result of their experiences in the prison.

John Sloop in *The Cultural Prison* tracks how prisoners were represented in popular culture during the era of the rehabilitative ideal and he finds that, while there are variations over the years, the public typically received, repeated, and circulated stories about rehabilitated prisoners, which made other stories—stories about prisoners who were not changed by the prison (like the prisoners at Johnny Cash’s concert at Folsom Prison in 1968 that I discuss in the introduction)—“harder to tell.” According to Sloop, the dominant image of the prisoner during the post-war period of 1950 to 1959 was no longer that of “an inherent criminal who fails his fellow citizens.” Instead, the post-war prisoner was defined as “a human being” who was “prone to redemption” and rehabilitation (39). Although the public mood changed toward some prisoners during the 1960s—prisoners could be defined as “organically irrational and immoral” and beyond the redemptive influence of rehabilitation as a consequence—the public largely continued to read prisoners’ experiences in rehabilitative terms.

Sloop argues that the story of Paul Crump, a prisoner who was sentenced to death for his participation in a robbery of a Chicago Meatpacking plant that resulted in a murder, exemplifies the popular conception of prisoners during the 1960s. Crump “became a nationally celebrated
cause when he gained the support of his warden, editorialists at several local newspapers, local ministries, and Billy Graham,” writes Sloop (66). As a result of this popular support, Crump’s death sentence was commuted and he was eventually paroled in 1993 (although Crump was later returned to prison on a parole violation). The popularity of Crump’s case was due in part to his role in the robbery. He claimed that he did not commit the murder himself but had been framed by an accomplice and by the police who had forced him to write a confession. More importantly, Crump had saved a guard’s life during the robbery by “taking a gun away from a would-be assassin.” Despite these two mitigating factors, Crump would never have earned such widespread support had it not been for his conversion to Catholicism and—a critical component of the rehabilitative ideal—for his education in the prison, manifested in “his voracious reading habit, which included works by such authors as Nietzsche and Blake” and his eventual publication of a novel called Burn, Killer, Burn! in 1962. A December 21, 1962 Time magazine review of Burn, Killer, Burn! suggests that Illinois Governor Otto Kerner commuted Crump’s death sentence precisely because “working on a novel” had helped turn Crump “into an entirely different personality” (emphasis added; “Books: A Prisoner’s Progress”). Once again, the rhetoric of rehabilitation that is promoted by the prison—what the authors of Struggle for Justice call the transformation of the “whole personality”—is reflected back to the prison by the non-incarcerated public who see Crump as a “different personality.” Crump’s warden wrote that he was “a classic case of rehabilitation,” and Crump’s education, reading, and the publication of his novel were critical to making his rehabilitation viable and believable not only to the warden but also to the public that came to his defence (qtd. in Sloop 67).

Finally, Sloop writes that the rehabilitated prisoner constituted “the most sustaining representation of the male (Caucasian) prisoner” during the period of the rehabilitative ideal,
“one that continues to have a great deal of rhetorical force” well into the last years of the twentieth century, as I will show in Chapter 2 with Jimmy Santiago Baca’s *A Place to Stand* (92). This representation changes at the close of the era of the rehabilitative ideal, shifting from the concept of a prisoner who is capable of rehabilitation with the aid of prison programs to that of someone like Baca who “has overcome great obstacles in an attempt to improve himself” during the 1980s and beyond (161). However, Sloop argues that, despite the variety of reading practices likely brought to bear on prisoners’ writings, the public at large continued to read for redemptive prison experiences that conformed in one form or another to the rehabilitative ideal, whether undergone with or despite the prison system.

**Conclusion: Prison Writing and the Rehabilitation Narrative**

I want to conclude this chapter with an examination of how the prison’s rehabilitation narrative affected the autobiographical writings of prisoners during the era of the rehabilitative ideal, which my dissertation will consider in greater detail in the following three chapters. Dylan Rodríguez’s analysis of prison writing as a genre is particularly useful here. Prison writing in general, and perhaps the prison memoir or autobiography in particular, is “a cultural production that is both constituted and coerced by state captivity, a dynamic condition that pre-empts and punishes some forms of writing, while encouraging others (state education, therapy, and rehabilitation programs often mandate writing exercises).” In other words, while the prison may seek to silence the voices of its imprisoned subjects, it also compels them to speech at the same time. Rodríguez continues:

> Overdetermined by the institutional mandates of “rehabilitation,” prison writing is sometimes domesticated through narratives of “individual transcendence,” framed
by notions of the imprisoned author defying physical incarceration by finding
(intellectual/spiritual) freedom in the creative act. (85)

I suggest that at no other point in American penal history has writing in prison been more
“overdetermined” by “institutional mandates of ‘rehabilitation’” than during the era of the
rehabilitative ideal, when literal freedom was chained to representations of self and
institutionally mandated auto/biographical acts like the prisoner’s file. As I will show here and in
the next three chapters, prisoners’ autobiographical writings often adhered to or negotiated the
rehabilitation narrative because their selves and their writings were overdetermined by the prison
system’s rehabilitation mandate. Because prison authorities and prison writers shared a
vocabulary of rehabilitation, the border between the discourse of the prison and the discourse of
prisoners was highly porous. Thus arguments that prison writing was transcendental,
emancipatory, or oppositional to (and hence outside of) the ideological, political, or discursive
authority of the prison are difficult to sustain. Rather than argue that prisoners achieved
imaginative freedom through their writings, or that autobiography provided a location for
unfettered agency otherwise curtailed in the material existence of prison, I suggest that reading
the confluence of prison writing and the discourse of the prison opens a new theoretical space for
understanding prisoners’ writing practices, which sometimes reified the logic of the prison but at
other times challenged or subverted the prison’s authority precisely because imprisoned writers
made use of the prison’s discourse.

Consider, for example, the relationship between the prison’s rehabilitation narrative and
the narratives of rehabilitation that are developed in the autobiographies of three prisoners—
Caryl Chessman, Malcolm X, and George Jackson—during the era of the rehabilitative ideal.
Chessman’s death-row autobiographies—Cell 2455, Death Row (1954), Trial by Ordeal (1955),
and *The Face of Justice* (1957)—made liberal use of the rehabilitation narrative because the logic of the rehabilitative ideal that governed the discourse of the prison during his imprisonment meant that providing a believable story of his self-transformation could save him from the electric chair, much as Paul Crump’s claim to rehabilitation saved him several years later. In order for Chessman’s story to be believable, however, it had to be recognizable both to the institution and to the public at large who read for stories of prisoners’ rehabilitations and could, as they eventually did (although unsuccessfully), come to his defence and demand clemency on his behalf.

In *Cell 2455*, Chessman sketches the rehabilitative arc that he pursues throughout his writing, which conforms to the mandate of rehabilitation that governed the discourse of the prison in the 1950s and bears a close resemblance to the conversion narrative:

> The long years lived in this crucible called Death Row have carried me beyond bitterness, beyond hate, beyond savage animal violence. Death Row has compelled me to study as I have never studied before, to accept disciplines I never would have accepted otherwise and to gain a penetrating insight into all phases of this problem of crime that I am determined to translate into worthwhile contributions toward ultimate solution of that problem. This book is a beginning contribution; I would like to believe that it also signals the beginning for me of a journey back from outer darkness. (Chessman 359)

Caryl Chessman redefines his cell as an ideal location for “study,” troping on Zebulon Brockway’s redefinition of the prison as a “college.” Because of his education and the imposed isolation of death row, Chessman is “carried” beyond a state of extreme anti-sociality to a state in which he accepts the values of the prison, a transformative process from “darkness.”
presumably to light, from “animal” to human, from criminal to citizen. In fact, claims Chessman, he is more than just a citizen; he is a judicial subject *par excellence* because his conversion-through-education changed him from a criminal into a crime-solver or crime-fighter. Chessman’s self-transformation was called into being by the looming threat of his execution more so than the presence of the parole board; however, Chessman uses the rehabilitation narrative because the logic of rehabilitation offered hope that his sentence could be commuted. His valorization of the rehabilitation narrative shored up the popular belief of the 1950s that prisons could and did rehabilitate offenders—even offenders like Chessman, who was believed to be psychopathic.

Although prisoners’ autobiographies during the era of the rehabilitative ideal usually employed either the rehabilitation narrative or the rhetoric of rehabilitation, they are not necessarily part of what Guest calls a “discourse that enables . . . the criminal justice system” (xvi). Nor do they “promote the ideology of rehabilitation” necessarily, as Auli Ek argues in *Race and Masculinity in Contemporary American Prison Narratives* (2005) (57). Certainly some prisoners’ autobiographies do “enable” the “institutionalized discourses of imprisonment,” as does Caryl Chessman’s *Cell 2455*, for example. But many prisoners’ autobiographies subvert or resist the ideology of the prison system despite using—or rather *because* they use—the prison’s discursive and narrative implements.

In fact, Auli Ek gestures toward a useful theoretical framework that explains—if only partially—how prisoners subvert or resist the ideology of the prison even as they make use of the rehabilitation rhetoric and narrative that is prescribed by the prison system and circulated in popular discourses about the prison. Resonating with my development of Jean Genet’s theory of “corruption” that I discuss in the introduction and elaborate in Chapter 4, Ek argues that contemporary prison autobiographies function like Michel de Certeau’s theory of “tactics”
because they “poach in” the institutionalized discourses of the law and the prison that Ek, following de Certeau, calls “strategies” (de Certeau qtd. in Ek 55). Ek’s application of de Certeau’s theoretical paradigm of strategies and tactics is, as she says, simply “analog[ous],” however. Consequently, she does not take into account how prisoners’ “tactics” of resistance emerge organically out of prison culture, which is necessarily dependent on making use of the “strategic” discourses, materials, and systems of the prison, turning them to ends that are very different from their original purposes (55). I argue that prisoners’ tactical “poaching in” the institutional discourses of the prison is only part of a larger matrix of tactics that I call “corruption.” That said, Ek’s application of de Certeau’s paradigm to the work of prisoners’ autobiographies usefully explains how prisoners often subvert or resist the institutional discourses of the prison by using the prison’s discursive strategies. Prisoners often use the rehabilitation narrative tactically by “adapt[ing] it to their own uses and their own rules,” which often contradict the intended uses and rules of the prison system (de Certeau xiv).

*The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, for example, provides a useful bridge between an autobiography that reproduces the ideological presumptions of the rehabilitative ideal, such as Chessman’s *Cell 2455*, and later prisoners’ autobiographies that subvert the rehabilitation narrative not by refuting it but instead by using it for ends different than its intended purposes, such as George Jackson’s *Soledad Brother*, which I will discuss in a moment. Malcolm X’s conversion narrative does “promote the ideology of rehabilitation” that Auli Ek argues is a dominant feature of the book (57). In particular, Malcolm defines his self-education in an “experimental rehabilitation jail” called the Norfolk Prison Colony according to the rhetoric of rehabilitation (181). He writes that “especially in prison where there was a heavy emphasis on rehabilitation, an inmate was smiled upon if he demonstrated an unusually intense interest in
books.” Malcolm “devour[s] literature” and famously copies the entire dictionary, essentially following Norfolk’s experiment in rehabilitation (200). Like Chessman, Malcolm even channels Zebulon Brockway and the new penologists by defining the prison as an ideal “college”: “prison enabled me to study far more intensively than I would have if my life had gone differently and I had attended some college,” he writes. “Where else but in prison could I have attacked my ignorance by being able to study intensely sometimes as much as fifteen hours a day?” (207).

Malcolm X uses the rehabilitation narrative and tropes of rehabilitation (conversion-through-education) that are the conceptual metaphors for Norfolk Prison Colony, whose mandate was to apply the experimental theories of penologists in the interest of changing prisoners’ personalities or identities. Therefore, Malcolm X’s use of the rehabilitation narrative adheres to the ideological foundations of the Norfolk experiment. However, if Malcolm X was rehabilitated by Norfolk, if his story can be read as what Guest calls an “enabling discourse” for the legal or the penal systems, then why was the prison so eager to oust him from their program and force him to return to spend the last year of his sentence in the general prison population at Charleston Prison (218)? Why was their successfully rehabilitated “offender” punished rather than celebrated?

Of course, Norfolk was aware that while Malcolm X might have changed through his time in prison, quite how he changed was very different from what they had presumably intended. Malcolm’s self-education conforms to the rehabilitation narrative, but he deflects the ideology of rehabilitation by discovering through his rehabilitation that, like other African American prisoners, he is less criminal than the society and the prison that imprisoned him. In other words, rather than undergo a change from criminality to citizenship, Malcolm X uses the “strategic” institutional discourse of the rehabilitation narrative (as well as the materials made available to him for his rehabilitation) but he does so “tactically” by changing the terms of his
rehabilitation: “The black prisoner,” writes Malcolm X citing Elijah Muhammad, “symbolized white society’s crime of keeping black men oppressed and deprived and ignorant, and unable to get decent jobs, turning them into criminals” (195). Although Malcolm X’s conversion does follow the rehabilitation narrative, and although it does “come close to functioning as institutionalized discourses of imprisonment,” as Auli Ek suggests, his tactical use of the rehabilitation narrative critically reroutes the ideological project of rehabilitation. By using the rehabilitation narrative, Malcolm recodes the values of rehabilitation. This tactic is used to great effect by the next generation of imprisoned African American autobiographers, like Eldridge Cleaver in *Soul on Ice* and George Jackson in *Soledad Brother* and *Blood in my Eye*.

In *Soledad Brother*, Jackson problematizes the “uniqueness” and “individualism” that are central to Malcolm X’s autobiographical self but he also uses a similar tactic as Malcolm by redefining the rehabilitation narrative so as to reveal the relationship of crime (and class) to structural and institutional racism (28). Therefore, even though Jackson openly challenges the discursive strategies of the prison system, he nonetheless uses the rehabilitation narrative to explain his own self-transformation in the prison system—a transformation that, as for Chessman and for Malcolm X, happens through his education. Jackson initially pursues a prison education through the sanctioned classes in California’s Youth Authority Corrections at Paso Robles (38). Later, in San Quentin, Jackson, James Carr, and several other prisoners develop their own education programs. Soon, Jackson “led study groups on Marx and Fanon under the guise of ethnic awareness classes,” writes Paul Liberatore in *The Road to Hell: The True Story of George Jackson, Stephen Bingham, and the San Quentin Massacre* (1996) (19). In other words, Jackson and his fellow prisoners use the “strategic” space of the ethnic awareness classes “tactically:” the
classes provide them with a subterfugal pocket for agency and resistance, within which they pursue a very different curriculum than the prison intended.

Furthermore, Jackson uses the rehabilitation narrative to explain how he is changed through his education. However, he reconstitutes the rehabilitation narrative in revolutionary terms. For example, Jackson uses the conversion rhetoric that undergirds the rehabilitation narrative: “I met Marx, Lenin, Trotsky, Engels, and Mao when I entered prison and they redeemed me,” he writes (Soledad Brother 39-40). But Jackson’s story of “redemption” through a revolutionary education transforms rather than reinscribes the prison system’s prescribed rehabilitation narrative. As Brian Conniff observes, “Jackson never conceives of criminality as a state from which he needs to undergo any kind of conversion” (153-154). Instead of rehabilitation, or a conversion from criminality to citizenship, Jackson’s education converts his “black criminal mentality into a black revolutionary mentality” (Soledad Brother 40). For Jackson, the prison is still a “college,” of sorts. But Jackson’s prison-college produces a different kind of student or graduate: “with the time and incentive that these [imprisoned] brothers have to read, study, and think, you will find no class or category more aware, more embittered, desperate, or dedicated to the ultimate remedy—revolution” (50). So while Jackson, like Zebulon Brockway, imagines the prison as the ideal college, he has scooped out the literal and figurative space of this prison-college classroom and supplanted it with a curriculum that rejects the college’s authority. Because Jackson uses the rehabilitation narrative in Soledad Brother his memoir subverts rather than “enables” the discourse of the prison system.

Not only do the autobiographies of Caryl Chessman, Malcolm X, and George Jackson provide a useful continuum of texts that slide from affirmation to inversion of the values that subtend the rehabilitation narrative, they also speak to the trajectory of the ensuing chapters in
this dissertation. In chapter 2, I consider how Jimmy Santiago Baca’s use of the rehabilitation narrative in his autobiography *A Place to Stand* “enables” the discourse of the prison system, much as Caryl Chessman’s use of the rehabilitation narrative reifies the prison’s rehabilitative project (although the two men and their autobiographies are very different). In Chapter 3, I analyze how Jack Henry Abbott’s *In the Belly of the Beast* approaches the rehabilitation narrative but—like Jackson who argues that he is not “broken” but certainly not “normal” as a result of his prison experience, despite his education (52)—rejects the rehabilitation narrative’s teleology of criminality-change-citizenship. Finally, in Chapter 4, I analyze how James Carr (mis)uses the rehabilitation narrative in *Bad*, subverting the discourse of the prison system as a result. Jimmy Santiago Baca’s *A Place to Stand*, Jack Abbott’s *In the Belly of the Beast*, and James Carr’s *Bad* provide diverse illuminations of an archive of texts that use the rehabilitation narrative, and they stage the intricate collusions and contestations that occur between prisoners and the discursive authority of the prison when the imprisoned write about their experiences behind bars.
Chapter 2: From “Primitive Manhood” to “Humanity”:
Rehabilitation, Education, and Citizenship in Jimmy Santiago Baca’s *A Place to Stand*

“As criminals can neither be coerced nor bribed into a change of purpose, there is but one way left; they must be educated. We must provide a training which will make them . . . good citizens.”

— Thomas Mott Osborne, *Prisons and Common Sense* (1924)

Prison autobiographies are often defined as “counter-narratives,” as texts that stand in opposition to the prison; yet, as I show in this chapter through a reading of Jimmy Santiago Baca’s *A Place to Stand*, such characterizations are limited in scope—even, somewhat naïve. Sandra Young, for example, argues that “autobiography provides a model … to counter-write that which is forcibly imprinted through the ‘vocabulary’ of imprisonment” (16). Likewise, Paul Gready claims that while “prisoners ha[ve] little or no control over the manner in which they [a]re captured and fixed in official writing, other written forms[,] [like] the writing of autobiographical accounts, provid[e] a way of regaining control” (492). Significantly, the arguments set forth by critics such as Young and Gready presuppose the absence of the prison as a regulating power in prison life writing. Because of the regulatory effects of prison discourse, some of the claims made by prisoners in their writings cannot simply be taken at face value. Prison autobiographies can and do bear ideological meanings and political consequences that exceed the intentions of the writing subject, particularly when the autobiographer in question uses tropes, subject positions, or
narrative structures that are associated with the prison, have been developed in relation to the prison, and consequently involve the discourse of the prison.

By analyzing the nuances of Baca’s prison memoir *A Place to Stand*—by reading against the grain of Baca’s narrative—I critique the writing-as-counter-narrative paradigm that is so frequently used to analyze and explain prison life writing. While Baca’s memoir does counter the legal and penal narratives about his life, it also reasserts the same logic of rehabilitation that validates the prison system as a necessary and valuable part of American society. Somewhat perversely, given Baca’s overt intentions to thoroughly critique the institution of the prison, *A Place to Stand* confirms the prison as a site for the containment of threats to the American civic body, the rehabilitation of the criminal, and the production of American citizenship. Baca’s narrative not only uses the form and structure of the rehabilitation narrative, it also makes frequent use of the tropes, metaphors, and subject positions found in the rehabilitative ideal. As a result, the ideological significations of the book run counter to its professed goal of exposing the brutality of the prison system and contesting the validity of the prison as a form of social control and individual reformation. Even the story of Baca’s development as a writer in prison conforms to the project, outlined by prison reformers such as Thomas Mott Osborne, of using education to change “criminals” into “good citizens”—a project that, as I suggested in Chapter 1, was imagined by prison reformers as a rehabilitation narrative.

Drawing on Joseph Slaughter’s *Human Rights, Inc.: The World Novel, Narrative Form, and International Law* (2007), I suggest that Baca’s story of learning to read and write in prison, and his decision to define himself as a writer rather than as a criminal characterize his prison experience as the catalyst for his rehabilitation, consequently enabling his permanent departure from the community of prisoners and ex-prisoners and his entry into the Liberal-democratic
polity, which the book implicitly posits as an imagined community of readers and writers. By comparison, his incorporation in a “reading public” that telescopes liberal-democratic civil society is commensurate with the naturalization of the other prisoners in the book as uncitizens, whose civil death is directly proportionate to Baca’s emergent civil life.

This story of citizen- and uncitizen-making rehearses the terms of the originary drama of the social contract that Caleb Smith argues in *The Prison and the American Imagination* is an underlying plot of the poetics of the prison. Consequently, while *A Place to Stand* reveals the racism, classism, and brutality of mid-twentieth-century American incarceration, it does not “disturb [the] boundaries and upset [the] hierarchies” that are reinforced in and through the prison system, as Smith elsewhere suggests of Baca’s work (174). Instead, Baca’s memoir participates in what David Guest calls the prison’s “enabling discourse” by naturalizing the prison’s ideology of containment and rehabilitation by using these same terms to describe his own experiences behind bars.

**Writing as Counter-Narrative**

Baca explicitly defines *A Place to Stand* as a counter-narrative. Like the paradigm of the counter-narrative, Baca’s memoir contests the story about his life that is recorded in what Gready calls “official writing,” particularly the discourse of the law and the prison. For example, legal documentation like Baca’s criminal record determines that he was sent to prison because he was convicted of “possession of heroin with intent to distribute” (*A Place to Stand* 98). *A Place to Stand* contests Baca’s criminal record by explaining that he was “innocent of the specific charges against” him (4). Baca describes how he had been visiting his friend Carey when Carey’s roommate, Rick, was selling heroin to a man who turned out to be an undercover Drug
Enforcement Agency agent. “Rick was the guilty one,” he writes. However, according to Baca, the “[Unites States] marshals had trumped up a paper saying [that Baca] had sold heroin to Rick, and Rick had signed it.” Moreover, Baca writes, Rick testified that Baca had “been dealing heroin to him for years.” But, he continues, “[t]he truth was I’d only met him a few times… and I had never given him so much as a seed of marijuana” (96). A Place to Stand counters the official record of Baca’s criminal charges by providing an alternative narrative that makes different truth-claims than those of the law. While an autobiography does not have the authority to define the kind of judicial, evidentiary truth that is established in a courtroom, autobiography provides a kind of personal truth that can contest the official, legal record in the public forum of the literary marketplace.42

Along with contesting the truth-claims of legal discourse, a counter-narrative can also provide a more complete account of a prisoner’s life that explains or even justifies his or her involvement in crime. Baca’s memoir likewise provides his drug dealing with acceptable, at times even honourable motivations that qualify how he is defined in the official legal record. He suggests that he only “sold drugs to get back to Albuquerque,” his hometown. He writes that he also sold drugs “to be with someone [he] loved,” a woman named Lonnie with whom he has a loving relationship before he is sent to prison. And he adds that drug dealing was one way for him “to be respected, to be part of a community” (101-102). Selling drugs brings him into a close circle of friends who act as a kind of surrogate family for him for a while—at least until he is imprisoned. Baca, Lonnie, and his friend and accomplice Marcos live together and sell drugs to support their modest lifestyle, which is described as a momentary but utopian period of Baca’s life. Thus his memoir complicates his categorization as a criminal in legal discourse by showing how his desire for family, love, respect, and community motivates him to continue to sell drugs.
Baca also contests his criminalization in legal discourses by detailing how his Chicano/Indio identity, as much as his involvement in criminal activity, was what resulted in his conviction. “I was sure I was convicted mostly because of who I was,” he writes, “expunged from a society that didn’t want people like me in it” (102). Furthermore, A Place to Stand illustrates how Baca’s criminalization and his eventual incarceration are extensions of a race-based ostracization that he experiences throughout his life. Baca writes,

Security guards and managers followed me in store aisles; Anglo housewives walking toward me clutched their purses as I passed. I felt socially censured whenever I was in public, prohibited from entering certain neighborhoods or restaurants, mistrusted by government officials, treated as a flunky by schoolteachers, profiled by counselors as a troublemaker, taunted by police, and disdained by judges, because I had a Spanish accent and my skin was brown. Feeling inferior in a white world, alien and ashamed, I longed for another place to live, outside of society. By the time I arrived at Florence [prison], a part of me felt I belonged there. (4)

Baca experiences American society as an exclusive and exclusionary “white world” that systematically characterizes his Spanish accent and his brown skin as markers of criminal otherness. His sense of his own criminality is naturalized because it is indexed throughout the social body, at the level of public gazes as well as at the level of the judiciary. Baca describes what Michel Foucault calls the “carceral continuum” because looks, gestures, taunts, official exclusions, and prohibitions goad him toward criminality and ultimately into the prison. Foucault writes that the prison “continues, on those who are entrusted to it, a work begun elsewhere, which the whole of society pursues on each individual through innumerable mechanisms of
discipline” (302-303). Likewise, according to Baca, “prison was not new”; he had “been preparing for it from an early age” (4). But unlike Foucault, Baca highlights how the “innumerable mechanisms of discipline” that cultivate his sense of himself and his relationship to society are not in operation “at every level of the social body,” as Foucault suggests (my emphasis 303). Instead, Baca’s carceral continuum is specific to his being Chicano/Indio: the normalization of the prison in Baca’s life is a result of a social body that defines him as a “deviant” in large part because of his race (4). By describing how different degrees of racism interlock to provide him with a deviant self-image that he ultimately validates through his involvement in crime and his eventual incarceration, Baca counters the individuating crime-focused logic of his sentence that does not, at least in Baca’s case, take systemic racism into account.

As a counter-narrative, prison life writing not only contests the various texts of the law that seek to define autobiographers as criminal, but also contests what Sandra Young argues is “forcibly imprinted through the ‘vocabulary’ of imprisonment” as well. Thus Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson write in Reading Autobiography that prison narratives enable “prisoners to inscribe themselves as fully human in the midst of a system designed to dehumanize them and to render them anonymous and passive” (201). Like Smith and Watson’s definition of prison narratives, A Place to Stand documents the dehumanizing violence of the prison and relates how writing provides Baca with a forum for staking a claim to human personhood. Echoing Smith and Watson’s rhetoric, Baca writes that the prison is a “dehumanizing environment” (5). He endures repeated stints in isolation cells, beatings by guards, and assaults by other prisoners. He is even administered powerful psychotropic drugs without his knowledge that keep him in a zombie-like trance. He is finally taken off the drugs only after he nearly bites off his tongue as a result of his
severe sedation (216). Baca’s representation of the prison accords with Smith and Watson’s assertion that the prison undermines a prisoner’s humanity. “Everything [in the prison] had weight and substance, intended to silence, imprison, destroy,” he writes (257).

Baca’s memoir counters what he, Smith, and Watson see as the logic of imprisonment by staking a claim to humanity through his writing. His story is framed as a counter-narrative that challenges the prison system because Baca resists the prison’s destructive forces; he not only makes it out alive but he undergoes an incredible self-transformation in the prison, eventually turning himself into an established poet. As I have suggested, however, this process of self-transformation is plotted according to the rehabilitation narrative. Therefore, while the content of A Place to Stand might seem to counter the official writing of the law and the prison, the form of the book adheres to those official writings at the same time. As I will show, this confluence of A Place to Stand with prison discourse has ideological effects that work against the grain of the book’s explicit counter-narrative message.

A Place to Stand and the Rehabilitation Narrative

The narrative trajectory of A Place to Stand, as Baca outlines in the prologue, conforms to the classic conversion paradigm of fall, conversion, and redemption. In the pre-conversion period of his youth, which is a time of loss and “despair,” Baca is segregated from civil society because of his Chicano and Native American identity (3). Even his family members are estranged from one another—his father, Damacio, his mother, Cecelia, his older sister, Martina, and his older brother, Mieyo—as a result of early experiences of trauma that overshadow Baca’s conceptualization of familial and even sexual relationships. Damacio, Baca’s father, is an alcoholic who leaves his family for long stretches of time; when he returns, he is often drunk and
Baca’s mother, Cecelia, abandons the Baca family when Jimmy is only seven years old, leaving to live as a white woman named “Sheila” (she is in fact Hispanic) with a white man named Richard. Cecelia and Richard eventually have children of their own, and Cecelia refuses to acknowledge the Baca children as part of her family. Jimmy Baca lives with his grandparents for a time, but when his grandfather dies he is taken to St. Anthony’s Boys’ Home in Albuquerque with his older brother, Mieyo. After repeatedly running away from St. Anthony’s, Baca is transferred to a detention centre for boys, which is the first in a long line of increasingly punitive forms of incarceration that govern his adolescence and young adulthood. Holding cells, drunk tanks, and jails ultimately circumscribe his young life after he absconds from the detention centre for boys with his brother.

Eventually, Baca experiences what the conversion tradition defines as a fall: he is charged with drug-trafficking, sentenced to five years imprisonment, and incarcerated in Arizona’s Florence maximum security prison. True to the form of the conversion narrative, Baca’s fall catalyzes his self-transformation:

[I]f prison was the place of my downfall, a place where my humanity was cloaked by the rough fabric of the most primitive manhood, it was also the place of my ascent. I became a different man, not because prison was good for me, but in spite of its destructive forces. In prison I learned to believe in myself and dream for a better life. (4)

In terms redolent of the theologically imbued rehabilitation narrative that is promulgated by the prison system, Baca throws off the “cloak” that disguises his “humanity” largely because of the humanizing influences of reading and writing. Although he presumes that the prison’s function is “destructive” and claims that he converts into a different man “in spite of” his incarceration, he
overlooks the fact that the prison has, at least in discourse, a productive function as well. As I show in Chapter 1, the prison is supposed to be destructive and productive. The ideology of the prison system rests on what seems to be opposing positions, which in fact work in tandem: first, that prison should be restrictive and punitive (at times even destructive); and second, that prison should provide the conditions for rehabilitation. The criminality-change-citizenship trajectory of A Place to Stand accords with the rehabilitative ideology of the prison. From the “downfall” that leads to his imprisonment to the eventual “ascent” that leads him towards “a better life,” Baca’s story of conversion follows the trajectory of the rehabilitation narrative that is developed by prison reformers and penologists in the post-war period—a narrative that also circulates in prison life writing. Like Caryl Chessman in Cell 2455, Malcolm X in The Autobiography of Malcolm X, George Jackson in Soledad Brother, Eldridge Cleaver in Soul on Ice, Piri Thomas in Down These Mean Streets, and Sanyika Shakur in Monster, Baca becomes a “different man” as a result of being imprisoned. Baca’s story of self-transformation through education reproduces the narrative of rehabilitation that so thoroughly saturated prison discourse during the period of his incarceration.

In accordance with a dominant motif of the rehabilitation narrative, Baca undergoes a total change of self by learning to read and write in prison. Like Chessman, Malcolm X, and Jackson, Baca configures the prison as conducive to introspection and intellectual growth, thereby echoing Osborne’s conception of the prison as a place for educational training and Brockway’s model of the prison as a “college.” Although Baca claims to be changed “in spite of” the prison, his self-transformation accords with the rhetoric of the rehabilitative ideal at its most idealistic. His cell, for example, is repeatedly described as a location for silent, near-monastic study, where “meditative hours spent [...] writing and reading broke old molds” (244).
The space of the prison cell isolates him from the distractions of the outside world and catalyzes his turn inward. Baca’s cell is like the solitary cell of the early penitentiary, which was supposed to force a prisoner into a meditative state that would induce a conversion. Like the nineteenth-century prison reformers who theorized that the combination of solitary confinement and the “comforts of the Bible” would induce conversions in the cells at Eastern State Penitentiary, there is a kind of dialectic between the enforced solitude of the prison cell and the self-education that furthers Baca’s conversion and rehabilitation.

While Baca’s prison cell can take on utopian characteristics in *A Place to Stand*, Baca predominantly defines the space of the prison as dehumanizing. The prison is a place of destruction, “spilled blood and real death”; it “strip[s] [prisoners] of [their] humanity” (192). By comparison, reading and writing are ineluctably humanizing influences in the book. Learning to read and write, he claims, “helped make [him] the person [he is] today” (my emphasis 5). The story of his emergence as a “person” correlates with, and is largely framed as an effect of, his education. Indeed, Baca repeatedly contrasts the kind of personhood achieved through the supposedly civilizing and rehabilitative capacities of education with the “primitive manhood” that defines his identity in the prison before his conversion. The discursive implications of Baca’s frequent recourse to the rhetoric of person versus primitive, human versus animal, index the extent of Baca’s indebtedness to the Enlightenment underpinnings of the rehabilitative ideal.

Moreover, by maintaining that his development as a writer “opened a way to the future that was based not on fear or bitterness but on a compassionate involvement and a belief that [he] belonged,” Baca articulates a claim that fulfils the teleological culmination of the rehabilitation narrative in a new, post-prison community (5). It is difficult to define quite how and to what he “belongs,” however, because Baca never seems to achieve a sense of belonging in the book.
Certainly he recaptures something of his long-lost familial belonging by becoming a father, to which he alludes in the prologue and then discusses in the brief epilogue. But the prologue and epilogue also trouble his capacity to reclaim any sense of belonging in the Baca family, recording as they do the violent deaths of his mother, father, and brother. Baca does achieve a sense of cultural belonging by grappling with and rediscovering his Chicano/Indio roots, but despite a growing awareness of his heritage and of its importance to his sense of self, the complexities of being Chicano/Indio in America—a raced and classed nation defined largely as “the ‘other world’” in *A Place to Stand*—are far from resolved at the end of the book (14). Furthermore, as I will show, even while Baca’s self-transformation legitimates his position in American society, it also reproduces the exclusions on which the book’s definition of America is based.

Rather than frame ‘belonging’ in *A Place to Stand* in familial or cultural terms, given that such forms of belonging never really transpire in the book, I suggest that belonging is, for Baca, defined through reading and writing. By claiming a position within a literate community, Baca not only sustains his emergent sense of himself as a writer, but also clearly demarcates his new self from his past identity. Dispensing with the “primitive” and unlearned self that he had understood himself to be before his conversion, he instead claims entry into a post-conversion or post-rehabilitation community of readers and writers. I would argue, too, that the story of Baca’s transformation from “primitive manhood” to “humanity,” a process of conversion that corresponds with his emergent identity as a “writer [and] a poet” (5), follows a plot of “human personality development” that Joseph Slaughter argues underpins liberal-democratic theories of belonging within a civic community. “[T]hrough the transformative power of literacy,” writes Slaughter, the illiterate subject “journeys from singularity into a national community” (275). In
this idealized collectivity of “fellow readers,” humanity is expressed and claimed through the capacity to participate in literate exchange and, above all, through authorship. While there are notable differences between the Bildungsroman that is Slaughter’s focus and the genre of memoir in which Baca writes, there are cross-pollinations between the narrative conventions of the Bildungsroman and those of memoir. Like the illiterate subject of the Bildungsroman who is transformed through literacy, Baca finds a sense of belonging in what Benedict Anderson calls an “imagined community” of fellow readers and writers. Without such a community of readers and writers, Baca’s post-prison identity and even his claim to “humanity” would be at risk, for his rehabilitated self emerges in correlation with, even as a direct result of, his capacity to read and write.

Baca’s imagined community of readers and writers bears a similar form and function as Jürgen Habermas’ concept of the liberal public sphere, a space of enlightened discourse through which the civic body takes shape. In Slaughter’s formulation, the Habermasian “account of the liberal public sphere […] took the historical form of a bourgeois reading society,” where civic identity was predicated upon the capacity to engage in written discourses (280). By becoming a writer, Baca achieves a sense of belonging to a “reading public” that he had been unable to access, prior to his incarceration, because of his illiteracy. His membership within the literate community is particularly important because in liberal democratic societies, according to the Habermasian paradigm, civic participation, even civic identity, is dependent upon access to and participation in the “bourgeois reading society” of the public sphere. In this regard, and in the context of the American liberal democratic system, Baca’s illiteracy had foreclosed his ability to participate in civic society. The story of Baca’s entrance to the literate community from which he
had originally been denied access is both narrated in and confirmed through his memoir—as well as in his other published work, much of which is autobiographical.

Slaughter, citing Rita Felski, notes that while Habermas defines the liberal public sphere as an idealized “free discursive space that equalizes all its participants,” its rhetoric of civil egalitarianism and shared universal humanity obscures the fact that its application is lopsided and exclusive, implemented in “practices and discourses bearing new forms of inequality” (5). The literate, democratic public sphere is more often than not marked by exclusions of race and class, as Baca’s experience of illiteracy, childhood deprivation, and youth incarceration clearly demonstrate. Given the exclusionary tendencies of the public sphere, and given Baca’s formative experiences of discrimination and disenfranchisement as a Chicano/Indio male, it is perhaps not surprising that Baca has a vexed relationship with literacy and other markers of the liberal polity. While “books” are objects of desire in *A Place to Stand*, practices of reading and writing often participate in maintaining white, middle-class power, thereby keeping minority groups and the poor locked outside circles of political, legal, economic, and cultural influence. The exclusionary implications of reading and writing practices are dramatized when Baca describes his enrolment in a predominantly white, middle-class school after being placed in a detention centre for boys. At the school, he notes a gulf between him and the white, “normal American kids,” a division that is manifested through reading and writing. Out of embarrassment and shame, Baca “hadn’t told anybody that [he] couldn’t read” (26). Consequently, he finds himself excluded within the educational environment of the classroom as well as in the playground: in class he “didn’t know anything the teachers were talking about,” and outside class he “couldn’t talk to the kids” because he and they had no shared cultural experiences. Baca positions himself as a minority observer looking in on a seemingly hermetic group of mostly
white and middle-class readers and writers whose Americanness is constituted through their capacity to engage in literate exchange. As Baca astutely suggests, American national identity is not only raced and classed, but it is claimed and performed through reading and writing as well.

The exclusions that consolidate white, middle-class power in American society are represented in A Place to Stand as violent in their intentions and effects. When Baca is in jail awaiting his trial for drug-trafficking, for example, he steals a book from a young, college-educated white woman who is working in the jail. Baca regards his theft as an act of vengeance because the woman had ridiculed an older Chicano man whom Baca imagines as his father. Although Baca’s burgeoning literary appetite makes the book an object of desire, he is also repulsed by what the book represents. “To my way of thinking,” he explains, “books had always been used to hurt and inflict pain”; as an example, he claims that “lawbooks [are used] to perpetrate wanton violence against poor people” (100). It is only months later, once he has begun the process of education and rehabilitation within the prison, that Baca realizes books can be used to express or mobilize resistance to discourses of oppression, such as to systematic classism and institutional racism, for example. The relationship of “books” to power, Baca realizes, can take a variety of forms.

Somewhat ironically, perhaps, the violent potentiality that Baca identifies as present in the relationship between the public circulation of legitimized and exclusionary written texts (such as law textbooks) and discourses of power (such as the law) is played out in Baca’s own eventual incorporation into and participation in the reading public. Baca “belongs” to the liberal and literate public sphere not only because he is an author, but because he embodies the qualities of the ideal citizen-subject whose reason and self-discipline are defined against an uncivilized other. In his conversion from illiteracy to literacy, Baca’s “primitive,” pre-literate self is
supplanted by the “humanity” that he acquires through the civilizing and citizen-making skills of reading and writing. To make the consequences of his transformation clear, though, Baca differentiates himself from the other prisoners in the same manner that he distinguishes his new subject position from that of his previous, illiterate self: he defines them in terms that contrast markedly with his own supposed “humanity,” as animals or grotesque figures of near-humanness.

**Becoming Human**

By learning to read and write, Baca becomes the kind of person who is able to participate in the liberal democratic public sphere. His entrance into the reading public is commensurate with an ontological change whereby he learns to think and feel like the idealized citizen-subject of liberal democracy. The more he engages with an imagined literate community that extends beyond the prison, the more he develops the paradigmatic attributes of the Enlightenment subject: he is endowed with reason, self-determination, self-discipline (including deferred desire and sublimated anger), empathy, and civic responsibility. These characteristics are defined against those of the other prisoners, whom Baca sees by comparison as impulsive, violent, vulgar, bestial, and grotesque. Indeed, Baca’s acquisition of the Enlightenment ideals of humanity and civility is facilitated by the imagined degeneration of his fellow prisoners. Like a bucket passing its counterweight in a well, his ascent is made possible by their fall. As I will show in this section, the growing divisions that Baca imagines between himself and the other prisoners reflect Baca’s increasing adoption of the dominant discourse of rehabilitation. Moreover, the oppositional pairing of civility and savagery that so thoroughly permeates his representation of his fellow prisoners corresponds with the Enlightenment underpinnings of American democracy.
according to which, as Caleb Smith argues, the prison is deemed a necessary organizational structure in American society.

In Baca’s version of events, the animality of his fellow prisoners is first made apparent after he tries unsuccessfully to persuade the prison reclassification committee to allow him to participate in the prison’s educational programs. Registering his frustration with the prison’s decision by refusing to work or engage in any form of socialization, he is seen by the administration to pose a threat to its authority; so, after three weeks, prison guards remove him from his cell and march him to an area of the prison known as ‘the dungeon.’ Baca’s forced removal effects a permanent division between him and the other prisoners, one that he conveys through the imagery of wild animals waiting to ravage their prey:

[A guard] jabbed me with his stick and marched me down into the landing in the middle of the block. Cons stood at the bars as one voice then another and another cursed in a deafening roar. They shook the bars, yelping like hyenas snarling over a fresh kill. Their eyes were hard and glassy. I tried to tell myself they were cursing the guards, but it was me they were condemning. (167)

The image of prisoners shaking the bars of their cells like caged animals recalls Robert Lowell’s poem “In the Cage,” where prisoners, like “[c]anaries,” “beat their bars and scream” (53). While Lowell’s ornithological metaphor might destabilize the order of the prison through the use of “colour and sound” (Clarke 135), however, Baca’s depiction of his fellow prisoners as bloodthirsty hyenas affirms the prison’s order and purpose. If the prisoners are animals—particularly if they are hyenas, which in metaphorical terms would suggest they are “cruel, treacherous, and rapacious” (OED)—their incarceration can be justified as a means of containing...
their instinctive and involuntary violence. Arguably, in fact, they invite and even require incarceration because they are unable to exercise control over their desires or their violence.

Separated by bars from the group of snarling prisoners, Baca is forced out of the prisoner community. A lone creature thrust outside the pack, Baca forms a threat to prisoner solidarity even while in his isolation and vulnerability he is constituted as prey. The incident causes him such concern that he spends time contemplating why the other prisoners have with such vehemence rejected him: “they now suspected me of being a coward,” he imagines, “of betraying their trust, of letting them down.” By incorporating the words of the other prisoners into the text, he lends evidentiary support to his conclusions: “Maybe he’s a snitch?” one prisoner suggests; “He’s a punk,” says another; “Es puto, no vale verga, no tiene Corazón, chale con aquel vato” (166). And yet, the explanatory words that Baca objectively records belie the subjective images that describe how he feels. The metaphors of bestial violence that convey his affective response to this moment of rejection signify that to him the other prisoners seem to have no interiority whatsoever, just “hard and glassy” eyes. Thus, the reader cannot but read the conjectures and anxieties expressed by the other prisoners through the prism of the hyena analogue, a refraction through which the prisoners’ speech is effectively reduced to a zoo-like cacophony of snarling and growling.

Baca experiences his expulsion from the community of prisoners as a revelatory moment. Through their bestial demeanour, the prisoners “revealed their secrets” to Baca (167). This moment of unintentional disclosure on the part of the prisoners also initiates a process of self-revelation for Baca himself; thus, he writes: “Their rage and censure were forcing me to find something out about myself which didn’t exist yet but which I felt struggling to come out” (167-168). These reciprocal revelations are mirror-images of one another: when the other prisoners
uncloak their inhumanity, to reiterate the terms used by Baca in his prologue, Baca begins to see “something about [him]self”—assumedly the “humanity” that his prologue promises will be revealed in the course of the narrative.

Beginning with the incident on the cell block and exacerbated during his transfer to the ‘dungeon,’ Baca more and more frequently sees the other prisoners in inhuman or bestial terms:

The dungeon was a dark subterranean sewer under CB3, the highest level of security detention…. At the first security checkpoint, a huge guard with one arm opened a gate and we advanced deeper. The light grew weaker. Nerves made my stomach tight as banded steel. We kept going, farther down, all the way to the back, through four more gates, passing still more tiers of administrative segregation prisoners…. It was almost dark now and lightbulbs encased in iron brackets burned to illuminate the short tier beyond the last gate. (176)

His removal from the prison’s general population to the dungeon is framed as a journey into a dark, hellish underworld. Baca moves from a space of relative light to a space of darkness, from relative cleanliness to a “sewer,” from an upper region (associated in Christian iconography with heaven, which is a place of sanctity, transcendence, and purity) to a lower region (associated by contradistinction with hell, which is a place of degradation, filth, and bodily functions and desires). Baca’s tier is certainly no heavenly sanctity; but Baca implies that the dungeon is so savage as to make this distinction sustainable, at least momentarily. This downward trajectory not only conforms to the conversion narrative—here, Baca falls to his lowest depths; and it is in the dungeon that he begins to learn to read, write, and recreate himself—but it is suggestive of the captivity narrative as well. Captivity narratives—particularly those of seventeenth-century New Englanders—were stories of white settlers who were captured by Aboriginal tribes. The
white settler undergoes a series of “removes,” as Mary Rowlandson describes them, from familiar society to an alien underworld where the faith and mettle of the white captive are tested by the apparent savagery of his or her Aboriginal others. Likewise, Baca’s removal to the dungeon takes him to a savage wilderness where his humanity is tested against the primitivity of the inhabitants of a strange and fearful place.

However, rather than the differentiated space of the captivity narrative’s alien underworld, the dungeon is more of a condensation of the violence, brutality, and abjectivity that Baca sees in the prison’s general population. Like their counterparts in the prison’s general population, the prisoners in the dungeon are animalistic: “The dark, the sweat stink, the quietness, and the furtive glances of the cons reminded me of zoo animals that lived mostly at the back of their cages in the shadows,” writes Baca (177). Baca’s journey into the prison’s depths, into what Frank Lauterbach terms a “carceral wilderness,” reveals a continuum of animality among the prisoners and within the space of the prison: what was first glimpsed in the animalistic behaviour of the prisoners on the cell block is magnified and laid bare in the dungeon’s excesses. Baca seems to be travelling to a space interior to the prisoners themselves, where their true nature is uncloaked to reveal something “primitive” and inhuman lurking beneath their seemingly human exteriority.

To the extent that Baca’s autobiographical production is predicated upon the construction of a fundamental distinction between the prisoner as rational human and the prisoner as impulsive animal, it reproduces what Caleb Smith describes as the prison system’s “performative” function. Deriving his claims from an analysis of Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s *The Social Contract*, a classic text of Enlightenment political philosophy, and the writings of early prison reformers, Smith argues:
The social contract, as it was conceived in the enlightened and sentimental discourses of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, required the figurative sacrifice of natural (or animal) life as a precondition for the acquisition of the citizen’s spiritual (or human) subjectivity. The civil state was founded through a process of mortification and reanimation. This was the new political myth that was to be played out in the rituals of the new institution of punishment. . . . In the modern age, the penitentiary would enact the abjection of the body and the birth of the citizen’s refined, self-governing soul—it would sacrifice [what Jean-Jacques Rousseau called] the “stupid, limited animal” and conjure, from its remains, an “intelligent being and a man.” (13-14)

As Smith observes, the social contract as imagined by Rousseau presupposed a fundamental split between the human potentiality to be either a “stupid, limited animal” or an “intelligent being.” According to theorists such as Rousseau, the process of conversion from the “natural (or animal) ... to the spiritual (or human)” state by way of an imagined contractual agreement had “transpired in a mythic past.” In the figurative death of the (animal) criminal and in the resurrection of the (human) citizen, this originary drama of human self-making and political formation was “reanimat[ed]” in the American penitentiary (49). In effect, the penitentiary proved foundational to the development of Americanness in the early United States, functioning as it did to stage the birth of the body politic: just as “the civil state was founded through a process of mortification and reanimation,” so was the abjection of the most violent prisoners and the humanizing reanimation of the most virtuous prisoners played out within the prison.

In the remainder of this chapter, I explore how the performance of citizen-making within the penitentiary is reproduced in *A Place to Stand*. Baca is converted from criminal to citizen,
from a state of “primitive manhood” to “humanity,” by learning to read and write; by contrast, those prisoners who are either unable or unwilling to claim the position of the citizen-subject are, according to the logic of the social contract, relegated to the pre-contract position of “limited animal[ity].” Adopting the terms and tropes of Enlightenment ideology, Baca consigns to the realm of near-human those prisoners whose lack of interest in self-education threatens his own attempts to construct a selfhood that is defined by his humanity. Therefore, as I will show, Baca not only buys into the terms of liberal democratic citizen-making but reproduces the logic of the American prison system that has also, at least since the passing of the Thirteenth Amendment in 1865, defined prisoners as near-human as well.

The first person Baca sees in the dungeon is a Chicano/Indio prisoner whose body signifies his distance from the realm of the human: this prisoner “had been down [in the dungeon] for so long,” writes Baca, “that his skin pallor was a sickly yellow, and his eyes had a paranoid frenzy in them” (177). The colour of the prisoner’s skin and eyes disrupts the body’s accepted frame of signification, instilling a sense of fear in Baca. The prisoner’s body is not quite human, not quite animal; in its confusion, it accords instead with the grotesque. As Leonard Cassuto points out in *The Inhuman Race: The Racial Grotesque in American Literature and Culture* (1997), the “grotesque has a peculiar disturbing power—it is a conflicting mixture of signals that intrudes upon the desired order of the world” (8). Violating fundamental categories and disrupting boundaries, the grotesque “represents an attack on the entire cultural enterprise” (11). Other prisoners in the dungeon are more definitively grotesque, defiantly troubling the boundaries between human and animal or human and object. Texas Red, for example, “was a giant of a man, his tattooed arms like mountainsides with rock pictographs. He was so wide that standing up at the bars his shoulders almost went the width of the cell” (180). JJ “was short” and
Snake “was tall”—but “both had pale skin from being in the dungeon too long.... Their blade-lean bodies, arctic stares, and ... gaunt faces made them a lethal threat to anyone they looked at” (181). With misshapen or gargantuan figures, bodies like weapons (“blade-like”), and names that denote colour (‘Texas Red’) or animality (‘Snake’), the prisoners who inhabit the dungeon represent an exaggerated version of inhumaness that Baca sees as constitutive of the prison itself.

Moreover, Baca’s representation of the Florence prisoners as inhuman accords with the categorization of prisoners as not-quite-human in the Thirteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution. As I discuss in Chapter 1, the Thirteenth Amendment categorized prisoners as slaves, relegating them to a not-quite-human or an inhuman category. The Thirteenth Amendment reads: “‘Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, except as punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted, shall exist within the United States. . . .’” (Hawkins and Alpert’s emphasis; qtd. in Hawkins and Alpert 366). As Cassuto points out, the figure of the slave disturbed conventional boundaries between human and object—the slave looked human but was legally defined as property—thus conforming to the boundary-breaking terms of the grotesque. Similarly, A Place to Stand’s representation of prisoners in terms of the grotesque reproduces the inhuman category that is established for prisoners in the Thirteenth Amendment, underscoring how a prison memoir can reinscribe the vocabulary and ideology that underpins the prison. Discourses of power—in this case, the Thirteenth Amendment, one of the most important legal documents for the creation of penal law—can be implicated in a prison narrative, regardless of the prison writer’s intentions.

The grotesque physicality of the prisoners in the dungeon corresponds with their impulsively violent behaviour. Baca gives as one such example the fate of the “new tough kid”
who was brought into the dungeon and temporarily left on the tier while the guard opened one of
the cells. As Baca explains, the “tough kid” was attacked for no apparent reason: “JJ and Snake
were out for a shower, and when they saw the kid standing there all alone, they ripped his throat
out with a homemade meat hook” (191). This commensurability between the dungeon prisoners’
grotesque bodies and their impulsively violent behaviour seems at first to be interrupted by a
prisoner named Bonafide. Like the other prisoners, Bonafide is grotesque: his body, which
exceeds definition, can be explained only through an odd assemblage of objects and animals (his
“leopard’s litheness” and his “legs the size of telephone poles”), and through clashing gendered
signs (his gross muscularity in contrast with his “ballerina’s waist”). Although Baca notes a
“disquieting menace about him” at first, Bonafide is in fact cordial, affable, and welcoming, and
the two men develop a friendship. “I thought I knew Bonafide as well as one could,” writes Baca
“I could tell he was not the psycho that everybody claimed he was” (189). Then, one morning,
when another prisoner is relocated to Bonafide’s cell, Baca hears “a muffled violence”: “It
sounded like a ferocious tiger tearing apart a small dog. I paused in my writing—actually, I
stopped cold—when I heard another voice come out of Bonafide, not his normal one but one
filled with murderous rage to kill.” Something inhuman (“another voice... not his normal one”)
erupts out of Bonafide as he beats and rapes the other man, and again the animal analogues
resurface, marking both Bonafide (as “a ferocious tiger”) and the other prisoner (as “a small
dog”). These bestial analogies are maintained throughout the horrifying scene, signifying
Bonafide’s inexplicable and sudden depravity as well as the inevitability of his victim’s fate:
Bonafide “roar[s]” while the other prisoner “squeals and whimpers” and emits “teeth-gritting
yelps of pain”—metaphors that serve as reminders of the “hyena”-like prisoners in the general
population who were “yelping” when Baca was removed to the dungeon.
Bonafide’s disclosure of his capacity for sudden violence confirms the opposition between Baca and the other prisoners that was first staged when Baca was taken from his cell to be moved to the dungeon. After aurally witnessing Bonafide perpetrate rape, the familiar for Baca is suddenly rendered uncompromisingly strange: “to think that this whole time I thought I knew him,” writes Baca, “and there was another man inside him totally alien to me” (190).

Bonafide’s revelation of his interior self is set against Baca’s own process of self-discovery: Bonafide reveals himself to be “totally alien” to the man that Baca is in the process of becoming. Indeed, Bonafide and the other prisoners serve to illuminate the degree to which Baca has changed. In their abjectness, they highlight the radical difference between themselves and Baca, and dramatize the distance Baca has travelled in the process of gaining the characteristics of what Rousseau calls the “intelligent being” who belongs outside the prison in civil society (56). Taken together, the collective inhumanity of the other prisoners, particularly within the exaggerated space of the dungeon, seems to prove the book’s oft-used metaphor that prison is another “world” (89, 97, 108, 117). Baca’s language of radical opposition—where prisoners are “alien,” even if they appear familiar, and where prison is another “world”—reproduces the vocabulary of total difference between the otherworldliness of the prison and the comparative normality of civil society.

If Baca’s forced venture into the dungeon is a journey into the collective, hidden interiority of the prisoners, it is also an exploration of his own interiority. Reflecting the trajectory of the conversion narrative, Baca’s journey culminates in his eventual emergence from the dungeon with a renewed sense of himself and his own “humanity.” Baca’s increased introspection and contemplation correlate with his increased devotion to improving his reading and writing skills. Thus, Baca begins to exchange letters with a man named Harry who picked
Baca’s name from a church list of prisoners who have no one on the outside with whom they can correspond. Harry supplies Baca with a dictionary, and, like Malcolm X in Norfolk Prison Colony, Baca spends time looking up words, copying their meaning, and writing short letters. Baca also copies the religious pamphlets that Harry sends him, not for their religious content but to “practice writing sentences.” At first he struggles with the language, “plodding word by word to write a clear sentence,” but soon his efforts at writing develop into more critical engagements with his past as well as with the prison environment that clash with the religious penitence prescribed by Harry (185). During this period, Baca also begins to write poetry.

Indeed, Baca’s emergent sense of himself as a writer is in part defined by his turn away from the body toward the imagination. This turn invokes the “happy prison” motif that is found in Richard Lovelace’s “To Althea, from Prison,” Stendhal’s The Charterhouse of Parma, Alexander Dumas’ The Count of Monte Cristo, and, in satirical form, in Paul St. John’s essay “Behind the Mirror’s Face.” The happy prison motif functions as a metaphor of transcendence, of freedom that is achieved through artistic creation. To invoke the trope of the “happy prison” is to reconfigure the forced confinement within the prison as an opportunity for artistic and imaginative freedom. Thus, when Baca describes the cell as a “monastic refuge” or as a “womb,” he indicates that to him the prison confines but also nurtures, encloses but also frees (243). Baca invokes the metaphor of transcendence through artistic creation in seemingly literal terms when he describes how writing provokes “out-of-body travels”: “Incredible as it sounds, I would find myself floating above my cot in my cell, looking at my body lying peacefully below me,” he writes (239). The happy prison motif and other tropes of spiritual or literary transcendence echo the Enlightenment ideal of the solitary individual as the “man [who is] truly master of himself” (Rousseau 56), while at the same time occluding, if only for a moment, the prison’s discursive
emphasis on physical incarceration and bodily abjection. The coupling of incarceration with the humanizing influences of reading and writing, so the logic is implied, produces the necessary conditions for reflection, self-discovery, and bodily transcendence that will enable the prisoner to overcome the abject, criminal self. Concealed through the motif of the happy prison, of course, are the beatings, the effects of ageing, the rape, and the sexual (and other) deprivations that, regardless of artistry, continue to assail the abiding presence of the imprisoned physical body.47

As the trope of the happy prison indicates, Baca’s education does more than provide him with reading and writing skills. He finds that writing improves his “self-esteem” (184); he learns self-discipline; he increases his capacity for introspection and self-reflection (188), which are the buds of his blossoming sense of empathy and civic responsibility (what Slaughter describes as “self-reading” [248]); and, as Harry suggests, writing begins to provide him with a vocabulary for “mak[ing] a better human being of [him]self” (186). Baca’s education seemingly enables him to transcend the animality of prison, to embody the qualities that Rousseau claims make civic participation possible, and to be “‘part of a secular story of how one becomes truly human’” (Asad qtd. in Smith 15). After Baca’s education in the dungeon, his transformation rehearses the story of the Rousseauian social contract. As a result of his reading and writing, “the voice of duty replaces [his] physical impulses,” and the voice of moral righteousness replaces his impulses and his “appetite.” Consequently, Baca is “forced to act upon other principles and to consult his reason before heeding his inclinations,” a turn to reason and deferred desire that Baca dramatizes when he is faced with the violent demands of prison culture and the abjectivity of his fellow-prisoners (Rousseau 56).

While the other prisoners are impulsively violent, and seem to have little compunction about inflicting physical or psychological pain on others, Baca develops qualities of rationality
and imagination that enable him to experience feelings of empathy. The capacity for (sentimental) affiliation is, as Slaughter observes, a virtue of the ideal democratic citizen (99), particularly in the liberal-humanist tradition where social uplift occurs at the moment when the subject recognizes the humanity of the other. A striking example of Baca’s newly acquired empathy and self-restraint is revealed when, while still in the dungeon, he fights a prisoner named Boxer. After overpowering Boxer, Baca kneels over the bloodied man, shank in hand, ready to strike a death-blow. For an instant, he takes on the bestial qualities that he tends to associate with the other prisoners: “I towered over him like an animal with a survival instinct to kill” (209). But Baca’s momentary, symbolic alignment with the other prisoners is abruptly severed; the humanizing, citizen-making influences of reading and writing intervene in the form of the imagined voices of Pablo Neruda and García Lorca, two poets who have proven influential to Baca and who here function as Rousseau’s “voice of duty.” Baca writes:

> While the desire to murder him was strong, so were the voices of Neruda and Lorca that passed through my mind, praising life as sacred and challenging me:
> How can you kill and still be a poet? Do you know you will forever be changed by this act? (206)

The opposition between Baca’s emergent poet-self, who “prais[es] life as sacred,” and the violent subjectivity of his fellow prisoners is staged as a decision between two diametrically opposed choices. Baca can kill Boxer and align himself with the other prisoners who, like Bonafide, act according to the law of “survival of the fittest” (191), or he can reject their economy of violence and align himself instead with Neruda and Lorca, with the Enlightenment ideal of fellow-feeling that is characteristically expressed in relation to literate exchange. Baca meets the challenge posed by Neruda and Lorca almost instinctively: “In that instant of
indecision,” writes Baca, “standing over him and staring into his bloody face, I saw a man with a mother and father, siblings, a human being with dreams and feelings and loves” (210). Through his exposure to poetry and its ability to provoke empathy for imagined others, Baca recognizes Boxer’s humanity.

Arguably, then, Baca’s emergent sense of “justice” trumps his “instinct” and he manages to exchange the law of “nature” for the law of the social contract. The influences of reading and writing that are signified through the imagined voices of Neruda and Lorca produce in Baca a sense of “fellow feeling for the equal humanity and fundamental dignity of the human personality, both in oneself and others” that Joseph Slaughter argues is “the freest and fullest expression of the human personality” in human rights discourse (42). Indeed, Baca is not just empathizing with Boxer as a fellow person with emotions and desires, but responding to Boxer in accordance with the Rousseauian “general will” that identifies and promotes the value of social interdependence (56). To kill Boxer would not only be to harm one man and, perhaps, his family and friends, but to inflict damage upon the social body itself. Consequently, Baca chooses to drop the shank and let Boxer live, staging an Abrahamic non-sacrifice that seals his covenant with civil society.

This same choice between violence and empathy is dramatized again several pages later, thus serving to reinforce Baca’s increasing empathy and acquired humanity. While lining up for food in the prison cafeteria, Baca angrily throws his meal-tray at a prisoner who is working as a kitchen server because he thinks the prisoner is whistling at him. Later, Baca is confronted by three kitchen servers wanting to retaliate for his outburst. They stare at him, and he stares back. “Suddenly,” writes Baca, “staring at them, I saw past their faces, past their flesh, into their hearts; I saw them as infants, their parents addicted to drugs, screaming and drinking” (242).
This scene once again accentuates a fundamental division between Baca, whose empathy, rationality, and introspection cause him to walk away rather than fight, and the other prisoners, who we are to assume are impulsive and ready to fight, and who seemingly have no reservations about the violent culture in which they participate.

In imagining the stories of these prisoners, Baca provides for them what he supplies for himself in his memoir. Baca both empathizes with them as fellow humans and bestows on them the histories that might explain their incarceration without making assumptions as to their inherent criminality. He sees their infancy, their families, their childhood; he sees how poverty, neglect, and substance abuse might participate in their eventual criminalization and their violence. Baca’s desire to empathize with the gang of kitchen servers is commendable; but there is at the same time a more problematic side to Baca’s empathy. As was the case with Boxer, Baca is telling their potential histories for them, superseding their voices, prescribing the narratives that might explain their past and their future. He wants to “tell them something” about their childhood (of which he may or may not know) rather than “witness and record” the stories they tell him (244).

Thus, Baca unwittingly repeats the biographical project of the legal and penal systems that produce official narratives (such as criminal records, files, and case-studies) about their prisoner subjects with little if any input from those about whom they write. These official discourses overwrite the complexities of prisoners’ stories with the teleology of crime and punishment (and, potentially, redemption). Similarly, the stories of Boxer and the kitchen staff prisoners are overwritten by the demand felt by Baca that he stage his self-transformation and validate his claims to citizenship and humanity. Neither Boxer nor the gang of kitchen staff prisoners narrate their own biographies; instead, their stories are told for them. The goodwill that
Baca apparently feels toward them in no way changes the violence inflicted upon their own sense of selfhood; for all Baca’s attempts to narrate their life stories in positive and sensitive terms, he more than likely created false histories for them, histories that are now set in print and labelled with Baca’s authorship. And so for these prisoners, the counter-narrative paradigm is inverted. Baca’s memoir reinforces rather than contests how legal and penal discourses occlude the nuances of their life stories that might qualify or counter how they are, as Paul Gready argues, “captured and fixed in official writing.”

Baca’s goal of “witnessing and recording” the lives of his fellow prisoners suggests that he acknowledges his responsibility to receive and vocalize the stories of other prisoners alongside his own, perhaps to enable their voices to enter by proxy into the civic space of the reading public (244). Witnessing certainly has its ethical and methodological problems: it can easily slip into voyeurism, or it can produce a power differential between the witnessing writer and the witnessed prisoner, for example. But providing space within his narrative to consider the ways that the life stories of other prisoners might contest the narratives of the prison system would at least destabilize their status as his inhuman others. Unfortunately, the potentially “socially disruptive speech” of Baca’s fellow prisoners is disciplined by Baca himself, subsumed by a narrative that follows a “socially acceptable for[m]” (Slaughter 153). Because the other prisoners never really participate in the formation of Baca’s narrative, the binaries of human/inhuman and citizen/criminal that are concretized by the walls of the prison and legitimized by the dominant narrative of rehabilitation are reinforced even as Baca seemingly challenges the prison’s authority by revealing its brutality and its interconnections with practices of exclusion and structural racism that occur throughout American society.
Conclusion

The argument that prisoners are ontologically different from the non-imprisoned is not part of the manifest content of *A Place to Stand*: instead, the book shows through Baca’s story how poverty and racism set the stage for criminal behaviour, and how prison makes its own violent subjects. On the surface, Baca’s memoir functions as a counter-narrative. But Baca’s use of the rehabilitation narrative to map his conversion from illiteracy and criminality to literacy and citizenship, culminating in and verifying his authority among a reading public, rearticulates the terms of the social contract. Baca learns to read and write and proves his capacity to participate in a post-prison, contractually bound civil society that is actualized in the microcosm of a reading public. Because *A Place to Stand* rehearsesthe terms of the social contract and the Enlightenment story of self-making that equates the acquisition of literacy and authorship with citizenship, the book draws on rather than counters the discourse of the American prison system that is also informed by the same literary, theoretical, and political paradigms.

In comparison with Baca, the other prisoners remain on the pre-contract side of the binary between animal and citizen because they cannot or do not claim the position of the citizen-subject from which they are excluded while in prison (for prisoners have effectively suffered *de facto* civil death, excluded as they are from rights to a civil identity) and, indeed, from which they may have been excluded even before their incarceration. Consequently, what John Bender argues of *Oliver Twist* is also true of *A Place to Stand*: “Though [it] is plainly written as a humane attack on the institutions that help produce the delinquent milieu, the very terms of the attack strengthen the perception of delinquency that upholds the phenomenon” (4). Despite the explicit content of the book, *A Place to Stand* reproduces what Avery F. Gordon calls the “artifactual carving up of human differences into distinct groups whose worth is ranked hierarchically; … the othering, denigration, stigmatization… that accompany such a ranking—in
short, the state-sponsored coupling of difference and power” (652). Indeed, as Baca himself notes in an interview, the coupling of difference and power has profound consequences for prisoners: mainstream society predominantly regards ex-cons “as less than human, and therefore irredeemable” (Working in the Dark 88). Because Baca uses the rehabilitation narrative, with its teleological narrative of progression toward citizenship by means of literacy acquisition, he trades on the vulnerability of his fellow prisoners in order to articulate his own sense of human and civic value. Instead of reconfiguring the underlying terms on which American citizenship is based, which would arguably be the only way to adequately criticize the prison system as he purportedly intends to do, Baca exchanges an image of prisoners as “less than human” for his own humanity, and trades their total incommensurability with civil society for his own (author)ity as a citizen-subject. A Place to Stand does not counter a dominant narrative of the American prison system so much as normalize the rehabilitative and punitive ideology on which the prison system is based.
Chapter 3: Narratives of Murder: Jack Henry Abbott and *In the Belly of the Beast*

“I am still very ignorant, but I can remake myself.” — Abbott, *Belly*, 114

“No one has ever come out of prison a better man.” — Abbott, *Belly*, 143

When Norman Mailer was in the middle of writing a biography of a convicted murderer named Gary Gilmore (which was to become *The Executioner’s Song*), he received an unusual letter from a prisoner named Jack H. Abbott. Abbott, who had served time with Gilmore, offered to provide Mailer with insight into Gilmore’s life as a long-term convict—things only another long-term convict like Abbott could know. Abbott explained that, like Gilmore, he had been raised in incarceration: from state institutions like reform schools to juvenile institutions to jails to prisons to Maximum Security and long stints in solitary confinement: Abbott knew prisons. Mailer was so struck by the intensity and skill of Abbott’s letters that he responded, spawning a two-year letter-writing dialogue between the two men. With the help of a young editor at Random House named Erroll McDonald, the letters eventually developed into Abbott’s epistolary autobiography, *In the Belly of the Beast* (1981).

Abbott’s book was published six weeks after he was paroled from prison. Although there is some debate about the amount of influence Norman Mailer had in ensuring Abbott’s parole, Mailer did promise to provide him with work and income in New York, conditions crucial to satisfying the parole board and ensuring Abbott’s early release. The night before his book was published to rave reviews—most notably by Terrence Des Pres in *The New York Times*—Abbott and two friends stopped for a late-night meal at The Binibon café on the lower East Side of
Manhattan. Abbott got into a disagreement with Richard Adan, the night manager of the café, which quickly escalated into an argument; the argument was taken outside; and moments later Richard Adan was dead on the sidewalk: Abbott had stabbed him, once, clean through the heart. After several months on the run, Abbott was finally apprehended and tried for murder. He was found guilty of manslaughter and sentenced to 15 years to life in prison. Abbott published another book in 2001 called *My Return* (co-authored with Naomi Zack), in which he attempted to explain his role in the murder by way of a Grecian tragedy made up of dialogue from the actual trial. (*My Return* is a strange piece of work: both Abbott and Adan are characters in the play; the characters re-enact the murder; and Abbott includes appendices of his own sketches of the stabbing as stage-directions and supporting evidence.) A year later, Abbott was dead in his cell. An inquest concluded that he had hanged himself with a bed sheet and a shoelace.

My initial interest in *In the Belly of the Beast* had much to do with the tragedy and ensuing scandal of the Adan murder that coincided with the book’s publication, and with the violent, strange, and equally tragic history of Jack Abbott that I sketch above. But my ongoing fascination with Abbott’s autobiography is echoed by Michel Foucault’s interest in the confession of Pierre Rivière. Rivière’s 1835 confession, which was republished by Foucault and his collaborators in *I, Pierre Rivière, having slaughtered my mother, my sister, and my brother. . .: A Case of Parricide in the 19th Century* (1975), is an account of the events leading to Rivière’s murder of his mother, seven-year-old brother, and eighteen-year-old sister. Foucault writes that he and his collaborators spent a year working on the confession of Pierre Rivière because of “the beauty of Rivière’s memoir” (Foreword x). Likewise, the brilliance (if not the beauty) of *In the Belly of the Beast* inspired my research as well. Abbott’s epistolary autobiography is gripping not only because of the extraordinary circumstances of its publication but also because of its
eloquent style, made even more amazing because Abbott taught himself to read and write in prison—mostly, according to *Belly*, in periods spent in solitary confinement. Like Mailer, I too “felt an awe one knows before a phenomenon” (x). Few writers self-educated in prison have the capacity to render the grotesque horrors of the mid-twentieth-century American prison system quite like Abbott, and so I am surprised that almost no critical work has considered this important book.

There are a number of interesting correlations between Rivière’s confession and *In the Belly of the Beast* that are worth noting, if only because these texts stage how life writing can be co-opted by legal discourses. Just as *In the Belly of the Beast* became a crucial piece of evidence in Abbott’s trial for the murder of Richard Adan (which I will consider in the course of this chapter), Rivière’s confession was the central piece of evidence in his trial for the murder of his three family members. In fact, Rivière wrote his confession at the behest of the judge who presided over his trial for the triple homicide. The judge thought that Rivière’s confession would be a litmus test of Rivière’s sanity, much as Abbott’s autobiography was used in his trial as evidence that he suffered from what the defence called an “extreme emotional disturbance.” The “extreme emotional disturbance” defence was, and continues to be, a variation on an insanity defence. What initially intrigued Foucault and his colleagues was how the legal, medical, and emergent psychiatric discourses failed to account for Rivière’s confession. To some, it proved his madness. To others, the rationality and the beauty of his text proved his sanity. *In the Belly of the Beast* elicited a similar debate in Abbott’s trial: the prosecution argued that the book revealed the ramblings of an inherently violent killer; the defence argued that the book attested to Abbott’s psychological instability—the result of decades of abuse at the hands of a violent prison
system. Although Abbott and Rivière’s trials show how life writing can be co-opted by legal discourses, their trials also show how autobiographies are slippery documents to use as evidence.

There are further comparisons between Foucault’s study of Pierre Rivière’s confession and my interest in In the Belly of the Beast, however, that are worth exploring. Like Foucault’s analysis of Pierre Rivière’s confession in his short essay “Tales of Murder” (to which my title refers), I am interested in the way that In the Belly of the Beast “is subsumed—at least so far as its form is concerned—under a vast number of narratives” that influenced, perhaps at times even defined, how prisoners could write about their lives during the late 1970s and early 1980s. Although Foucault considers how Rivière’s confession “seems to fit into the multitude of similar narratives” of his time-period, however, I am interested in exploring how Abbott’s memoir does not fit into a particular archive of stories that conform to a specific narrative pattern, but how readers at the time of the book’s writing and after the Adan murder read Belly according to that popular, recognizable narrative pattern nonetheless (“Tales of Murder” 203).

The narrative pattern that I explore is what I have been calling the rehabilitation narrative, which had a constitutive effect on the prison life writing genre during the era of the rehabilitative ideal. Belly employs many of the tropes of the rehabilitation narrative: the conversion through self-education, the motif of rebirth, the entrance into a post-conversion/rehabilitation community that sustains his new self. Abbott stitches his story into the tradition of the rehabilitation narrative, participating in a narrative formation that is developed in the rhetoric of prison reformers and reformulated in prisoners’ autobiographical writings, extending from Caryl Chessman’s Cell 2455 to Jimmy Santiago Baca’s A Place to Stand, The Autobiography of Malcolm X to Nathan McCall’s Makes me Wanna Holler.
But Abbott’s memoir problematizes, even critiques, the assumptions and expectations of the rehabilitation narrative as well. Most importantly, he adamantly refuses the rehabilitation narrative’s *telos*. Despite his story of self-transformation through reading and writing, he never transcends the conditions of the prison (even after he is paroled before the Adan murder). Moreover, his story is not about the development of a citizen-subject whose writing proves his capacity to participate in a civic community; rather, *Belly* describes the development of a subjectivity that copes with, even excels in, a dehumanizing environment. Therefore, unlike the rehabilitation narrative, his self-transformation makes him particularly well-suited for the prison environment but leaves him ill-equipped, even unable to survive in the rehabilitation narrative’s ideal liberal polity, let alone cope with the exigencies of American non-carceral life.

By critiquing the rehabilitation narrative, Abbott also questions the ideal shared by many well-meaning educators, artists, philanthropists, and religious organizations that education “changes” prisoners, presumably into subjects who can reintegrate into civil life. For example, Jean Trounstine, in *Shakespeare Behind Bars: The Power of Drama in a Women’s Prison*, argues that “art has the power to redeem lives” (2). Joseph Bruchac, in *The Light from Another Country: Poetry from American Prisons* writes, “Working with writers in prison has . . . been an object lesson in the power of poetry to reach and even change human lives” (xiii). Boston University claims on its website that its prison outreach program has the “power” to “elevate, nurture, and transform,” to “change a life.” In *Belly*, Abbott challenges the redemptive, transcendent rhetoric associated with prison education by resisting the trope of “change” and instead foregrounding how prisoners’ lives are circumscribed by systems that not only enforce stasis but also encourage physical, psychological, and social degeneration. However much Abbott “remakes” himself, he argues, he will never “come out of prison a better man.”
If the conditioning that Abbott receives through the brutality of guards and other prison officials were merely “an imposed ideology” that could be changed through the intervention of, say, drama, poetry, or a liberal arts degree, then the dehumanizing conditions that have defined his life “would be—and one would be glad—a very much easier thing to overthrow” (Williams 39). But Abbott takes great pains to emphasize how his dramatic, even exceptional self-education in prison cannot interrupt the debilitating violence of the carceral system, which consistently and repeatedly acts on its subjects, conditioning them so they will invariably return to the detention centres, jails, and prisons that have informed their self-conceptions, often since childhood. Such a vision is certainly bleak, but it suggests that “changing lives” requires a broader social transformation than education can realistically provide.

However, *Belly* was typically read by Abbott’s supporters and detractors alike as a rehabilitation narrative—or a failed or falsified rehabilitation narrative—as though it fit into the “multitude” of rehabilitation narratives that the book in fact contested. Abbott’s presumed failure to live up to the telos of the rehabilitation narrative and successfully form part of the civic community—the very presumption that *Belly* critiques—ultimately validated conservative notions of prisoners as a violent and irredeemable social group and reified the prison’s importance as a way to control a threatening criminal underclass. Abbott’s inability to live up to the citizen-making project of the rehabilitation narrative even became a sign of the failure of the prison’s project of rehabilitation, which ushered in a retributive prison ideology that, when matched with Ronald Reagan’s (and later George Bush Sr.’s and Bill Clinton’s) various ‘wars’ on drugs and crime, provided for the draconian prison conditions that Abbott argued made him violently antisocial in the first place.
In this chapter, I will explore how *Belly* makes use of, but critiques the rehabilitation narrative, particularly its story of individual transcendence and its criminality-to-citizenship teleology. I then consider how Abbott uses the form and tropes of the rehabilitation narrative not to articulate a transformation from criminal to citizen but instead to define himself according to a different bifurcation that he posits between prisoners who continue to resist the prison, whom he identifies as “fanatically defiant and alienated individuals,” and prisoners who have submitted to the prison system, whom he calls “indoctrinated” prisoners. Although his transformation into a “fanatically defiant and alienated individual” provides him with the psychological and discursive material to resist the trauma of imprisonment, it is a subject position that likely makes life outside prison *more* unmanageable, reversing the terms of rehabilitation entirely. Finally, I show how despite Abbott’s critique of the rehabilitation narrative, and despite *Belly’s* insistence that its autobiographical subject’s self-transformation attunes him to prison and not the civic community, *Belly* was read according to the “multitude of narratives” of rehabilitation that bore considerable weight on the discursive space of prison writing. As a result of this misreading, Abbott’s failure to live up to a myth of rehabilitation that he himself critiqued fuelled conservative arguments that criminals were impulsively violent and required more, not less, prison.

**In the Belly of the Beast and the Rehabilitation Narrative**

Teresa Godwin Phelps’ “Voices from Within: Community and Law in Three Prison Narratives” is one of the only literary studies of *In the Belly of the Beast*. The absence of analyses of *Belly* is surprising not only because of the aesthetic merit of Abbott’s autobiography, which I mention above, but because the book was at the centre of a heated national debate about criminality and
prison policies at the beginning of the Reagan-era—a debate that I will discuss at the close of this chapter. However, while Phelps is virtually alone in taking critical stock of *Belly*, she tries to bracket the book from the prison writing archive. Phelps uses narrative to separate *Belly* from autobiographical prison writings that she presumes are worthier texts. She compares *Belly* with Martin Luther King’s *Letter from Birmingham Jail* and Philip Berrigan’s *Prison Journals of a Priest Revolutionary* and concludes that Abbott’s text differs from those of King and Berrigan because Abbott’s autobiography “has no connection to any narrative tradition, either Biblical or otherwise.” “Between the lines we see that Abbott lacks a story in which his life is embedded,” she writes (72). Phelps differentiates Abbott (the social pariah) from King and Berrigan (model citizens) by claiming that *Belly* is without “narrative tradition.” However, Abbott’s memoir implicitly and explicitly locates itself in relation to the most significant narrative traditions in American prison writing, particularly the conversion narrative and its penal relative, the rehabilitation narrative. In fact, what made *Belly* so controversial was the book’s proximity to what Foucault calls “the multitude of similar narratives” that adhered to the rehabilitation narrative in one form or another, including such works as James Carr’s *Bad*, Eldridge Cleaver’s *Soul on Ice*, and George Jackson’s *Soledad Brother* (and after it, *A Place to Stand*). These prison life writings validate, problematize, or subvert Zebulon Brockway’s (and later Thomas Mott Osborne’s) notion of the prison as a “college.”

*Belly* likewise makes use of the tropes, metaphors and subject positions of the rehabilitation narrative, particularly its redefinition of the prison as a pedagogical space. After spending his youth and young adulthood incarcerated without access to or much interest in schooling, Abbott undergoes a dramatic, life-changing self-education in prison, mostly as a way to stave off the madness of solitary confinement and Maximum Security. Taking the trope of the
studious, monastic prisoner to a dramatic extreme, Abbott describes himself locked in Maximum Security for five years without speaking to anyone but his sister when she would visit him twice a month. During that period, he reads extensively from books that his sister mails him. His studying induces a kind of conversion experience. He writes:

When I entered Maximum Security, I was about five feet, nine inches tall. I did not have a beard and did not know basic arithmetic. When I emerged I could not walk without collapsing; I had a full beard and was six feet tall. I had a rudimentary understanding of mathematical theory and symbolic logic and had studied in all the theoretic sciences. I had read all but a very few of the world’s classics, from prehistoric times up to this day. My vision was perfect when I was locked up; when I got out, my vision required glasses. (22)

Abbott details an intellectual rebirth: before Maximum Security, he “did not know basic arithmetic”; after five years in Maximum Security, he not only understood advanced mathematics but he had studied “all the theoretical sciences” and read the majority of “the world’s classics.” Abbott’s hyperbole—“I had read all but a very few of the world’s classics,” “had studied in all the theoretic sciences”—suggests his desire to underscore the dramatic difference between who he was before and who he became after his five years’ in Maximum Security. Autobiographical subjects of rehabilitation narratives often index a differentiation between their pre-conversion and their post-conversion “selves” through manifest signs of their education. Malcolm X transcribes the entire dictionary, for example; Jimmy Santiago Baca provides a list of authors and texts that he read in prison, which informed his sensibilities as a poet. Like Jimmy Santiago Baca and Malcolm X (particularly in the “Saved” chapter), Abbott
also riddles *Belly* with the names of the writers, theorists, and books that informed his thinking and his emergent sense of himself as an intellectual.

Furthermore, Abbott’s physical appearance bears the traces of his self-making: remarkably, he grows in height. His physical development indicates that he was in Maximum Security over a period of time when he was still young enough to be growing. But he is also conveying the magnitude of his transformation by mapping those changes on the size of his body. His conversion is so massive, so transformative, that he *feels* as though he literally grew inches. But Abbott’s conversion is also a physical degeneration: he grows a beard—a trope of aging in unwilling, unintended, or enforced solitude (like Rip Van Winkle, for example); he cannot walk properly; his once-perfect vision is compromised, assumedly, from long hours of studying. Inasmuch as his body maps his intellectual development through its physical growth, his aged, momentarily disabled, and compromised body also stages the brutal effects of long-term prison life. Abbott thus resists the motif of the “happy prison” that reappears in texts that make use of the rehabilitation narrative. The happy prison, as I suggest in Chapter 1, is a trope that posits the prison as a location for intellectual development. Abbott problematizes the happy prison motif by counterposing his educational growth with his physical degeneration. In *Belly*, education is never a mode of transcendence. The book repeatedly foregrounds the effects of the physical deprivations and consistent violence of the prison on Abbott’s body.

Abbott’s conversion experience also initiates him into a literary community. His narrative thus resonates with the traditional conversion narrative, whose end-result is the convert’s initiation into a community of like-minded believers. More specifically, Abbott invokes the rehabilitation narrative. The rehabilitation narrative culminates in the prison author’s incorporation in a community of readers and writers (staged in Jimmy Santiago Baca’s *A Place*...
to Stand, for example). Similarly, when Mailer agrees to an epistolary relationship with Abbott, he symbolically accepts Abbott into a “reading public.” As Abbott writes: “It is as if I were sitting in an audience listening to fine gentlemen and scholars deliver speeches and discourses on things of reverence to me. Then one of them suddenly looks across the numberless audience directly at me and says: ‘It’s your turn, Jack. Come up here and say something’ (Belly 25). The sign of Abbott’s belonging in this reading public—what confirms his transformation in this scene from audience member to speaker—is authorship. Abbott’s articles in The New York Review of Books and the eventual publication of Belly are the definitive marks of acceptance in a “city of letters.” Thus Belly constitutes a prison autobiography/memoir corollary to Joseph Slaughter’s definition of the Bildungsroman as a “Clef à Roman.” Slaughter describes how an “historically marginalized author’s access to the dominant literary public sphere is very often conditioned on a novel about the tribulations of an individual’s social apprenticeship in the culture of the dominant literary public sphere.” Slaughter calls this novel of growth and ultimate socialization in the “dominant literary public sphere” a “Clef à Roman”: “an author’s generic key to the lettered city that comes with a novel about a protagonist’s attempts to gain admission into a society of readers” (308). Similarly, In the Belly of the Beast is the story of a prison-author’s acceptance in a literary community that is confirmed in the publication of the story itself.

However, while Abbott claims a position in a reading public that sustains his self-definition as an author, his story explicitly resists the plot of “human personality development” that subtends the rehabilitation narrative and liberal-democratic theories of belonging in a civic community (see Chapter 2). Instead of claiming that his education in prison provides him with the psychological or social tools for participation in a liberal polity (as Jimmy Santiago Baca
does, for example), Abbott argues that he cannot transcend the prison because he is essentially conditioned by prison life—whatever his skills as a writer.

Abbott repeatedly underscores his unfitness for “American society” in the book’s final chapter, rather than argue that his self-education has prepared him for life after prison: “I cannot imagine how I can be happy in American society,” he writes; “I am naturally resentful . . . of the injustice that [American society] has done to me” (197). Not only does Abbott refuse the rehabilitation narrative’s rhetoric of repentance, positioning himself as the victim of social violence instead (a redefinition of criminality deployed by African American prisoners like Malcolm X, for example), but he also implies that he could reoffend if released from prison. Arguing that he “cannot imagine how [he] can be happy in American society” is a particularly shocking claim for someone faced, perhaps for the first time, with the very real chance of parole. Parole boards rarely grant a prisoner’s release without the prisoner’s stated contrition or apology, and Abbott’s letters and other writings would have been reviewed by the prison censors, and likely compiled or glossed for the parole board in his prison file. Abbott goes further, however, not only arguing that he is “resentful” of his treatment by the prison and American society (rather than repentant), but that he cannot “be happy” outside the prison, implying that he is a likely candidate for recidivism.

Much as Pierre Rivière’s confessional narrative was essentially produced before the crimes that it detailed (at least in the mind of Rivière), Abbott’s memoir similarly predicted its autobiographical subject’s crime and his eventual re-incarceration. This is not to contend that Abbott predicted the murder of Richard Adan in his memoir; but the book argues that Abbott will almost certainly be unable to live in civil society, implying that he will be convicted of a crime and invariably return to prison. Abbott reminds his readership of the unlikelihood of his
post-release success in the final paragraph of the book, underscoring how *Belly* rejects the *telos* of post-prison success inherent to the rehabilitation narrative. Abbott writes,

> How I wish this would end! How I wish I could walk free in the world, could find my life again and see and do things other people do.

> I don’t see how that would be possible now, though. Too much has happened, for too long, to me. But I want to try. It is my right. *That* is what “human right” is. *My right*, the *individual’s* right. We all have that right even though we know in our hearts we may be incapable of accomplishing what we have the *absolute* right to try to accomplish. . . . I have the right, at least, to walk free at some time in my life even if the odds are by now overwhelming that I may not be as other men.

(emphasis in original 197-198)

Rather than argue that his education has prepared him for life after prison, Abbott bases his appeal for freedom solely on a rights claim: “It is my right. *That* is what ‘human right’ is. *My right*, the *individual’s* right.” Abbott argues for his freedom through his human rights but, in the same sentence, he insists that he likely cannot abide by the rules of citizenship. He refuses to claim that he belongs in American society despite the fact that his book, and his life story, clearly gesture in such a direction, and framing his development as a writer according to such a familiar narrative would have strengthened his argument for early release. Whereas most rehabilitation narratives conclude with the autobiographical subject’s capacity to engage in the contractual obligations that Rousseau argues bind the liberal polity—like the claim that education has “changed” him from a criminal to a citizen, however that transformation is defined—Abbott implicitly questions the truth-claims of rehabilitation by reminding his readership of the carceral conditioning that has affected his self-conception and his perception of social behaviour, which
disrupts his capacity to claim a liberal-humanity (figured loosely above as “other men”) that is the presumed end-result of a liberal education.

In fact, the subject position that Abbott claims in *Belly* is opposed to the idealized liberal-democratic citizen-subject who constitutes the *telos* of the rehabilitation narrative. The democratic citizen-subject is rational, disciplined, and can, at the very least, sustain civic participation. Abbott defines himself as impulsive and violent; he describes his near-incapacity to be a part of a community or participate in unmediated manifestations of the public sphere. For example, he explains his association with the social world by staging his vexed relationship to the “crowd”:

> When I’m forced by circumstance to be in a crowd of prisoners, it’s all I can do to refrain from attack. I feel such hostility, such hatred, I can’t help this anger. All these years I have felt it. Paranoic. I can control it…. I have to intentionally gauge my voice in a conversation to cover up the anger I feel, the chaos and pain just beneath the surface of what we commonly recognize as reality. Paranoia is an illness I contracted in institutions. (5)

If the conversion narrative (like its offspring, the *Bildungsroman*) culminates in the convert’s acceptance in a new community, or if the rehabilitation narrative likewise culminates in a prisoner’s reintegration in society, then Abbott’s paranoia and anger, his inability to participate in a social group without recourse to violence, suggest the degree to which this social drama has been inverted by the prison system.50

Much of the book is devoted to Abbott’s self-analyses that trace the relationship between the violent, alienating carceral spaces of his upbringing, maturation, and early middle-age with the alienated, violent person that he readily admits himself to be. He writes that he is affected by
“a form of instability (mental, emotional, etc.)” that “is caused by a lifetime of incarceration” (emphasis in original 13). His “judgment is untempered, rash; his emotions are impulsive, raw, unmellowed” because incarceration has not allowed him to “mature emotionally” (14). Indeed, “[t]here are emotions—a whole spectrum of them—that I know of only through words, through reading and my immature imagination,” he writes: “I can imagine I feel those emotions (know, therefore, what they are), but I do not [feel them]” (emphasis in original 15). Abbott insists that, whatever his education imparts, it cannot interrupt the psychological and social effects of his long-term imprisonment. He subtly critiques the argument that education can “change people” without also changing the broader social conditions in which those people happen to live.

His insistence on degradation rather than transcendence as a dominant motif for his writing refocuses the prison autobiography/memoir genre on the marginalized stories of prisoners who do not or cannot transcend the conditions of their imprisonment, stories that are far more representative than the uplifting stories of rehabilitation that recur in the prison life writing archive (as I suggest in Chapter 1, most prisoners return to some form of incarceration within three years’ of their release). Moreover, Abbott resists one of the major conceptual tropes shared by prison writers and criminologists, penologists, and sociologists: the notion that prison constitutes a “state of exception.” Often, a prison narrative will begin in a non-carceral space and time, develop through crisis, criminality, and subsequent juridical intervention, before entering the space and time of the prison. For example, Malcolm X details his upbringing in Lansing, Boston, and Harlem before describing his arrest for burglary and his imprisonment at Charleston Prison, Concord Prison, and Norfolk Prison Colony. Certainly the specter of Jim Crow and the de jure and de facto segregatory practices throughout the country suggest that his pre-prison life bares traces of a broad, racialized, carceral condition within the nation that he
navigates before and after his stints at Charleston, Concord, and Norfolk. Still, imprisonment *per se* is very clearly an exceptional space in the narrative.

Likewise, criminologists, penologists, and sociologists often define the prison as an exception to the otherwise “normal” life of the prisoner. Erving Goffman, in *Asylums* (1961), for example, makes just such a distinction in his famous definition of “mortification”:

> The recruit comes into the establishment with a conception of himself made possible by certain stable social arrangements in his home world. Upon entrance, he is immediately stripped of the support provided by these arrangements. In the accurate language of some of our oldest total institutions, he begins a series of abasements, degradations, humiliations, and profanations of self. His self is systematically, if often unintentionally, mortified. (Goffman 14)

Goffman describes the rupture between the “home world” and the prison world, between the prisoner’s “conception of himself” before prison and the mortified self after prison, as constituting the originary trauma of imprisonment. Likewise, Stanley Cohen and Laurie Taylor in their seminal work on the effects of long-term imprisonment, *Psychological Survival* (1981), write that “the prisoner has to come to terms with the fact that he is starting on a new life, one in which routines which previously obtained in every area [of his life] will be transformed.” The prisoner, particularly the long-term prisoner they discuss, “has been given ‘life’—a prison life—and somehow he must learn to live it” (43).

However, according to *Belly*, Abbott never had “stable social arrangements in his home world.” He *only* has “a prison life.” *Belly* inverts conventional narratives of the prison, even those reproduced in sociological, psychological, and criminological studies like *Asylums* and *Psychological Survival*, which define prison as an exceptional spatial and temporal condition that
intervenes in otherwise “normal” or at least non-carceral life. *Belly* autopsies a subject whose psychological, social, and emotional makeup is enmeshed in the prison, who cannot claim a position outside of the carceral, despite his capacity to lay claim to a familiar narrative tradition whose conventions insist that such an exterior position is possible, even narratologically inevitable. Therefore, while Abbott’s narrative approximates a familiar story of rehabilitation by making use of the tropes of rebirth and self-education, his story aligns with Foucault’s argument in *Discipline and Punish* that prison constitutes one branch of a larger “carceral continuum” that serves to restrict, codify, and survey a criminal subclass who are cycled back to the prison soon after their release (278). By refocusing his story on the entrenchment of this system in his identity, Abbott narrativizes the experiences of those prisoners whose lives are always-already circumscribed by the carceral, which stories of transcendence and rehabilitation, if presumed to be in any way representative of prison experience, artificially resolve.

**Alienation and Indoctrination in the Prison and Prison Writing**

*Belly* does articulate an opposition between two different subject positions that resonate with the bifurcated self in the conversion tradition, but crucially these subject positions have no bearing on a non-carceral polity: the “fanatically defiant and alienated individual” and the “indoctrinated” prisoner. While both subject positions are constituted by the conditions of the prison, Abbott uses their presumed difference to articulate a measure of agency for himself (although, as I will show, *Belly* destabilizes this binary at the same time). Abbott argues that long-term prisoners, particularly those who have been “state-raised” like himself, “emulate . . . a fanatically defiant and alienated individual” who is “effective” because he has the capacity to kill, if necessary, in the interests of self-defence, “pride, integrity, [or] honor.” The “fanatically
defiant and alienated individual” refers to prisoners who “act alone and without emotion, who act with calculation and principles, to avenge themselves, establish and defend their principles with acts of murder that usually evade prosecution by law; this is the state-raised convicts’ conception of manhood, in the highest sense,” writes Abbott (emphasis in original 15). Abbott’s dedications page gives an indication of the types of convicts that he sees fitting into this category, prisoners who are ideologically, politically, culturally, and individually very different but that share some element of the ethos that Abbott highlights above.52

For example, Abbott dedicates Belly to Sam Melville and George Jackson, two prisoners who died dramatically and violently while resisting the prison system in the interests of overlapping revolutionary causes. Melville detonated at least eight bombs in 1969 to protest the Vietnam War, before being captured by police and FBI while setting dynamite charges in National Guard trucks outside the 69th Regimental Armoury in New York. After his imprisonment, Melville continued his activism. He was one of the main organizers of the infamous Attica prison uprising in 1971, and he was murdered by National Guardsmen at Attica when they overtook the prison in a bloody siege.53 Melville’s revolutionary principles, his terroristic resistance to the state, and his reworking of his own whiteness—in Letters from Attica (1972), he writes, “One thing is for certain: when I emerge [from prison] . . . I won’t be a honky anymore” (57)—contribute to Abbott’s conception of the fanatically defiant and alienated individual and to his “revolutionary” vocabulary.

Likewise, Abbott emulates George Jackson’s self-definition as a Marxist guerrilla fighter, and the ideological framework that Jackson develops in Soledad Brother and Blood in My Eye provides much of the moral and political scaffolding for Belly. Abbott’s education is particularly indebted to Jackson, as both men trace their training as revolutionaries according to a kind of
conversion experience. In *Soledad Brother*, for example, Jackson writes, “I met Marx, Lenin, Trotsky, Engels, and Mao when I entered prison and they redeemed me” (39-40). Similarly, in *Belly*, Abbott finds redemption by reading “Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels…Lenin, Stalin, and Mao” who, he claims, “teach the highest principles of human society” (118). Furthermore, both Jackson and Abbott articulate a relationship between the individual prisoner and an “imagined community” of oppressed peoples, much as a convert’s sense of self is sustained through a post-conversion community that shares his or her values. In *Blood in my Eye*, for example, Jackson defines how prisoners are involved in a collective, large-scale revolution beyond the prison: “Prisoners must be reached and made to understand that they are victims of social injustice,” victims in a “war [that] goes on no matter where one may find himself on bourgeois-dominated soil” (108). Taking a page from Jackson, Abbott is (on his small piece of bourgeois-dominated soil) participating in what he calls “a terrible revolutionary war in its infancy.” His daily battles and struggles with the guards and the prison system are framed as revolutionary acts, “flaring up in fits and starts and dying as quickly in a splash of blood and violence on a scale so microscopic as to go unnoticed to the average, everyday perception of events in the country” (196). But his “vision” of his life as a revolutionary “splash of blood” on “a small scale” has meaning because it is part of something greater, historic, a “bigger ‘splash of blood’” on a “‘bigger scale’” (196). Abbott self-identifies as a revolutionary by imagining his struggles in the prison as interconnected with an international war waged by oppressed peoples against their oppressors.

In particular, he identifies with peoples or nations struggling with racial segregation, foreign occupation, or colonialism. Reflecting Melville’s desire not to be “a honky anymore,” Abbott allies himself with African Americans, even distancing himself from his own whiteness in his chapter on race, describing “white folks” (174) as “them”: “I have never been close to
them, have never had much in common with them” (176). He allies himself with the Vietnamese, and with other “peasant” nations in “Central America and South America, in Africa and the Middle East” (186): “I am with the most feeble and oppressed of all the Third World nations. I direct my concern there,” he writes (187). (He also claims an affiliation with China and the Soviet Union—hardly paradigms of similarly oppressed third-world nations in the late 1970s and early 1980s.) By establishing an imaginary linkage to other oppressed peoples, Abbott defines himself as part of “a community of believers”—to return to conversion rhetoric—who have their own moral codes that are more righteous than those of their oppressors. While such a revolutionary outlook is certainly “defiant,” its community-centred ideal contradicts Abbott’s privileging of “alienation.” However, while Abbott finds a sense of community in his identification with revolutionary groups outside the prison, he also reserves a great degree of antipathy for his immediate group of prisoners. His chapter called “The Inmates,” for example, predominantly paints them as “vil[e]” and animalistic (changed emphasis 76). Despite his imagined allegiances with oppressed groups, he remains at odds with the vast majority of his fellow-prisoners, who represent more of a threat than a sense of community for him.

If Melville and Jackson mitigate their alienation from the majority of American culture with an alternative revolutionary community, then two other prisoners on Abbott’s dedications page indicate a more thoroughgoing alienation, which Abbott venerates as well: Gary Gilmore and Carl Panzram. Gilmore is, as I mention in my introduction, another state-raised convict: his life progresses from juvenile institutions to prison to long periods in solitary confinement. After Gilmore murdered two men while on parole from prison, he was made famous for forcing the hand of the state by refusing all appeals, challenging all stays of his execution, and requesting that his death sentence be carried out, which it eventually was, after a series of highly publicized
court battles and public skirmishes with members of his own family, the American Civil Liberties Union, and other groups interested in maintaining the moratorium on the death penalty. According to Abbott, Gilmore is an ideal convict, someone who is “principled” (153), who pledges allegiance to what Abbott sees as a fading convict code of honour—a code of toughness, rebelliousness, and, importantly, a code predicated on challenging the prison system and the state.54

Likewise, Carl Panzram—a convicted serial killer, pedophile, and serial rapist whose death row confession was, after forty years, eventually published in 1970 as *Killer: A Journal of Murder*—challenges, even goads the legal and prison systems, ultimately arguing for his own execution after his arrest.55 Panzram’s last words to his executioner allegedly were, “hurry it up, you Hoosier bastard! I could hang a dozen men while you’re fooling around!” (326). Both Gilmore and Panzram are determined social outcasts who revel in their outlawry and stage hyper-masculine confrontations with the state, defining their agency through their capacity to out-man their adversaries by willingly forcing their own destruction.

Yet, dramatic as Gilmore’s and Panzram’s acts of resistance happen to be, their resistances to the state signpost their lack of agency at the same time. Their swaggering suicide-executions are revealing because they do not resist the prison, the legal system, and the state so much as authorize the claim these institutions have on their lives. In fact, Gilmore and Panzram seem wholly determined by the institutions that they goad, challenge, and resist. Like Abbott, both men were state-raised and held the interlocking carceral institutions accountable for conditioning their impulsively violent behaviour. Panzram writes, for example,

What others may have learned by the same sort of treatment in other and similar institutions, I don’t know, but this I do know, that in later years I have met
thousands of graduates of those kinds of institutions and they were either in, going into or just leaving jails, prisons, mad houses, or the rope and electric chair was yawning for them as for me. (32)

Panzram highlights the degree to which his shocking violence and his rebelliousness are inseparable from the very systems that he opposes and defies so fearlessly. His bloody reactions to incarceration—Panzram claimed his acts of violence were performances of revenge on a society whose penal institutions had irreparably damaged him psychologically—further subject him to the prison, trapping him in a destructive cycle: the prison produces his violent criminality, which ultimately (even inevitably) returns him to prison and justifies his execution.

Abbott’s “fanatically defiant and alienated individual” is thus an effect of prison conditioning inasmuch as he is a figure of resistance. The “fanatically defiant and alienated individual,” writes Abbott, “cannot imagine what forgiveness is, or mercy or tolerance, because he has no experience of such values. His emotions do not know what such values are, but he imagines them as so many ‘weaknesses’ precisely because the unprincipled offender appears to escape punishment through such ‘weaknesses’ on the part of society” (emphasis in original 15-16). The very signs of the fanatically defiant and alienated individual’s agency—his immovable values or principles, his violent acts of resistance, particularly his seemingly defiant and determinedly self-immolating resistance to the state—are in fact effects of a state-enforced lack, whereby the experiences that enable him to forge a bond with society are removed through the state institutions that have governed his life.

Similarly, Abbott’s acts of resistance are never unadulterated expressions of agency in the book so much as always-already affects of the prison that are imbricated in the consolidation of the prison’s power, particularly the prison’s power over his body. There is something
inherently self-defeating in Abbott’s conception of resistance that threads its way through the book. His acts of resistance are not framed as aberrations from the prison that disrupt its order. Instead, they seem integral to the prison’s workings of power. Abbott’s resistance is usually staged as open defiance, often expressed as reactionary violence: throwing his meal-tray at a guard (17); striking a guard with a homemade bludgeon because the guard wrote him a disciplinary report (36); throwing water at a guard who insults him (41); “instinctively” pushing a guard who has pushed him (43), and so on. These small acts of resistance and defiance are not out of place in the prison. They are relegated to infractions that call forth their commensurate punishment: disciplinary reports, beatings, the hole, the starvation diet.

Not only do his acts of resistance in Belly increase the prison’s control over his body, but they consistently suggest a lack of will, an impulse or “instinc[t],” some force guiding his rebelliousness, as if the punitive mechanisms of the prison have a hand in affecting the resistances that ultimately consolidate their power over him. Abbott even idealizes his resistance in terms of an absence of free-will: “I’m the kind of fool who, facing Caesar and his starving lions, need only retract a statement to walk away scot-free but instead cannot suppress saying ‘fuck you’ to Caesar—knowing full well the consequences,” he writes (18). His fantasy of resistance—framed as impulsive, beyond his own control, something he “cannot suppress”—only invites and justifies further violence on the part of the state. Abbott’s impulsive resistance resonates with William Faulkner’s Joe Christmas in Light in August who is also guided—even, it seems, guided to violence—by some force beyond himself: “he believed with calm paradox that he was the volitionless servant of the fatality in which he believed that he did not believe” (177). So too does it resonate with Bigger Thomas, from Richard Wright’s Native Son, who is also governed by social forces beyond himself and whose “life had been leading to” the murder of
Mary Dalton (and later Bessie) (Native Son 90). Although Abbott’s whiteness differentiates the particular forces that govern his actions from those of Christmas or Thomas, like them he seems to “ac[t] to put an end to the world’s anticipation,” or at least the anticipation of the guards and other prison officials, particularly when he lashes out against them (Fanon 139). Resistance in Belly is surprisingly powerless because it is implicitly framed as an effect of the prison and constitutive of what Foucault calls a cycle of “punishment-reproduction” (Discipline 278). It is depoliticized and categorized as an infraction that can be invested in existing systems of punishment.

However, Abbott manages the paradoxical position of claiming that he is self-determined as well as determined by the prison by formulating agency according to a binary of resistance—subservience (although, as I have shown, such a formulation is inherently unstable). He defines the figure of the “fanatically defiant and alienated individual” and his acts of resistance as agential by opposing them to the figure of the “indoctrinated” prisoner, who is wholly inagential. Indoctrination is a central but slippery term in the Abbott lexicon since at first he defines it simply as a prisoner’s “adjustment” to prison, particularly to the prison’s rules and regulations (16-17). But throughout Belly indoctrination signifies a state of total subservience, a near-complete loss of control and an absence of selfhood that approaches Giorgio Agamben’s concept of homo sacer: the subject reduced to bare life that can be killed (but not sacrificed) without moral or legal consequence. Abbott writes, “I have seen men around me through the years fall apart morally, seen them go mad in subtle ways and seen them surrender their will to the routine of prison, and I have resisted it much, much longer than others” (27). “Moral” degeneration, madness, surrendering of the “will” to the prison (either to officials or to other prisoners): indoctrination signifies the near-total loss of selfhood that results from prison degradation. The
indoctrinated prisoner is, according to Abbott, a non-self whose selflessness has been consolidated through beatings, sexual violence, and severe, ritualized humiliation by guards and prisoners. It is through indoctrination’s signs of total passivity and complete subservience (clear referents of the prison’s power) that Abbott’s resistance can be articulated as resistance rather than as enmeshed in the effects of prison conditioning.

Gerard, Abbott’s one-time friend and fellow prisoner, is something of a case study of the indoctrinated prisoner. Abbott “knew him years ago, knew him when he was whole,” he writes, “when he was dignified.” But after years of violence, abuse, and long stints in the hole, something changed in Gerard: “I do not know how this change in him came about. It must have been gradual. I only know I noticed one day that he had gone to pieces,” writes Abbott. Going “to pieces” involves supplication before guards or prisoners, some outward sign of weakness, vulnerability. Abbott describes how Gerard goes from cell to cell, falling before other prisoners, begging them to allow him “to commit fellatio through the bars of the cells” (98). It is near-insanity, something Abbott sees registered in “Gerard’s face,” which reminds him of a phrase of Nietzsche’s: “the glance of eternity,” a look revealing no interiority (97).

However, Abbott describes Gerard as “this madman who is not insane” (99). Indoctrination is, according to Abbott, a liminal state between sanity and insanity. As a result, Gerard is an uncanny presence, capable and aware enough to live in the general prison population, but inconsequential as a “ghost.” “[I]magine,” writes Abbott: “You walk anywhere, and not only do the guards not stop you, no one sees you” (emphasis in original 98). Because Gerard is a shell of a man, as abject as a “ghost,” he is deeply unsettling and threatening, but he can also be killed without consequence. Abbott writes: “Anyone could kill Gerard in retaliation and everyone else would protect his killer. Guard or prisoner. He is one of those people who
tempt everything evil in men, and yet by human measures he is honest and his intent is never to harm” (Abbott’s emphasis 97). Like homo sacer, indoctrinated prisoners like Gerard constitute “those who can be killed with impunity since, in the eyes of the law their lives no longer count” (Zizek). Perhaps the indoctrinated prisoner, rather than Foucault’s physically useful but politically incapacitated “docile body,” is the ultimate subject of the prison because the indoctrinated prisoner has undergone such a complete transformation as to be totally without agency, ultimately without selfhood, a “ghost.”

Of course, all prisoners (particularly those who spend long periods in solitary confinement) feel they have little, sometimes no agency. All prisoners, moreover, are in a kind of subject-limbo, people without the natural and inalienable rights of people—“ghosts” in the eyes of the law. Thus prisoners feel threatened by their proximity to the indoctrinated prisoners’ abjection. For Abbott, fear of indoctrination is what catalyzes his turn to reading and writing in Maximum Security; it prompts his education. His self-conception as a “fanatically defiant and alienated individual” like George Jackson or Sam Melville, Gary Gilmore or Carl Panzram, differentiates him from someone like Gerard. Gerard is submissive; so Abbott is openly resistant, even in the worst circumstances, often against his own best interests.

Moreover, while claiming the position of the “fanatically defiant and alienated individual” allows him to resist succumbing to indoctrination, it is a subject position that likely played a role in returning him to prison for life after his brief parole and after he murdered Richard Adan. During the Adan murder trial, Abbott made a curious and damaging decision to reject the terms of his own defence while he was on the stand. Ivan Fisher, Abbott’s attorney, argued that Abbott murdered Adan because of an “extreme emotional disturbance” caused by a lifetime of violence in prison. “His sense of everything came from inside,” Fisher told the jury in
his closing argument. “That’s all his world has ever been” (qtd. in “Jury Starts Deliberating”). But when Fisher asked Abbott to agree that the prison system “broke” him, Abbott—before the media, the victim’s family, lawyers, judge, and jury—suddenly and angrily refused: “‘No,’ replied Abbott, visibly insulted. ‘I don’t go along with that. They made me say something.’” (qtd. in “Abbott Takes the Stand”). In fact, Abbott never fully supported the “extreme emotional disturbance” defence. Originally, until evidence suggested otherwise, Abbott had argued that Adan, too, had possessed a knife in order to claim that he had acted in self-defence. Abbott also angrily refutes the “extreme emotional disturbance” defence in My Return. But his angry rejection of Fisher’s defence while on the stand constituted a particularly confounding decision because adhering to the “extreme emotional disturbance” defence was his only chance of avoiding a life sentence.

I suggest that Abbott challenges the terms of his own defence on the stand because the “extreme emotional disturbance” defence ruptures the “fanatically defiant and alienated individual”—“indoctrinated” prisoner binary that he constructs to articulate a measure of agency for himself in the prison. The “extreme emotional disturbance” defence suggests that he is so conditioned by the prison system that his actions are not his own, but are instead effects of the prison system. For him to admit that he was determined by the prison would be to admit that he was indoctrinated. Abbott seems to act irrationally against his own best interests because he was trying to negotiate the impossible space between accepting that he was rendered “unstable” by the prison system and accepting that he had been indoctrinated by the prison system. Abbott claims he was “sent to prison to be broken,” he writes in Belly (emphasis in original 183). So for him to admit that the prison system “broke” him, as Ivan Fisher suggests, would be to admit that his self—a self created in opposition to indoctrination—was a fiction, and that nothing separated
him from a prisoner like Gerard. Abbott was unwilling to wholly admit that he was indoctrinated, even if such an admission was crucial to his own defence. Demanding that he accept that he was indoctrinated was not simply to threaten his belief system, but rather his sense of self—a self that kept him sane in prison. This was, for Abbott, a very real threat, since he never really managed to leave the prison: life on the outside was still, for Abbott, governed by similar rules as prison, and, of course, he was incarcerated during and after the trial.

Conclusion: From the Big House to Random House

Although Abbott does not see himself as indoctrinated, he nevertheless insists in Belly that he is deeply conditioned by the prison system—even, that he is “a product of prison conditions” (emphasis in original 28). Moreover, his use of the rehabilitation narrative organizes his conditioning into two different subject positions that provide him with a sense of agency, however limited or fleeting, but at no point does he suggest that his self-transformation enables him to claim the ontological qualities that are presumed to underpin citizenship. Instead, he quite explicitly resists the rehabilitation narrative trajectory, refusing to define himself as someone who could live a non-carceral life. However, due to the book’s proximity to the rehabilitation narrative—and, perhaps, due to the understandable desires of those familiar with Abbott’s story to see him live out the rehabilitation narrative’s telos after his release—many people read the book as a “Clef à Roman,” as a sign that his capacity to engage in a literate exchange was commensurate with his capacity to engage in the social exchanges constitutive of the civic community. Jerzy Kosinski, for example, who like Mailer had had a lengthy correspondence with Abbott, claimed that he and others were infatuated with Abbott because Abbott provided them with a classic American story of self-making, a conversion narrative that
writers in particular could relate to because it validated their oeuvre for its life-changing potential: a conversion “‘from Leavenworth to Random House,’” as Kosinski succinctly put it (qtd. in Dearborn 360).

Because the Adan murder signified Abbott’s failure to fit into the very narrative that his book repeatedly questioned—that his education provided him with the psychological and social tools to make the transition from the Big House to Random House—he was largely castigated in the media, defined as inherently violent. Defining Abbott as inherently violent validated a hard-line conservative position on crime that was swiftly gaining prominence at the beginning of the 1980s, which was predicated on an image of prisoners as “animalistic and senseless,” as having “warped personalities”—an image in stark contrast to earlier years where prisoners garnered a degree of sympathy in American popular culture (Sloop 142). Characterizing prisoners as inherently violent provided the ideological grist for retributive prison policies and “tough-on-crime” sentencing that dramatically increased prison populations across the country.

Michiko Kakutani’s September, 1981 article for The New York Times, which is the most high-profile (and most cited) piece of journalism about the Abbott case, usefully stages how misidentifying Abbott according to the rehabilitation narrative provides the conditions for the emergence of a conservative discourse that may have otherwise been difficult to validate. Kakutani writes,

A myth was at work … It was the wishful impulse to see Jack Abbott’s life as a story not just of crime and punishment, but of crime and punishment and redemption; and it was the fervently held belief that talent redeems, that art confers respectability, that the act of writing can somehow transform a violent man into a philosopher of violence. (B1)
Kakutani’s article is telling because it stages how applying the rehabilitation narrative to Abbott—the “myth” that Abbott could be “redeem[ed]” through “art” or “writing”—legitimizes a conservative discourse in the public imaginary: that Abbott was, quite simply, a “violent man.” Such a position conveniently narrows Abbott’s violence to individual responsibility, effacing the role of the prison system (and, in many ways, the complicity of American society) in providing the conditions for Abbott’s violent behaviour.

Ultimately, as Philip Jenkins writes in Decade of Nightmares: The End of the Sixties and the Making of Eighties America (2006), “[m]edia response to the [Abbott] case stressed…the irredeemable evil of the killer, the near-impossibility of rehabilitation, and the gullibility of Abbott’s admirers” (239), which reinforced “conservative policies” that “indicate[d] the bankruptcy of liberalism” (238). Paradoxically, In the Belly of the Beast came to justify the argument that prisoners required more not less prison—“retributive” rather than “rehabilitative” prison policies. The reception of Abbott’s autobiography consequently participated in a discursive formation that enabled the biopolitical reorganization of the American carceral landscape as sentences were lengthened, parole was largely eliminated, more prisons were built, increasingly isolation was used as a control-mechanism (manifested most obviously in the development of so-called “super-max” prisons), and prison education programs were largely eliminated.

Thus, (mis)reading In the Belly of the Beast as a rehabilitation narrative not only reflected but affected American cultural, political, and penal formations, allowing for the emergence of what has come to be called “the prison-industrial complex.” The reception of In the Belly of the Beast indicates the potential consequences of the rhetorical trope that education can “change a
life,” revealing instead the degree to which reading practices that privilege education as transformative can re-entrench the law-and-order discourses they presumably aim to challenge.
Chapter 4: “Bad Motherfucker”: Lying, Badmen, and Breaking the Rules of Genre in *The Autobiography of James Carr*

“I know that the one writing it would only have to take words and fling them onto paper, the forbidden and accused words, the bloody words, the words spit out in a lather, discharged with sperm, the slandered, reprobate words, the unwritten words—like the ultimate name of God—the dangerous, padlocked words, the words that don’t belong in the dictionary, because if they were written there, complete and not maimed by ellipses, they would say too quickly the suffocating misery of a solitude that is not accepted . . . .”

— Jean Genet, “Introduction to *Soledad Brother*,” 21

In his introduction to George Jackson’s *Soledad Brother*, Jean Genet spends a great deal of time talking about bad language. He writes that the “forbidden and accursed words” that really speak to prison life are “not accepted” outside the prison, in civil society. Genet insists that writing about prison is circumscribed by proscriptions and prescriptions that he represents as a kind of violence done to an already violent language: “any writing that reaches us from this infernal place should reach us as though mutilated, pruned of its overly tumultuous adornments,” he writes (21). For the “bloody words” of the prison to enter into the discourse of civil society they have to be “maimed” and “mutilated,” “pruned” of their brutality and their shocking immediacy.

Because Genet is writing about *Soledad Brother*, which is an epistolary memoir, he is specifically addressing prison life writing. Prison life writing, as Genet suggests, has rules about what kinds of speech, and what kinds of speaking subjects, can enter into official (that is, published) autobiographical discourse. However, the rules of prison life writing can be difficult
to identify because they are frequently tacit or implicit, *de facto* rather than *de jure*. Since the rules of prison life writing are often hard to spot, they are best recognized when broken or transgressed. And so I begin this chapter by exploring how the publication history of *Bad: The Autobiography of James Carr* stages the regulation of “forbidden” words and transgressive speaking subjects. As a result, I identify *Bad* as a book that breaks the rules of prison life writing.

*Bad*, which is an account of James Carr’s life as an L.A. gang member in the 1950s and 1960s, a prisoner in the 1950s, 1960s, and early 1970s, and a Black Panther in the early 1970s, was censored by its publisher. The first edition of *Bad*, which was published in 1975, ran without an International Standard Book Number (ISBN) and was not listed under *Books in Print*, which made it unrecognizable within the centralized systems for identifying all officially published books. (It has since been republished with an ISBN in 2002 by AK Press.) Because *Bad* was without an ISBN or a listing in *Books in Print*, book-ordering agencies had no way of knowing that the book existed, which made it difficult to sell and, obviously, difficult to read. *Bad* was initially a ghost-text: it did not exist on official record.

In the “New Afterword” to the 2002 edition of *Bad*, “BM Blob” of AK Press suggests that the book went unlisted because the California Department of Corrections (CDC) (now called the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation, or CDCR) threatened to sue the publisher, Herman Graf, Associates, Inc., if the book went to press (226). However, I conducted a phone interview with Isaac Cronin on September 15, 2008, and Cronin told me a very different story about the book’s publication history. Cronin, along with Dan Hammer, helped write *Bad*, which is an as-told-to autobiography. James Carr’s stories of prison life were recorded and transcribed by Cronin and Hammer in a series of interviews before Carr was murdered. After Carr’s death, Cronin and Hammer were chiefly responsible for finding and managing
negotiations with a publisher for *Bad*. More so than BM Blob, Cronin speaks from a position of some authority on *Bad*’s troubled early publication. And Cronin maintains that not listing the book was a deliberate decision on the part of the publishers themselves, and certainly was not the result of a disagreement with the CDC.\(^6\) Cronin maintains that at the last minute Herman Graf concluded that being allied with a book that challenged convention in such an aggressive manner would be bad for business. Since Herman Graf had already signed a contract, it was forced to publish the book. However, it managed to successfully avoid officially listing *Bad* as one of its own.

Herman Graf’s subtle policing indicates how prison life writing is bound by rules and regulations that normalize, proscribe, “maim,” “mutilate,” or “prune” narratives of imprisonment before they can enter into the realm of official autobiographical discourse. If Cronin’s theory is correct, the publisher’s reluctance to assign its name to *Bad* was not due to fears that the book was slanderous, libellous, or in any way incriminating. If *Bad* broke rules, they did not rise to the level of juridical intervention that would make the publisher’s contract moot. But Herman Graf censored *Bad* nonetheless, underscoring the degree to which the book pushed the limits of what was sayable in autobiography, and how it broke tacit rules of self-narration in prison life writing.

In “Breaking Rules: The Consequences of Self-Narrative,” Paul John Eakin identifies “three primary transgressions—there may be more—for which self-narrators have been called to account” for contravening or transgressing the implicit or explicit regulations of autobiographical discourse: “(1) misrepresentation of biographical and historical truth; (2) infringement of the right to privacy; and (3) failure to display normative models of personhood” (113-114). Of the three rules that Eakin identifies here, the third—“failure to display normative models of personhood”—is particularly instructive for understanding the possibility of Herman Graf’s
concern that associating its name with Bad could have negative repercussions for the publishing company.

If Herman Graf policed Bad’s publication, I suspect that the publishing company’s anxiety about the book had something to do with James Carr’s failure to conform to the “normative models of personhood” of prison life writing. In particular, Carr does not adhere to the genre’s tacit rules about representations of violence and crime. Prison writers who have committed acts of violence or who have engaged in criminal activity invariably seek to justify (or at least explain) in their autobiographies the violence that they have perpetrated or the crimes that they have committed. Carr, by comparison, describes murdering, raping, and brutalizing men and women inside and outside the prison without justifying his violence. In fact, he resists providing any explanation whatsoever for his crimes.

There is a scene early in Bad that illustrates Carr’s approach to the prison life writing genre. Carr describes how, when he was a boy, he stabbed another boy with a hunting knife and refused to provide the police with an explanation for the attack after he was caught. Carr writes: “They kept trying to discover some kind of motive. . . . I kept saying ‘I don’t know,’ while they kept thinking up possible reasons. It seemed like they were more nervous than I was thinking up new lines of questions” (24). Like Carr’s Bartleby-esque refusal to provide a motive for stabbing the boy, Bad provides no moral, ethical, political, or ideological explanation or justification for Carr’s predatory violence. Instead, Carr boasts about his violent crimes in his autobiography.

While Carr’s boasting clashes with the mores of prison life writing, it does conform to a figure that appears in African American folklore, ballads, blaxploitation films (and later in hip-hop) called the “badman.” In Born in a Mighty Bad Land: The Violent Man in African American Folklore and Fiction (2003), Jerry H. Bryant describes the badman as the “bad nigger” who “was
the white man’s worst dream,” the “out-of-control black man, the surly slacker, the belligerent troublemaker, and occasionally the killer of whites” (2). Bryant isolates two manifestations of the badman, however: what historian Lawrence Levine calls the “moral hard man” and what folklorist Roger D. Abrahams calls the “hard man.” Malcolm X, Eldridge Cleaver, and George Jackson are badman figures, but they constitute “moral hard men” because they fight against white oppression and align themselves with “social action” (3). Moral hard men “revolt mainly against whites within the white system,” writes Bryant (2). Clearly, prison life writing accommodates the figure of the moral hard man. The hard man is a different story.

The “hard man” challenges the white system but he also preys on weaker members of his own community. The hard man, according to Bryant,

was a fierce individualist, a scourge in his own community, introducing disorder and arousing fear, disapproval, and alarm as well as a reluctant admiration. He was known for his viciousness, and his excesses were material for stories around a slave-cabin fire or, later, at the barber shop or pool hall and the springboard for exaggerated tales of boundless priapic feats, triumphs over the devil, incomparable cruelties, and a cool style that young studs sought to emulate. In the black community, this “bad nigger” was the king of the street corner, the terror of the roadside honky-tonk, the superbly self-confident and solitary operator. (3)

The hard man as defined by Bryant is often talked about in prison life writing; rarely, if ever, do prison autobiographers speak or write as hard men without including telling qualifications that make the violent figure of the hard man palatable for a non-prison readership. While prison autobiographers occasionally invoke the hard man, their hard man performances are typically bracketed as politically motivated (thus constituted as moral hard men), represented as
manifestations of selves from the past that no longer have much in common with the book’s author, or explained or rationalized, which contrasts with the hard man’s devil-may-care braggadocio.

Unlike other prison autobiographers, Carr takes the position of the hard man in his autobiography. Because Carr self-defines as a hard man, much of the usual “pruning” that goes into a prison autobiography—like pruning the autobiographer’s involvement in violence—is absent in *Bad*. Consequently, Carr’s self-narration as a hard man contravenes acceptable models of personhood and uses some of the “reprobate,” “padlocked,” censored words, sentences, and stories that Genet suggests adequately represent the brutality of prison life—and presumably the brutality of some of the prison’s inhabitants. Claiming this subject position is certainly problematic. For example, the hard man’s proximity to stereotypes of African American criminality makes him a particularly troubling speaking subject. However, by speaking as a hard man, Carr brings into autobiographical discourse an aspect of the imaginative lives of African American prisoners—indeed, most prisoners—that is largely unrepresented in prison life writing.

As I have shown throughout this dissertation, prisoners tell stories about rehabilitation, conversion, social uplift, or political responsibility. But, as *Bad* illustrates, prisoners also tell tales of hard men who, like Carr, are “bad motherfucker[s]” “right from the start” (22). These tales are often disturbing and problematic, as *Bad* demonstrates. But they represent prison life from a unique position, particularly in autobiographical discourse.

In this chapter, I analyze how Carr employs the two manifestations of the badman—the moral hard man and the hard man—in his autobiography. First, I explore how and why Carr uses, but eventually rejects, the moral hard man as a strategy for self-definition. Carr describes a turning point in his life where he undergoes a self-education in prison, essentially reproducing
the prison-as-college trope that I have suggested is central to the rehabilitation narrative. He uses his education to change from a predatory, violent young gang member and prisoner into a member of the Black Panther Party, essentially using the rehabilitation narrative in ways similar to moral hard men like Malcolm X and George Jackson. He redefines the terms of rehabilitation so as to provide him with the materials and the space to convert from a criminal to a revolutionary. But Carr rejects this figure in the course of the narrative, choosing instead to self-define in terms of the hard man, whose violence makes him a taboo figure in prison life writing.

Second, I consider how Carr brings the hard man into prison life writing, what such a subject position reveals about prison life that is otherwise excluded from autobiography, and why engaging with such a troubling, problematic, and oftentimes disturbing voice is worthwhile, even ethically important. I argue that Carr brings the hard man into autobiographical discourse by hybridizing autobiography with a genre that circulates in American prisons called “lying.” Lying has very different rules than autobiography and the hard man is one of the central figures, if not the central figure of the genre. Bad thus forms what Caren Kaplan calls an “out-law genre” because it “breaks many of the elite literature’s laws” (120) by “mixing two conventionally ‘unmixable’ elements” (119). Although Kaplan suggests that out-law genres blend “autobiography criticism and autobiography itself,” I suggest that Carr’s mixture of lying, an oral storytelling mode found in American prisons in the 1960s and 1970s, with autobiography, a written storytelling mode that is often associated with “high” cultural formations, likewise breaks rules of self-narration and disturbs the common-sense of autobiographical discourse and prison life writing (119). While lying brings the hard man into autobiographical discourse, lying also suggests how to engage with this disturbing figure and how to read a book like Bad. Lying foregrounds complicity as a governing ethic for engagements between the imprisoned and non-
imprisoned, which not only suggests how to read Bad and a hard man like Carr, but also provides a new model for critical analyses of the prison life writing genre.

The Moral Hard Man and the Rehabilitation Narrative

Biographical details about James Carr paint a picture of a man who lived up to his badman image. Like many badmen who die tragic and violent deaths, Carr too was assassinated. Several days after the first draft of Bad was completed, he was gunned down outside his home on April 6th, 1972. Before his death, Carr was rumoured to have been involved in several high-profile murders, kidnappings, and prison escape attempts related to his involvement with the Black Panther Party (BPP) and his close relationship with prison writer, author, and activist George Jackson. For example, in the early 1970s, police and some BPP members suspected Carr of murdering a high-ranking Panther named Fred Bennett at a remote cabin in California’s Santa Cruz Mountains after Carr was paroled. Carr was also suspected of providing support for two infamous prison escape attempts that occurred only weeks apart in 1971. He purportedly helped George Jackson’s younger brother, Jonathan, plan an attack on the Marin County courthouse on August 7, 1971 to free three prisoners who were on trial that day: James McClain, William Christmas, and Ruchell Magee. The plan failed, and Jonathan Jackson, the three prisoners, and a hostage were killed in a shootout with police. Carr was also alleged to have been involved in planning or providing support for George Jackson’s failed prison break at San Quentin on August 21, 1971, which resulted in the deaths of six people, including Jackson, who was shot in the head by a guard sharpshooter. What biographical details exist about Carr not only foreground his rumoured involvement in hard-man brutality, but they also implicate him in some
of the most traumatic acts of violence in the histories of the radical Left, the Black Panther Party, and the prison resistance movement.

Accounts of James Carr are also suggestive of the badman’s function as an object of desire whose masculine physicality, sexual prowess, and confidence make him, as Roger D. Abrahams says of the archetypal badman Stagolee, “the epitome of virility, of manliness on display” (qtd. in Bryant 92). Paul Liberatore, for example, in The Road to Hell: The True Story of George Jackson, Stephen Bingham, and the San Quentin Massacre (1996), fetishizes Carr’s body, writing that Carr “pumped iron on the yard until his biceps resembled coiled pythons” (17). For Liberatore, who is prone to sensationalist exaggeration in his muckraking, Carr’s arms are “pythons”—exotic, reptilian, and phallic. Likewise, in his autobiography and story of the Black Panther Party, This Side of Glory, ex-Panther leader David Hilliard draws a brief sketch of Carr that underscores, even venerates Carr’s physicality, toughness, and cool:

A bodybuilder—Jackal Dog’s his nickname—Carr belongs to a circle of longtime, radicalized prisoners; the group’s leader is George Jackson, an inmate renowned in the California jails for his discipline and strength, a master of thought and deed, a karate expert and communist whose collection of letters entitled Soledad Brother is soon going to be published . . . [Carr is a] mix of brains and brawn. He’s an impressive example [of Jackson’s “warrior”-prisoner]. Eldridg[e] [Cleaver’s] prison cadre are brave but lack both intellectual and political discipline. Jackal Dog’s different. George has taught him dialectics, coached him not to overreact but to cultivate patience and gauge the right time to strike. There’s no discernible jackanape tendency in him. (295-296)
In describing Carr as “superbly self-confident” and as someone who exhibits a “cool style that young studs” would want to emulate, Hilliard represents Carr in terms befitting Bryant’s gloss of the hard badman. Yet, Hilliard describes Carr in political terms that are more befitting of the moral hard man than the hard man. Hilliard defines Carr as intellectually and politically disciplined, and a friend of one of the era’s foremost moral hard men, George Jackson, rather than someone who, like the hard man, introduces “disorder” and preys on his own community.69

Indeed, there is a tension in the text between Carr’s moral hard man and his hard man persona. On the one hand, Carr defines himself as a violent predator. On the other, Carr defines himself as a moral hard man like Jackson—at least for a time—thus conforming to Hilliard’s portrait of him in This Side of Glory. Although Carr performs the role of the penitent criminal in order to be paroled from prison, like Jackson he makes use of the materials, space, and time that are provided by the prison authorities in order to convert his “black criminal mentality into a black revolutionary mentality” (Soledad Brother 40). Most prison autobiographies that describe an autobiographer’s conversion to a revolutionary cause—including Soul on Ice, The Autobiography of Malcolm X, and Soledad Brother—suggest that the (hard man) criminality or violence of their past has been supplanted by more meaningful, and also more socially acceptable, acts of (moral hard man) resistance. Even Jackson, who argues that the “black criminal mentality” and the “black revolutionary mentality” are to some degree compatible, indicates that criminality is supplanted by a revolutionary ideology in his own life-narrative. But Carr resists suggesting that his turn to a revolutionary ideology domesticates, or at least decriminalizes, the violent, predatory gang-member and prisoner that he was before his revolutionary conversion.
At first, *Bad* seems to follow a familiar narrative trajectory from a life of crime to prison to revolution that had perhaps become commonplace by the mid-1970s when the book was published. Much like the story of George Jackson, for example, *Bad* tracks how Carr’s impulsive rebelliousness as a young man lands him in interlocking and ever-increasing forms of incarceration, from a boys’ home, to juvenile camps, to prisons like San Quentin. For the most part, he thrives on the violence of the prison. But after a meeting with a member of the Adult Authority (California’s title for the parole board) nicknamed “Mad Dog” Madden, Carr realizes that he has to appear to be rehabilitated in the manner prescribed by the prison administration; otherwise, because of his “five-to-life” indeterminate sentence (121), he “was never getting out” (Carr 165). So, after years of open resistance to the prison system and facing the potential of life in prison, Carr performs the requisite role of “guilt and repentance” (Carr 162). Madden tells Carr: “If you wanna talk about streets [outside prison], you’ll go to school, you’ll take group counselling, you’ll get a trade, you won’t get any more one-fifteens [infractions]” (165). School, trade-school, and counselling are the cornerstones of the rehabilitative ideal. But in order for Carr to be granted parole, he has to do more than involve himself with the rehabilitative ideal’s educational or therapeutic models. At the time, penologists and prison officials hailed the prison as a “people-changing” institution (Hazelrigg 393). So Carr has to become, or seem to become, a changed person.

In order to show that he has changed, Carr learns to perform the rehabilitation narrative as it is set out by Madden: “In figuring out my little-good-boy routine I used Mad Dog Madden’s criteria as my chart. I’d done everything that he said was necessary to be eligible for parole” (Carr 177). Carr enrols in school, he learns a trade, and he visits the prison counsellor. By using a set of criteria as a “chart” and by representing his identity as a “routine,” Carr underscores how
rehabilitation, during the era of the rehabilitative ideal, was merely a performance for many prisoners. For example, another California prisoner named Malcolm Braly describes how prisoners obsessively work on their scripts (to continue the theatrical metaphor) so as to present the most successful performances of self before the Adult Authority:

There was nothing that interested us more and we logged years trying to thrash out a basis on which to predict the Adult Authority. This was our great debate.

We knew which programs to try to associate ourselves with and we knew which ploys were now exhausted. We could gauge public pressure and the changing winds of penal philosophy. . . . (252)

Like Braly and his fellow-prisoners, Carr’s life after his initial meeting with Madden takes on a heightened performativity as he tries to give the impression that he is taking clear (and prescribed) steps toward a sanctioned form of self-transformation.

The success of Carr’s performance is ultimately gauged by the Adult Authority, which determines success or failure based largely on the discursive subject it interprets in his file. (“Only the file could be trusted,” writes Braly of his own experiences with the Adult Authority (360).) As I suggest in my introduction, where I discuss two textual precursors of the prison file, the “conduct ledger” and the “passbook,” the prison file is a complicated site of auto/biographical production. As well as being a collective biography written by numerous prison officials about a particular prisoner, it is also, as Carr and Braly indicate, strangely autobiographical as well, since the prisoner associates himself with specific programs and activities in order to produce a discursive self in his file. The prisoner is in a very real way life writing. In a sense, too, this file is also a biography of an imagined rehabilitated subject, as prison officials and the prisoner work in tandem to produce traces of this subject in institutional
discourse. As Carr and Braly show, however, these autobiographical or biographical acts do not necessarily correspond to the men who perform them so much as represent the disciplinary conditions that make these performances necessary.

Carr’s performance of the rehabilitation narrative eventually succeeds: “Well, Mr. Carr,” says Gordon, a member of the Adult Authority at Carr’s parole hearing, “you look good. Look like a different person. We’re going to let you go, and we don’t expect to hear from you again” (Carr 189). Gordon’s rhetoric is interesting because it signposts the pedigree of the rehabilitation narrative. He approves Carr’s parole request because he sees Carr as “a different person,” deploying the transformative vocabulary of conversion, and signifying that the object of prison rehabilitation is the “person” before them and not simply that person’s criminalized behaviour.

While Carr’s performance seems to suggest that he has been determined by the prison and its discourse, he is by no means a passive object of the prison’s disciplinary, discursive, and narrative practices. In fact, it is precisely through this disciplinary apparatus that Carr articulates an alternative conversion that produces a very different subject from the “different person” that Gordon sees in Carr’s performance before the Adult Authority. Like Jackson, Carr uses rehabilitative “language” but he reconfigures, or corrupts, its meaning, providing himself with an alternative form of self-definition that accords with Jackson’s conversion from criminal to revolutionary. Carr produces himself as a rehabilitated subject because he has no other alternative if he wants to be released; but his “little-good-boy routine” provides him with the space, time, and materials for an alternate form of self-transformation. He does what Madden and other prison administrators tell him to do: he works and he gets an education. He improves his reading and he teaches himself “to concentrate and remember”—skills he finds difficult because he never went to school but “spent most of [his] life in the pen” (163). By participating
in the prison’s vocational and educational programs, and by noticeably performing his rehabilitation (pursuing long hours of solitary study, for example), Carr finds that the prison authorities generally leave him alone. “I was the big strong black dude who did a lot of cell time,” he writes. “That’s what the guards and cons thought, and that’s the way I wanted it” (164). By performing the role of the solitary “big strong black dude” whose time is consumed by reading and writing, he invites “guards and cons” to interpret his performance as a sign that he is participating in the prison’s rehabilitation program.

However, Carr’s performance as the solitary, studious prisoner acts as an envelope in which he has a pocket of agency, where he can engage in very different self-definitional strategies than those prescribed by the prison system. What he reads are not, for example, the textbooks prescribed in CMC-East’s education classes that are sanctioned by the prison administrators. After reading “through the entire philosophy section in the prison library,” he reads Marx and the writings of other “revolutionaries” like Lenin, Mao, and Fanon (168). These readings do not change Carr’s self-conception in a way that accords with the expectations of the prison administration and the parole board, despite the fact that his long hours of study seem to suggest that he is following their prescribed course of rehabilitation. Instead, his readings change how he understands his own violence, his criminality, and his rebelliousness: “The most important thing I learned was that people had always been rebelling against authority. . . . It had never occurred to me before that we were anything but freaks. I began to feel like I was in good company acting like a motherfucker” (164). Carr uses the space, time, and materials of the prison to further an alternative education that changes him into a revolutionary, but he also retains rather than rejects his hard man persona (“acting like a motherfucker”).
Like Jackson, Carr “never conceives of criminality as a state from which he needs to undergo any kind of conversion” (Conniff 153-154). Instead, his self-transformation entails a tactical reconfiguration of the trickster-like, subversive, but chaotic “disorder” of the badman. Before his self-transformation, his “rebellion was pure: unthinking, arbitrary, devilish,” he writes (190). After his self-transformation, through his use of the prison system’s rehabilitation paradigm (its prescribed study, its emphasis on education and reading), he provides this rebellious behaviour with political direction.

What Carr describes is a kind of political evolution that accords with Hilliard’s portrait of him as a moral hard man. But after his release from prison on parole, Carr finds flaws in the moral hard man personae of George Jackson or the male members of the Black Panther Party. Carr writes that he “came charging out [of prison] in 1970 expecting to find a Red Army ready for revolutionary war” and found instead “a handful of red criminals with the same worldview [he]’d had as a poolhall hustler, reinforced with heavy doses of ideology and drugs” (193). “I sustained my illusions for nine months more,” writes Carr. “I had doubts, but I swallowed them down with heavier doses of white powder and red book” (193). After being reincarcerated for fighting at one of George Jackson’s hearings, Carr reassesses his “past activity” as a revolutionary aligned with groups like the Black Panthers and finds “it sorely lacking.” He argues that the radicalized Left invite young black men to define themselves in militant terms that are illusory, dangerous, and self-defeating. His revolutionary activities were “reactionary in that they were merely direct responses to crimes committed by the State,” he writes. “The terms, the terrain, and the weapons of my past struggles had all been dictated by my enemy” (195). To borrow a term from Huey Newton, Carr saw the battle that Jackson, the Panthers, and other militant groups waged with the state as “revolutionary suicide.”
Along with his disillusionment with Jackson and the Panthers, Carr is also disillusioned with the moral hard man personae that these figures used and represented. Carr remains political, but *Bad* charts unfamiliar political and autobiographical territory because the book explicitly resists “proving that [Carr] was an innocent victim of social injustice” like other black revolutionaries, including Jackson (Hammer 13). Rather than pursue the familiar territory of the revolutionary, *Bad* privileges Carr’s criminality, his badness. However, his rejection of the moral hard man drastically limits how he can speak about his violent, criminal, and carceral past. Carr’s solution, as I have suggested, is to hybridize autobiography with a genre that circulates in the prison called “lying.”

**The Hard Man and “Lying”**

In *Race and Masculinity in Contemporary American Prison Narratives*, Auli Ek writes: “Since the experience of being incarcerated is . . . marginal in that it is unknown to most readers, autobiographers tend to teach us how to read this experience by educating us about prison discourse and culture” (57). Carr provides just such a pedagogical moment when he describes “lying”:

> I was lying back on my bed in there [the prison Adjustment Center—a form of solitary confinement] wondering what the cons did to pass the time, when a couple of dudes started calling, “Smitty, Smitty, tell us a lie.” They were answered by a black dude with a silkysmooth voice, the kind they put on a big-town jazz station. Smitty began a monologue about fucking a chick. . . . Smitty could *lie*.  

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“Smitty, we know you’re lying! Don’t just sit there and lie like that.” The dudes encouraged him by using a little negative psychology on him. . . . He described each thrust, each move. By the time he was ready, I was rooting for him to come, along with everyone else. When he did, I damned near joined him. It was that real.

Every night Smitty would get called on and lie. One night it would be Iwo Jima and Japs, the next about the biggest coke deal in history. . . . The dude had imagination. He might have made it big on the stage if he’d ever made it back to the streets. (89-90)

By describing lying as a storytelling practice in prison, Carr teaches Dan Hammer and Isaac Cronin how to receive and help produce his story. In his introduction to *Bad*, Hammer discusses how the three men used lying as a way to produce the taped interviews that would later be shaped by Hammer and Cronin into Carr’s memoir:

Isaac and I would move Jimmy along the way other cons used to inspire the “liars,” the cons who helped everyone pass the time by weaving incredible tales. The more fantastic the story, the more the listeners ride the storyteller with “Hey, Champ, that’s a loada shit,” which makes the raconteur go even further into it. (16)

Although this dialogic process is latent in the body of Carr’s narrative (which I address in my conclusion, along with the role of his interlocutors in producing *Bad*), lying brings Carr’s story into discourse: lying among the three men is recorded on the tapes before the tapes are transcribed into an edited written text that eventually becomes the published memoir. As a result, the generic borders of Carr’s autobiography are reshaped according to a storytelling mode that circulates in prison. As its name suggests, lying allows for transgressive speech acts (or what
Eakin calls the “misrepresentation of biographical and historical truth”). It also provides discursive space for rule-breaking “models of personhood.” Lying even reconfigures the relationship between speaker and listener in the as-told-to autobiography paradigm, which I will address in the conclusion to this chapter.

Lying emerges out of a rhetorical tradition beyond the prison, in wider African American “speech communities” that have historically reconfigured biographical and historical truth in storytelling to subvert a dominant and threatening white culture, to share sensitive information, or to articulate registers of truth that exceed factual records (Gates, Jr. xviii). For example, Zora Neale Hurston describes in her autobiography, *Dust Tracks on a Road* (1942), how men in her rural hometown would conduct “lying sessions”: competitive storytelling that blended community stories with individual memory, rumour, and cultural folklore (47). The “lying sessions” were social texts that provided meaning to a localized community in ways that factual texts could not. Lying sessions had an element of subversion to them as well: something that could be difficult, problematic, or dangerous to mention publicly was brought into discourse through its subterfugal blending with myth, cultural history, rumour, the artifice of the storyteller, and the participation of the listeners, who “strai[n] against each other” in telling their stories (47).

Lying and lying sessions are forms of “signifyin(g),” an African American rhetorical tactic that “allows the speaker to argue indirectly (through innuendo, humor or riddles) . . . to undermine and to unbalance a master discourse” (Fuss 84). Like lying, signifyin(g) resists master discourses not through open struggle but through a tactic like corruption, by using and reshaping a dominant vocabulary. Moreover, the meaning of signifyin(g) is often opaque to those outside the specific speech community in which the story is told and to which the story often
refers. As such it is often presumed to be meaningless or unimportant wordplay by outsiders. H. Rap Brown’s description of signifyin(g) registers the genre’s feigned insignificance: “I used to hang out in the bars just to hear the old men ‘talking shit’” (208). But “talking shit,” which may suggest wasteful or unimportant speech, a kind of language-detritus, has great individual, cultural, and social importance. Brown’s old men, the men in Hurston’s community, and prisoners like Smitty employ storytelling modes that are forms of linguistic subterfuge, or covert and resistant “private transcripts” whose meaning is indiscernible to those who are not members of the group or speech community. 75 These storytellers also use modes of untruth—“lies,” “talking shit,” and “lying sessions”—as ways of telling truths that may not be accessible within traditional or dominant modes of speech. Further, their method often uses the vocabulary of a dominant linguistic system, destabilizing the dominant vocabulary by deploying it in radically altered fashion (like braiding it with other generic modes, for example, as Carr does with lying and autobiography).

Storytelling practices that blend fact with fiction, myth with history and biography, are certainly useful in prison or on parole, where stories, particularly autobiographical stories about past criminal activity, can have legal (and other) consequences for an imprisoned or paroled storyteller. Framing Bad within lying may have provided Carr with the discursive space to talk about crimes that he might not have shared in genres that make less ambiguous truth-claims. However, Bad does not blur the boundaries of truth in order to hide Carr’s crimes. Instead, as I have suggested, the book adamantly asserts Carr’s criminality, constituting a radically different relationship to discourses of truth and power than has been suggested in studies of autobiography and prison life writing.
Most analyses of prison life writing argue that autobiography qualifies or contests how the discourses of the law and the prison have constituted prison writers as criminals. For example, Ioan Davies argues in *Writers in Prison* that prisoners’ autobiographical writings are “counter-texts” because they can provide the prisoner or ex-prisoner with an alternative forum for truth-telling than that of the courtroom. In this formulation, autobiography becomes what Leigh Gilmore calls an “alternative hearing” (145). Or, as Deena Rymhs writes, autobiography allows prisoners and ex-prisoners “to respond to the law’s authority over their public and personal identities”: “In managing their texts in such a way, these writers manoeuvre around some of the constraints that the law places on self-representation” (14). Carr, though, does not “manoeuvre around” the “constraints that the law places on self-representation” so much as use them to articulate subversive forms of self-representation. Rather than contest the subject position “criminal” ascribed to him by the law, the police, and the prison, Carr embodies it, uses it, expands and aggrandizes its signifying power.

*Bad* exaggerates rather than hides, qualifies, or contests Carr’s criminality because the book adheres to the generic rules of lying, which provide space for a different relationship to criminality than what is commonly available in prison life writing. To understand the rules of lying, I turn to a form of signifyin(g) called the “toast.” Jerry H. Bryant describes the toast as “a narrative poem, usually cast in a sort of pre-rap rhythm, designed for oral delivery by a single performer to an informal or casual audience of other street people, usually young men” (89). Toasts, which are often called lies, were important textual formations in American prisons in the 1960s and 1970s when Carr was imprisoned. In fact, Carr’s description of lying seems to be a prose-variant of the toast. Unlike prison life writing, the toast boasts about the speaker’s involvement in criminal activity and exaggerates his capacity for violence and ruthless brutality.
Unlike prison life writers, toast storytellers do not only talk about hard man, they talk as hard men, who are central figures of the genre. By reconfiguring his as-told-to autobiography in terms of lying, a prose-form of toasting, Carr too can talk as a hard man, and articulate aspects of prison life otherwise excluded from the prison life writing genre.

Consider, for example, how Carr’s descriptions of rape resonate with the lying/toasting genre and accord with stories of the classic hard man, Stagolee. Otherwise known as Stagger Lee, Stackolee, Stackalee, etc., Stagolee is the archetypal badman, first emerging in African American postbellum badman ballads, which were precursors to the toast. Toasts that narrate variations on the old Stagolee story follow plot lines that are similar to their ballad predecessors: Stagolee is thrown out of his house by his wife; he wades through mud to a local bar called “the Bucket of Blood”; in a fit of fury he murders the bartender, has rough sex—in some cases forced sex—with a prostitute, and shoots dead an adversary named Billy Lyon (who is also called Billy Lions, Billy Dilly, Ben Lee, Benny Long, etc.). Some versions of the toast end with Billy’s death (Wepman et al. 135-136), while other versions find Stagolee before a judge, charged with Billy Lyon’s murder (Jackson 51-52), and one version even concludes with Stagolee in hell after he is murdered by Billy’s mother, fighting the devil and having sex with the devil’s minions (Jackson 54-55).

Violent misogyny and rape play central roles in the poetics of badman figures like Stagolee, providing a generic context for Carr’s rape stories. In one version of Stagolee (here called Stackolee), for example, “Stack” has violent, forced sex with a prostitute after murdering the Bucket of Blood’s bartender: “Now me and this broad we started to tussle/ and I drove twelve inches a dick through her ass before she could move a muscle” (Jackson 47). In another version, when Stagolee is in hell, he rapes a woman “bent over shovelin’ coal” (qtd. in Jackson
Stagolee’s violent sexuality and misogyny are the norm in toasts, where badmen define their masculinity against and through the bodies of women. Jerry H. Bryant writes that sex for the toast badman “is an empty erotic pleasure.” “The point is to establish dominance,” writes Bryant, “to overwhelm, to display a total lack of sensitivity or affection. As in the old badman ballads, the penis is employed as a weapon. . . .” Bryant concludes that the “satisfaction found in blasting away with guns is echoed in the pleasure taken in ramming penises up the vaginas and rectums of the ‘ho’s’ [sic]” (91). In the badman toasts, sex is bereft of desire and is usually an expression of power, dominance, and control.

Similarly, throughout Bad, sexuality is an extension of other expressions of violence and domination in Carr’s phallocratic street and prison life. For example, Carr regularly boasts about his involvement in gang-rapes—described as “running a train”—that always take the most vulnerable women as objects of exchange in a masculine economy that privileges men who can arrange a rape for their friends. Early in the narrative, Carr describes gang-rape in a street gang called The Farmers. Their strategy involves finding some “sharp-looking chick” at a party and convincing her to leave with one of the gang members, ostensibly to “go to the store”:

When she got outside and into one of the Buicks, the next thing she knew she was all the way over in hell—in the middle of Watts with a squad of Buicks behind her. We’d take her down to our clubhouse and strip her down; then we’d all fuck her; as many as twenty guys in a train. (37-38)

In Makes Me Wanna Holler: A Young Black Man in America (1995), particularly his chapter called “Train,” Nathan McCall describes the dynamic of the gang-rape by relating his involvement in and witnessing of gang-rape in the small, predominantly African American community called Cavalier Manor in Portsmouth, Virginia, where he grew up:
Different groups of guys set up their own trains. Although everybody knew it could lead to trouble with the law, I think few guys thought of it as rape. It was viewed as a social thing among hanging partners, like passing a joint. The dude who set up the train got pats on the back. He was considered a real player whose rap game was strong. (44)

According to McCall, then, “running a train” was understood by its participants as a form of homosocial bonding (“a social thing among hanging partners”), which affirmed alliances between men and staged violent performances of masculinity over and through the bodies of young black women—women who are violently effaced in the homosocial exchange. As McCall indicates, rape was one way to define oneself as “a real player whose rap game was strong,” much as violent misogyny reinforces the badman’s masculine toughness.  

However, while McCall’s autobiography psychologises gang-rape in his community and explains how he was caught up in behaviour that he eventually rejects in the course of his narrative, Carr never defines rape as something worthy of regret, registering the degree to which his use of lying stretches the rules of autobiographical discourse. Carr frames gang-rape as part of the “crazy” “routine” of street life, illustrating his point by comparing gang-rape with a slapstick story about stealing cakes from a bakery (38). _Bad_ thus flattens otherwise horrifying experiences of sexual violence into an almost ethics-free discourse that makes little distinction between rape and petty theft.

As McCall demonstrates, prison life writing makes room for discussions of heterosexual rape (although descriptions of sexual violence are highly regulated in autobiographical discourse);  

79 by contrast, there is no space within the genre of prison life writing for autobiographers to describe their involvement in same-sex rape or prison rape. Auli Ek argues
that while some prisoners’ autobiographies are told from the position of the rape victim (see T.J. Parsell’s *Fish*, for example), most describe prison rape from the position of the “disinterested observer,” but none describes rape in prison from the position of the perpetrator, despite the overwhelming number of rapes that occur in American prisons (66). Ek’s observation that prison rape is talked about in prison life writing but never from the position of the rapist suggests that the prison rapist is a proscribed “model of personhood” in autobiography.

Where the prison life writing genre keeps the prison rapist at the margins of discourse because his violence is taboo, the genres of lying and toasting enable the prison rapist to be a speaking subject because they frame same-sex rape according to very different ethical boundaries, defining male rape exclusively as a sign of masculine power. For example, in another version of Stagolee, this time recited in 1967 by “Big Stick,” an African American prisoner at New York’s Auburn Prison, Stagolee rapes his adversary, Billy Dilly. First he threatens to “fuck Billy Dilly in his / motherfucking ass” if he encounters him. Then, when Stagolee is finally confronted by Billy, Stagolee’s threat of rape is actualized and ends in murder. Stagolee tells Billy,

“... you’d better get down on
your knees and slobber my head,
‘Cause if you don’t, you’re sure to be dead.”

Billy Dilly dropped down and slobbered on his head,

But Stag filled him full of lead. (qtd. in Wepman et al. 137)

Stagolee’s sexual violence in this version of the poem is directed at another man, bearing the traces of the sexually homogeneous carceral space in which the toast was recited. The sex of the rape victim in this Stagolee toast is of little significance because sexuality in the hard man’s
world is bereft of desire and only serves to demonstrate and enhance the potency of the hard man rapist.

By framing his autobiography in terms of lying, Carr is able to break prison life writing’s proscriptions on discussing male-on-male sexual violence and identifying oneself as a prison rapist, for he defines himself as a hard man like Stagolee. Carr describes how he and his gang repeatedly rape a new prisoner (“a kid”) named Abernathy, whose victimhood is representative of the other victims of sexual violence in the book and in prisons when Carr was incarcerated. After being gang-raped in the shower, Abernathy has a psychological breakdown. He “never came out of his cell again, and gradually went out of his head. He never saw a soul. . . . Pretty soon he was shitting on the floor and pissing in his pants. The shrink examined him and had him shipped off to Atascadero [State Hospital]” (64). In this instance, Abernathy is a figure of some pathos but, once again, Carr never expresses regret for his violence. Carr’s descriptions of rape also follow the narratological format of lying as a genre in their carnivalesque treatment of sexual violence, as is conveyed in the brutal but jocular terms used by Carr to narrate his actions. Thus, Carr frames gang-raping a “cute young kid” as a sadistic, humorous anecdote, for example, where the punch-line is that Carr and the other two assailants are caught because they all contracted the same venereal disease as a result of the attack (122). Likewise, Carr boasts about gang-raping a “cute white kid” with a group of young African American men at a prison camp near Yosemite. He describes raping the white kid as though it were a prank, and follows it with a putatively comedic police chase through the woods, where Carr and the other rapists run amok “like Keystone Kops” (57). Lying’s violent, sadistic, but bawdy humour provides a framework for Carr to speak about raping men because the genre’s humour resists acknowledging the pain of the victim, focusing instead on the priapic exploits of the rapist.
Carr’s use of the adverb “cute” to modify “young kid” and “white kid” signposts how his narrative deviates from the lying/toasting genre by defining the hard man’s homosexuality in terms of desire and not simply as an expression of power and dominance. In fact, throughout the autobiography Carr describes desiring young men that he calls “homos.” When he first arrives at CMC-East, for example, Carr sees “a procession of beautiful-looking boys [that] hurried across the yard and filed by me as if I was a judge in some fantastic beauty contest.” He ogles their “tight short-shorts, teased hair, make-up, perfume” and “get[s] right into the swing of things, introducing [him]self and handing out compliments” (161). Although Carr’s interest in men radically breaks with the hard man’s sexual code and with conventional representations of African American masculinity in the 1960s and 1970s, the autobiography also reinscribes homophobic, patriarchal, and misogynistic mores at the same time. Carr insists that the “homos” are to be referred to as “she,” partially effacing his homosexual desire by framing it in heterosexual terms (161). While the men that he desires occupy a liminal space between masculinity and femininity, their gender roles reproduce and exaggerate the subordination of women in American society, normalizing imbalances in male-female power relations by reproducing them in the prison. Finally, befitting his hard man image, Carr always represents sex with men as forced sex—sex that might involve desire but that is ultimately brutal domination.

Carr’s hard man persona is undoubtedly problematic. Beyond his brutal misogyny and predatory violence, his frank descriptions of prison rape potentially reify the stereotype of the “black beast rapist,” which was at one time held up in the Southern states as a justification for lynching black men (Rhodes 33). James Baldwin, discussing Richard Wright’s Bigger Thomas, calls this figure “that fantasy Americans hold in their minds when they speak of the Negro; that fantastic and fearful image which we have lived with since the first slave fell beneath the lash.”
This “fearful image” of the violent African American male has significant cultural currency in representations of African American prisoners. As Sloop demonstrates, one of the dominant images of African American prisoners during the period from 1969 to 1975—when Carr was imprisoned and when Bad was published—was of a nihilistically violent man:

[H]e is violent for the sake of violence alone. This prisoner is a rapist, a liar, a spoiler of white youth. Rather than struggling against a racist culture in order to preserve his heritage, he is represented as following his nature, behaving in ways that defy transformation and thus demand restraint. (16)

Historically, the stereotype of the violent black male has been crucial to sustaining different modes of “restraint” on black bodies. “Free blacks were often characterized as degraded, vicious, and depraved, supporting the rationale that blacks must be contained within the institution of slavery,” writes Jane Rhodes in Framing the Black Panthers: The Spectacular Rise of a Black Power Icon (2007) (32). Likewise, Dorothy E. Roberts, arguing that legal decisions entrench and make use of racist stereotypes of black men, writes that the “stereotype of the aggressive, ‘macho’ Black male legitimates the massive incarceration of young Black men” (qtd. in Levit 94). It is not surprising, then, that most “African American authors ‘vigilantly’ resist the traditional representation of the black male as rapist” (Ek 71). Because Carr embraces the image of the black male rapist and takes the position of the violent, chaotic, and destructive hard man, he risks reifying a stereotype that defines black criminality as an inherent condition rather than as an effect of social, racial, or economic exploitation. How, then, do we read a book like Bad that speaks with the “bloody words” of prison culture but that also invokes such problematic stereotypes?
Conclusion: Lying and Complicity

By incorporating lying into the generic territory of autobiography, Carr stages a different exegetical method than is usually employed in prison life writing, one which addresses how to read a book like Bad and clarifies why reading such a problematic text is important. As a discursive strategy, lying is predicated on the audience’s complicity with the storyteller. Hammer and Cronin’s involvement in the book goes beyond simply taping, collecting, editing, organizing, and publishing Carr’s story (which of course they do as well). They participate as secondary storytellers, in a sense, since lying is predicated on the involvement of an audience whose desire moves it along. Smitty lies because he is called upon and consistently encouraged (by way of “a little negative psychology”) by his audience to lie. Whatever meaning is produced in this exchange is dialogic, even dialectical, as the autobiographical facts of Smitty’s story (whatever they are) are meshed with the collective desire that directs and aggrandizes the scope of the narrative. Likewise, it is difficult to separate Carr’s story from the involvement of his two interlocutors, whose desire not only moves the story along, but also (as Hammer writes) “inspires” the story as well.

Dan Hammer’s introduction repeatedly emphasizes how lying invites him and Cronin to identify with Carr. He describes “how far into” Carr’s “life” they “were able to get.” They could get so far into his life that they could “think about the ups and downs of prison life from the con’s point of view,” he writes (16). While Hammer’s claim that they could “think . . . from the con’s point of view” is a form of sympathy I find dubious and problematic, how he brackets the ethics of this space is instructive:

Thus, he [Carr] could tell a story about fucking over some helpless con, for example, and we could feel the need to succeed in such an operation, laughing as the poor dude ‘bought the pig.’ It was completely due to Jimmy’s ability to
transport us into such a situation that we didn’t have to make the obvious
judgements on such actions, even to ourselves. (16)

Hammer claims that they do not “have to” pass judgement on Carr’s predatory violence. But
Hammer and Cronin are unable to pass judgement on Carr’s actions precisely because they
solicit it, inspire it, and help produce it in the text. They are “transport[ed] into such a situation”
and their position of complicity disrupts their capacity for judgement. Hammer’s invocation of
judgement highlights how Hammer and Cronin’s interviews with Carr invoke the confession. In
a confession, writes Michel Foucault, “one does not confess without the presence (or virtual
presence) of a partner who is not simply the interlocutor but the authority who requires the
confession, prescribes and appreciates it, and intervenes in order to judge, punish, forgive,
console, and reconcile” (History 61-62). What Hammer suggests, however, is that lying disrupts
what Foucault describes as the confessional mode’s capacity to police or regulate the
confessant’s discourse because the clear demarcation necessitated by confession—priest from
penitent, analyst from analysand, lawyer from accused, police interrogator from criminal
suspect—is exchanged for a messier textual production that is predicated on the listener’s
complicity in the story of the speaker.

I am not extolling Hammer and Cronin’s negotiation of this problematic territory; I find it
disturbing that they respond to Carr’s stories about preying on other prisoners, for example, with
“lots of sadistic laughter and slapping of hands whenever some devilish scheme reached its
climax” (16). Moreover, the body of Carr’s narrative makes no mention of the dialogic practice
that precedes the printed text (unlike Cleaver and Jackson’s autobiographies, for example, whose
epistolary forms register the prison-enforced dialogue of letter-writing). Evidence of Hammer
and Cronin’s complicity in the text is absent in the narrative, which is instead governed by Carr’s
univocal, autobiographical “I.” This occlusion of Hammer and Cronin’s complicity in the narrative also speaks to the unresolvable question of the “white envelope” that frames Bad: the introduction and conclusion are written by a white, middle-class man and woman; the editorial process is conducted by white (middle-class, college-educated) men; and the book is published after the violent death of the book’s recently imprisoned African American subject, who is further silenced as a consequence. These issues of power, of agency, of appropriation that haunt the text may never be resolved, but they are exacerbated when Hammer and Cronin’s complicity with Carr is not registered in the narrative, thus implying that the stories Carr relates are entirely his own and not also the responsibility of his white interlocutors.

While acknowledging that Hammer and Cronin’s roles in Bad are problematic, their use of lying as a storytelling practice emphasizes lines of complicity that are typically resisted when interlocutors and readers are faced with perpetrators of violent crime. Alan Rosen, for example, describes the “unusual antipathy which governs . . . [the] relationship” between readers and authors of Nazi memoirs (554). While I am not equating Bad with a Nazi memoir, or Carr with someone like Rudolph Hess, the antipathetic relationship that governs the discourse of violent crime is exchanged for something quite different in Hammer and Cronin’s engagement with Carr and his stories of sadistic violence. Even Carr is “quite surprised at how much [his interlocutors] relished his life,” writes Hammer (16). Ethically vexed as their dialogue certainly is (as Hammer and Cronin’s “relish” further suggests), Carr, Hammer, and Cronin radically break with convention by establishing a framework in which Carr’s brutal, predatory violence is engaged with from a position of complicity and not from a position of difference, from participation not rejection, from involvement not castigation.
In *Complicities: The Intellectual and Apartheid* (2002), Mark Sanders describes how the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) emphasizes that healing—both individual and communal—is predicated on an involvement with evil, even an acceptance of evil as part of the community and the self, rather than a rejection of it: “the assumptions informing the report’s argument go against the intuition that in order to combat evil one must be, or proclaim oneself to be, untouched by it. In this fable, as in all fables, one identifies in order to disidentify” (3). I suggest that there is a similarly counter-intuitive shift from “disidentification” to identification in the way that Hammer and Cronin engage with Carr, although it is limited to the shared discursive space of lying and is not explicitly brought into the narrative. Because lying highlights, through its call-and-response methodology, the complicity of audience with speaker, Hammer and Cronin—two white, middle-class, college-educated men—are complicit in the discursive violence of the text, which signposts deeper levels of complicity: their positions as beneficiaries of a racially stratified society and their ineluctable complicity in a system that maintains the racialized poverty, ghettos, and prisons that provide the conditions for Carr’s predatory violence.

Complicity is an important point of departure for prison resistance, prison writing, and prison reading: if prisoners are defined as violently other, and if they are segregated from our communities (however large or small these communities are defined), then we can avoid recognizing that these men and women and the acts of violence they have committed emerge from our communities, our neighbourhoods, our neighbours, our families, and, potentially (in certain conditions), ourselves. Engaging with threatening or troubling prisoners from a position of complicity and not of differentiation does not validate the violence of these prisoners, necessarily (as Hammer’s introduction at times seems to do). While recognizing the connections
between ourselves and those prisoners who have committed crimes—particularly those crimes we find most unreasonable or horrible—is a messy and unpredictable strategy, it forces us to do the difficult work of really engaging with the crimes committed and attempting to work through (rather than expel) crises in our communities. As Max Buckley says of Bigger Thomas in Richard Wright’s *Native Son*, another badman who haunts the margins of Carr’s autobiography: “if we can understand how subtly and yet strongly his life and fate are linked to ours—if we can do this, perhaps we shall find the key to our future...” (324). Understanding those linkages by theorizing and developing new reading practices that seek to negotiate the difficult territory between a troubling or disturbing text and a complicit readership provides an alternative discursive space to that of the law or the prison, which defines deep, social problems only according to binaries like legal and illegal, criminal and citizen.
Conclusion: Rehabilitation in an Age of Retribution

To understand the role of rehabilitation in today’s prison system one only needs to look at the architecture of the prisons that were built after the era of the rehabilitative ideal, in the 1980s and 1990s. These prisons are a far cry from the fortress-like penitentiaries of the early nineteenth century. As Joseph Hallinan observes in *Going Up the River: Travels in a Prison Nation* (2001),

> The American prison of the nineteenth century was astonishingly grand. . . . Pennsylvania’s first prison, built in 1829, was so brilliantly designed that its architect, John Haviland, was said to have captured “a philosophy in stone.” . . . The design of today’s prisons, however, is no longer driven by penal theory, but by cost. The modern “correctional facility” is a concrete econo-box, low and bunkered and anonymous. From a distance it resembles a hospital or suburban high school. (xvi)

Although Hallinan writes that these modern prisons are “no longer driven by penal theory,” their construction—which to me resembles contemporary warehouses more than hospitals or schools—does represent a penal philosophy, but it is a philosophy based largely on retribution. 82

As I show in chapter 1, John Haviland’s Eastern State Penitentiary, for all its castle-like, baroque adornments, was built in order to change people: single cells would isolate prisoners, provide the conditions for prolonged meditation, and induce conversions. By comparison, the modern prison is only supposed to punish, contain, and control people. These warehouse prisons emerged because, in the 1980s, penologists, criminologists, prison officials, politicians, and much of the general public concluded that, when it came to rehabilitation, nothing worked. The era of “nothing works” (which largely continues today) was the result of a series of studies,
reports, and muckraking journalism that found there was no evidence that the rehabilitative ideal reduced recidivism (Hawkins and Alpert 211). By the mid-1980s, the rehabilitative ideal was over: the indeterminate sentence was replaced by fixed sentencing in most states, and parole was cancelled for all federal crimes with the passage of the Sentencing Reform Act of 1984. The repeal of indeterminate sentencing and the removal of parole boards, with their near-draconian powers, should have been a positive change for prisoners. But the era of “nothing works” has seen exceptional prison growth, extraordinarily long sentences for repeat felonies and drug crimes, and an unprecedented targeting of African American, Latina/o, and poor white communities by law enforcement.

As a result of this new, retributive penal philosophy, many rehabilitation programs were uprooted and discarded. In particular, politicians took a special interest in prison writing. As H. Bruce Franklin writes in his introduction to his anthology *Prison Writing in 20th-Century America* (1998):

> By 1984, every literary journal devoted to publishing poetry and stories by prisoners was wiped out. New York State led the way in mounting a legislative attack on prison writings with its 1977 “Son of Sam” law. Almost every state soon followed in passing similar laws making it illegal for convict authors to collect money from their writings. (14)

Jack Henry Abbott, whose life and writings are so often caught up in what Malcolm Braly calls “the changing winds of penal philosophy” (252), was taken to court and forced under the Son of Sam law to pay Richard Adan’s widow the royalties from his 2001 book *My Return*. Along with legal restrictions on prison writing, writing courses were also dismantled throughout the 1980s and 1990s. And, in 1988, prisoners serving time for drug offences were barred from accessing
Pell Grants. Pell Grants had provided prisoners with funding for post-secondary education. In 1994, all prisoners became ineligible for Pell Grant funding (Wacquant 119). Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, prison writing, and the institutional programs that were established to foster prison writing, bore a significant brunt of the backlash against rehabilitation. So what effect did this dramatic change in penal philosophy have on prison life writing?

Although there are far more people in prison today than ever before in American history, there are fewer prison autobiographies and memoirs published now than, say, in the 1970s. Reflecting contemporary prison conditions, prison writing today is, according to H. Bruce Franklin, also “far more bleak and desperate than the prison literature of any earlier period” (Prison Writing 17). And yet, the rehabilitation narrative has never really gone away. As Jimmy Santiago Baca’s A Place to Stand demonstrates, rehabilitation continues to be a popular theme in prison life writing, despite the absence of the rehabilitative ideal in the prison system.

I find the overabundance of prison autobiographies and memoirs that use the rehabilitation narrative (or its tropes) to be highly problematic. My concern with the ubiquity of the rehabilitation narrative in the prison life writing genre has to do with practices of cultural selection and what ideological, political, or cultural paradigms those practices create or sustain. Consider, for example, the terms in which A Place to Stand’s critical acclaim are framed. Baca’s memoir is quite rightly celebrated for its aesthetic beauty. But the book is also lauded for the kind of story that it relates. For example, according to a blurb from Booklist that graces the book’s cover, “Baca taught himself to read and write, awoke to the voice of the soul, and converted doing time into a profoundly spiritual pursuit.” The rhetoric of the Booklist review harkens back to the vocabulary of the prison reformers who developed the early penitentiary systems. Baca’s reading and writing enable him to channel an inner spirit or soul, much as the
Quaker-inspired penitentiary was supposed to enable a prisoner to find the inner divine through isolation and Bible study.

Other blurbs on the cover and inset of Baca’s memoir foreground tropes of the rehabilitation narrative, celebrating in the book what has been removed from the prison’s mandate by the time of the book’s publication. For example, The Santa Fe New Mexican writes: “Baca enters [prison] rootless and illiterate, a child of abject poverty . . . having lived through an inexorable path of loss, abandonment, and violence. How he survived and became an internationally regarded poet and social activist is a gritty story unflinchingly told in A Place to Stand.” Library Journal cites Baca’s “ability to use language to elevate himself above his immediate surroundings.” The Arizona Daily Star claims it “affirms the triumph of the human spirit and for that reason alone it is an important story.” Almost unanimously, these reviews emphasize Baca’s successful transition from illiterate prisoner to “poet and social activist.” They isolate elements from the rehabilitation narrative as the important material of the book: rebirth, self-making, transcendence through literary work, and a triumphant sense of uplift and an affirmation of a collective social identity or “humanity.” My criticism of A Place to Stand in Chapter 2 aside, what could be wrong with celebrating such an exceptional life story?

For one thing, the reviews that advertise the book’s merits define it as a story of success and hope. This reading can only be sustained by focusing exclusively on Baca. However, the book is not—as another blurb on the back cover maintains—an “affirmation of one man’s spirit in overcoming the most brutal adversity” (emphasis added). Because Baca claims the book is a “witness” story, it is also the story of the other characters in his memoir, particularly the underprivileged—working-class Hispanics, children in juvenile homes, prisoners, Baca’s family: those “who don’t have a place in this world to stand and call home.” As mentioned in Chapter 2,
Baca writes that it is his “job to witness and record” their lives along with his own (244). Unlike Baca, virtually none of these characters makes it out of his or her underprivileged social position. Instead, most remain in prison, in poverty, or die. As I have suggested, Baca fails to witness and record the lives of some of the disadvantaged characters in his memoir, particularly the other Florence prisoners. The critical reception of *A Place to Stand* reinforces Baca’s occlusions by failing to acknowledge the stories in the book that overwhelmingly contradict the success-story reading.

I highlight how these reviews occlude the other, less “successful,” but perhaps more representative stories in *A Place to Stand* because these occlusions epitomize how prison life writing is selected, disseminated, and archived as valuable and worthy of critical or popular attention. Reviewers laud Baca’s story precisely because it is *exceptional*. It is celebrated because it is *not* representative of how most prisoners experience incarceration. Likewise, the life narratives that are typically selected for publication, critical analysis, and even optioned for films are usually equally exceptional. While they are defined as representative of prison life they are often unrepresentative of how most prisoners experience incarceration.

H. Bruce Franklin is an excellent resource for understanding how the prison life writing genre is maintained. He is credited with validating prison writing as a field of literary study. And his anthology of American prison writing is extremely popular and influences how academics and non-academics make sense of the genre. In “Can the Penitentiary Teach the Academy How to Read?,” Franklin claims that the “corpus of literature most appropriate for the exploration of relations among incarceration, social justice, and literacy” is prison writing. Because literacy levels are shockingly low in American prisons, I find Franklin’s claim that a reader can glean something of the relationship between “incarceration, social justice, and
literacy” fairly dubious. Franklin also underscores how a defining feature of the genre is “that most of it, including some of its greatest works, has been created by people who acquired their reading and writing skills through self-education while in prison” (643). Yet, on the whole, prisoners rarely learn to read and write in the prison. What Franklin unintentionally shows, then, is how the genre is out of step with what it purports to represent. Prison writing, and prison life writing, foreground stories of self-education and self-transformation but these experiences are rare in prison. Despite this disjunction, prison life writing provides stories of self-education and self-transformation—stories that, as I have argued, are frequently in line with the rehabilitative vocabulary of the prison system—with a degree of cultural currency.

In an age of retribution, when rehabilitation has been excised from most prison mandates, this might seem like an unnecessary concern. But the current prison system is in a state of crisis. And whenever the prison reaches a state of crisis—when the prison becomes too violent, corrupt, fiscally unsustainable, is plagued by overcrowding and riots, or does not live up to the expectations of the public—rehabilitation is invoked as a seemingly innovative solution. Toward the end of the eighteenth century, for example, when the scaffold became a site for resistance rather than contrition, and existing forms of incarceration were plagued by disease and rampant abuse, the penitentiary was developed as a humane rehabilitative experiment. When the post-bellum prison system was deemed a failure by penologists like Enoch Wines and Theodore Dwight (in their 1867 Report on the Prisons and Reformatories of the United States and Canada, for example), the new penologists developed methods like parole and the indeterminate sentence in order to reform prisoners and redefine the prison system. And when prisons failed to live up to the triumphant expectations of modern science and medicine in the first half of the twentieth century, the rehabilitative ideal was implemented in order to change criminals into citizens.
Rehabilitation is often introduced into prison mandates when the prison system is in a state of crisis, when the prison as a viable and ethical institution is threatened. Therefore, rehabilitation legitimates imprisonment at critical cultural moments when new solutions to crime and punishment could be considered.

My concern, then, is that while the prison system’s current crisis has piqued national interest, a genuine debate over the viability of the prison as a method of punishment could be thwarted by well-intentioned but misleading claims that prisons could change people, so long as the right methodology could be appropriately implemented. If, as I suggest, the prison life writing archive—as well as other subgenres of prison writing—provide rehabilitation with a degree of cultural currency, then those who are involved in the maintenance of this archive are complicit in providing rehabilitation with a kind of cultural truth at a critical moment when the viability of the prison is being publicly questioned.

To avoid reifying rehabilitation, I suggest we find different critical strategies that focus on prison life writings that resist claiming that the prison is a location for conversions, dramatic self-transformations, or rehabilitations that are perhaps laudable but unlikely in incarceration. James Carr’s *Bad* is an important starting point. *Bad* succeeds in representing something of the violence of prison life without framing it in terms of moral, political, or social codes that are recognizable to a non-incarcerated audience. Carr’s autobiography resists providing readers with a familiar solution to the prison problem. As a result, *Bad* suggests that the existing models for understanding prison life writing as well for understanding the prison itself are inadequate. This is, perhaps, why Carr resists identifying his violence and his crime as effects of racial or economic injustice. Racism and classism were likely important determinants in Carr’s criminality. But classifying criminality as an effect of racial and economic injustice
domesticates—renders knowable and safe—a problem that has yet to find a solution. By not applying known models to his experiences, his book suggests that new models for understanding and addressing crime and punishment are desperately needed. Advancing beyond my analysis of Bad, I would like to suggest a new hermeneutics for the prison life writing genre. Books that are selected for publication, discussion, and analysis should tell more than just stories we would like to see in prison life and should include those stories that we would prefer not to see at all. Publishers, critics, and other readers need to attend to those books that use what Jean Genet calls the censored, reprobate, bloody words of the American prison system. Now, more than ever, we need to hear words that we have never heard before.
Notes

Introduction: “Do you think that I’ll be different when you’re through?”

1 See also Dylan Rodríguez’s “Against the Discipline of ‘Prison Writing’: Toward a Theoretical Conception of Contemporary Radical Prison Praxis.”

2 For more on prison writing as “transcendent,” see Chapter 2 of Rodríguez’s Forced Passages, “‘You Be All the Prison Writer You Wish’: The Context of Radical Prison Praxis,” 75-112.


4 Glenn Rosenthal, a prisoner at Matsqui Prison (a federal medium-security facility in British Columbia) recently showed me a poem he submitted to a poetry competition put on by Correctional Services Canada (CSC), the Canadian federal prison system. The competition invited prisoners to submit poems about prison staff. Rosenthal’s poem, about a meeting with his parole officer, captures the relationship between the discursive strategies of the prison system to locate and fix a prisoner in language and, in turn, how that subject position is felt and experienced by the prisoner even when the language is meaningless:

   Conversation

   I told her

   Dangerousity is not a word.

   She differed and proceeded

   To explain her unique ability
To assess it

And how her unique assessment

Was going to affect me

For a long time.

She was right.

Whatever it is, I am sure

I have more of it now

Than before this conversation.

5 The difference between a political prisoner and a “regular” prisoner is difficult to determine. However, political prisoners usually see their detention as part of a larger struggle, a greater narrative, which may not be available to all prisoners.

6 “Changing lives” through education is the most familiar conceptual metaphor that is used by prison education programs. For example, in *Books Change Lives: 1993-1994 Reading Promotion Campaign*, Michael Thompson reports that the Correctional Education Association announced in January 1993 that it had partnered with The Center for the Book in order to subsidize an essay contest for prisoners registered in a GED program. The essay “should describe how a book, fiction or nonfiction, changed the student’s life and should discuss how specific ideas, events or characters in the book suggested that change” (58). Similarly, in 1994, the Correctional Education Association used the “Books Change Lives” theme for their second annual essay contest for prisoners’ enrolled in a GED program (Thompson 58).

7 As Caleb Smith writes, “women were [deemed] incapable of the reasoned reflection necessary for rehabilitation” in the nineteenth century (211 n. 5). This presumption seems to have resonances with twentieth century women’s prison programs as well.
Chapter 1: Conversion and the Story of the American Prison

8 I follow Stuart Hall’s Gramscian use of the term “common-sense” here. Common-sense is that which is defined as ordinary and natural, or perhaps universal, and thus beyond criticism or discussion. Hall writes, “It is precisely its ‘spontaneous’ quality, its transparency, its ‘naturalness,’ its refusal to be made to examine the premises on which it is founded, its resistance to change or correction, its effect of instant recognition . . . [that] . . . makes common-sense, at one and the same time, ‘spontaneous’, ideological, and unconscious” (qtd. in Procter 67).

9 See, for example, the transcript of the discussion about Paris Hilton’s post-jail interview with Larry King on Anderson Cooper’s CNN program, AC360˚: “Paris Speaks.”

10 A vast number of conversion narratives are circulated by various different religious denominations in prisons throughout North America. Prisoners at Fort Saskatchewan Correctional Centre, a jail I visited several years ago located just outside Edmonton, Alberta, simply called them “prison books.” These “books” vary in form from small pamphlets passed out by chaplains to full-length autobiographies, but all of them follow the same conversion paradigm. I obtained a list of the full-length autobiographies from one of the chaplains, a list circulated by Cons For Christ Prison Ministry (which is associated with Bridges of Canada and Chaplain Ray Hoekstra’s International Prison Ministries). The titles include: *Al Capone’s Devil Driver*, *Changed Lives in San Quentin*, *For Tomorrow We Die*, *Free at Last!*, *God’s Prison Gang*, *Gretchen & Nick*, *Holes in Time*, *Hooked*, *I’m not Coming Back*, *Jewels for the Journey*, *Killing Time*, *Lady in the Shadow*, *One Bad Dude*, *Prison Chains Broken*, *Smokin’ & Jokin’, The Caper*, *The Enforcer*, *Where Flies Don’t Land*, *Will You Die for Me*, *Within These Streets.*

The prisoners at Fort Saskatchewan also noted that there are bibles available through the same organization that include testimonies and study guides for prisoners, and that are
specifically annotated for prisoners. Sections applicable to prisoners are highlighted and commented upon (the resurrection, or the story of Jonah, for example). While I was unable to locate the “prison bible” (the prisoners’ term) through Cons for Christ, I was able to locate a similar bible through Charles Colson’s Prison Fellowship called *Free on the Inside*. For samples, see ibsdirect.com.

11 See Adam Liptak’s *New York Times* article “A Mediocre Criminal, but an Unmatched Jailhouse Lawyer” for an example of how the tropes of the conversion narrative are also used in journalism. Liptak’s article makes use of what I am calling the prison conversion narrative when he describes how “[a] former bank robber, Shon R. Hopwood emerged from more than a decade in federal prison as a skilled Supreme Court practitioner.”

12 According to a census by the Bureau of Justice Statistics, “Of the 272,111 persons released from prisons in 15 States in 1994, an estimated 67.5% were rearrested for a felony or serious misdemeanor within 3 years, 46.9% were reconvicted, and 25.4% resentenced to prison for a new crime” (“Recidivism”).

13 What makes an institution “total?” Although “every institution has encompassing tendencies,” writes Erving Goffman,

> some . . . are encompassing to a degree discontinuously greater than the ones next in line. Their encompassing or total character is symbolized by the barrier to social intercourse with the outside and to departure that is often built right into the physical plant, such as locked doors, high walls, barbed wire, cliffs, water, forests or moors. These establishments I am calling *total institutions* . . . . (emphasis in original 4)
For an excellent telescoping of Foucault’s discussion of how a narrative form (the novel) normalizes a conception of delinquency and non-delinquency, policed and non-policed (or self-policing) elements of the social body, see D.A. Miller’s *The Novel and the Police* (1988).

While perhaps my historical divisions seem to resemble those of Dilulio—his “old Penology,” “New Penology,” and “New Old Penology”—I am more indebted to the work of Larry Sullivan in *The Prison Reform Movement* (1990) because Sullivan’s chronology emphasizes the prison reform movements that I see changing and revitalizing the prison system’s articulation of the conversion narrative (as opposed to reforms of the prison system that emphasize security, for example).

For more detailed distinctions of the “morphology of conversion” (Morgan qtd. in Caldwell 2), see Edmund S. Morgan’s *Visible Saints: The History of a Puritan Idea* (1963), Norman Pettit’s *The Heart Prepared: Grace and Conversion in Puritan Spiritual Life* (1966), or even Mary Rowlandson’s series of “removes” in her captivity narrative, *The Narrative of the Captivity and the Restoration of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson* (1682).

For an analysis of non-Christian conversions, see Gauri Viswanathan’s *Outside the Fold: Conversion, Modernity, and Belief* (1998).

As Carolyn A. Barros and Johanna M. Smith write in *Life Writings by British Women 1660-1885*, Augustine’s *Confessions* “is generally considered the model for this form of life-writing, and subsequent converts to Christianity followed the pattern of his conversion narrative: detailed descriptions of a sinful past, long and arduous struggle in the ‘lost’ condition, miraculous conversion—accompanied by praise to God for his mercy—concluding with an account of the new life and ministry” (27).

For more on Quaker Spiritual journals, see Shea 3-84.
I deliberately draw on Althusser’s notion of “interpellation” here because it seems to me that there is a connection between the example of being hailed by a policeman and the experience of being “hailed” by God. There are, to be sure, crucial differences; but I think it is useful to think of the conversion experience as a distant relative of the experience of becoming a juridical subject, particularly for a convict. There is already much cross-pollination between these traditions at the level of language. Conversion experiences, for example, often borrow from the language of law: confession, judgment, guilt, and proof, are all part of the language of the conversion tradition. For more on the cross-pollination of legal and religious language, see Giorgio Agamben’s Remnants of Auschwitz (93).


22 For more on criminal narratives of this period, see Williams’ study of Henry Tufts, “My Only Practical Atonement: Variations of Personality and Performance in the Narrative of Henry Tufts.” Or, see Williams’ “Rogues, Rascals, and Scoundrels: The Underworld Literature of Early America.”

23 Certainly labour was important to the transformative process but, in the Pennsylvania model, it took a backseat to religion. John Haviland, the architect of Eastern State Penitentiary, for example, wrote in 1832 that “the cells first erected now in operation were originally designed for solitary confinement without labor” (emphasis added; qtd. in Cohen et al. 57). That said, one should not underemphasize the role economics and the exploitation of labour played soon after the Pennsylvania model was developed. For an extended discussion of the role of labour and economics in the development of American prisons, see the “Rusche and Kirchheimer hypothesis” as it is explained in Rusche and Kirchheimer’s Punishment and Social Structure.
(1939); or, for an emphasis on economic exploitation in more recent carceral practices, see the predominantly prisoner-written *The Celling of America* (1998).

24 I draw on Bender’s notion of the “sentence” and “plot” as embedded in the prison, which is outlined in *Imagining the Penitentiary* (35).

25 The process of fall and rebirth is repeated throughout the inspector’s reports (here, in 1842):

   The inspectors can never forget that the persons committed to their charge are men, and although fallen, debased and convict, yet they possess feelings susceptible to kindness, and minds capable of improvement . . . . The inspectors hope that the language ‘return, repent, and live,’ is heard in the prisoner’s solitude; and through that aid which alone can produce the change, many a prisoner can regard his cell as the ‘beautiful gate of the temple’ leading to a happy life, and by a peaceful end, to heaven. (qtd. in Skotnicki 55)


27 Reconfiguring Coleridge’s “Death-In-Life” John Edgar Wideman writes, “Prison time must be hard time, a metaphorical death, a sustained, twilight condition of death-in-life” (Wideman 35).

28 Death continues to be one of the most commonly used metaphors for imprisonment. As Dylan Rodríguez writes, “a discourse of death and disappearance has become a common way for the currently and formerly imprisoned to describe both the social logic and the experience of incarceration” (58). Prison is also a form of juridical and social death that extends beyond parole. “Prisoner” is a liminal status that continues to affect ex-prisoners who must repeatedly confess in job forms that they have been convicted of a felony, and who are, in some states, denied voting rights. Consequently prisoners are returned to society discursively half-dead, as partial citizens.
Auburn and Sing Sing warden Elan Lynds describes (in Foucauldian terms) the Auburn system’s use of labour as a way to transform prisoners into useful citizens:

Obedience to the law of society is all that is asked from a good citizen. It is this which the criminal ought to learn: and you teach him much better by practice than by theory. If you lock up in a cell, a person convicted of a crime, you have no control over him: you act only upon his body. Instead of this, set him to work, and oblige him to do everything he is ordered to do; you thus teach him to obey, and give him the habits of industry; now I ask, is there anything more powerful than the force of habit? If you have succeeded in giving to a person the habits of obedience and labor, there is little chance of his ever becoming a thief. (qtd. in Cohen et al. 158)

I should note, however, that labour was still important to the Pennsylvania system, and the prisoner’s progression toward conversion was often also discussed in utilitarian terms. But there is a clear difference of emphasis between the two systems: Pennsylvania emphasized the importance of religion and solitary introspection to produce conversion, while Auburn emphasized labour.

The person largely credited with the nationalization of the Auburn method was Louis Dwight, founder of and secretary for the influential Prison Discipline Society of Boston. Dwight, according to Orlando Faulkland Lewis, “was for twenty years the American authority on prisons and their inmates. Never did his religious zeal forsake him. He was engaged in a holy war. The salvation of human souls was the impelling force within him” (291). Dwight promoted the Auburn system less because it was economically viable and because it made prisoners useful.
(although these were clearly important factors to Dwight) but more because the Auburn system produced conversions: “His profound faith commitment came to be channelled and directed by means of a vow he made, that his life would be spent in seeking a form of ‘prison discipline’ that would promote religious conversion and remove inmates from the squalor in which they were forced to dwell” (Skotnicki 43-44).

31 This is not to suggest that Eastern did not also employ violent forms of coercion. Scott Christianson describes how Eastern employed a number of similar punitive practices, including other techniques, like straightjackets, the “iron gag”—described in 1833 by a prison investigating committee as “a rough iron instrument resembling the stiff bit of a blind bridle, having an iron palet in the center, about an inch square, and chains at each end to pass around the neck and fasten behind” (136)—and the “mad chair”—that is, a “large boxlike chair, into which a (usually mentally disturbed) prisoner was strapped and bound in a manner that prevented his body from resting, which caused extreme pain” (137).

32 This fact is passed over by quite a number of histories of the American prison system. Alexander Pisciotta’s much cited “Scientific Reform: The ‘New Penology’ at Elmira, 1876-1900,” for example, describes three important changes that occurred in the 1860s and 1870s, which altered prison management across the nation: the fear that crime was rampant and the existing prison systems were inadequate; new theories of penal reform developed at the National Congress on Penitentiary and Reformatory Discipline in 1870; and the appointment of Zebulon Brockway as the superintendent of Elmira Reformatory in 1870. Nowhere does Pisciotta mention the conclusion of the American Civil War or the abolition of slavery, certainly crucial changes to the American landscape that had an impact on the sudden, dramatic restructuring of the American prison system.
Some historians do consider the relationship between slavery and the prison, however, particularly the connections between slavery, the convict lease system, and the penitentiary. For more on the shift between these institutions, see Adam J. Hirsh’s *The Rise of the Penitentiary: Prisons and Punishment in Early America* (1992), Matthew J. Mancini’s *One Dies Get Another: Convict Leasing in the American South, 1866-1928* (1996), David Oshinsky’s *Worse than Slavery: Parchman Farm and the Ordeal of Jim Crow Justice* (1996), or Douglas Blackmon’s *Slavery by Another Name: The Re-Enslavement of Black Americans from the Civil War to World War II* (2008). For a useful comparison between slaves and prisoners, see J. Thorsten Sellin’s *Slavery and the Penal System* (1976). Also, for a slightly different analysis of this shift—one that questions the amount that plantation prisons or the work-lease program effectively took over where slavery left off—see Maria Gottschalk’s *The Prison and the Gallows: The Politics of Mass Incarceration in America* (Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

Amendment 13 of the Constitution abolished slavery—“Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude . . . shall exist within the United States”—even as it permitted slavery to continue within the prison—“except as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted” (qtd. in *Victim 4*).

For more on the “new penology” see Alexander Pisciotta’s “Scientific Reform: The ‘New Penology’ at Elmira, 1876-1900.”

Corporal punishment was eventually revealed to be a constant form of coercion in Elmira Reformatory. Brockway admitted to administering what he called “positive extraneous assistance” in the form of, among other things, “spanking” or “paddling.” Brockway would remove prisoners to a bathroom far from prying eyes, called “Room No. 4,” where he would administer “spankings” with a thick leather bat that he would wet before wielding. This was not
a punishment, he argued, “but a compelling physical experience within the comprehension of animals and of men so animal and inconsiderate as to require it” (qtd. in Pisciotta 618). The New York State Board of Charities, who conducted a massive investigation of Elmira in 1893 and 1894, did not see it that way: “The charges and allegations against the General Superintendent Z.R. Brockway, of ‘cruel, brutal, excessive, and unusual punishment of the inmates’ are proven and most amply sustained by the evidence” (qtd in Pisciotta 620).

36 I should stress again that I am focusing on the rhetoric of the system’s new managers and not necessarily on the practice of the new prison system. In practice, individualized treatment and the prisoner’s progress were not tied to parole until, at the earliest, 1917 (Hawkins and Alpert 187).

37 I develop this term from Edmund Morgan’s “morphology of conversion,” where he describes the conversion narrative as a series of defined steps along a sequence of “knowledge, conviction, faith, combat, and true, imperfect assurance” (qtd. in Dorsey 26).

38 Given the religious influence on the “new penologists” it is somewhat surprising that this period is often defined as a secularization of a system that had, until then, been devoutly religious. Skotnicki writes, for example, “The spirit of reform, albeit disguised in secular metaphors, was now centered on the reformatories” (134). While there was a shift in the rhetoric of the prisons toward science, there was hardly any disguise of the central role Christian doctrine continued to play in the new system. Most of the metaphorical language of the “new penologists” was decidedly Christian: Wines and Dwight write that the prison was “an agency for reforming and reclaiming fallen men and women,” for example (72). And Zebulon Brockway argues that “it is not possible for radically wrong character to be renovated, renewed, rendered right without connecting the thoughts and the affections with God, the good Father of us all” (Brockway 64). The “new penologists” happily blended science with religion. But mixing the sacred with the
profane was nothing new to the prison experiment: as noted, the early reformers of the American
carceral system had wedded secular, Enlightenment doctrine with their own religious beliefs.

39 The authors of Struggle for Justice charge that replacing criminal values with values
associated with free society amounted to “coerced cultural indoctrination” because the “values”
that prisoners were supposed to accept were often white and middle-class (43).

40 The first Alcoholics Anonymous group in prison was established at California’s San Quentin
prison in 1942 (MacCormick 17). By 1962 the General Service Office of Alcoholics Anonymous
“announced that there were 502 A.A. groups in prisons and jails with a total reported
membership of 20,451. Of these groups, 405 were in the United States” (MacCormick 22). In
1987, despite resistance to the then-massively unpopular “rehabilitation ethic,” “[a]bout one third
of the [Federal Bureau of Prisons] institutions utilized ‘12-step’ programs such as Alcoholics
Anonymous (AA) and Narcotics Anonymous (NA)” (“State of the Bureau 1991” 8). Along with
a variety of other treatment programs, most prisons today offer Alcoholics Anonymous or its
related drug-addiction treatment format, Narcotics Anonymous, for the treatment of alcohol or
drug abuse.

The Alcoholics Anonymous 12-steps program follows a clear conversion paradigm: like its
Puritan antecedents, it details the stages of development leading toward “a spiritual awakening”
(Step 12). It requires the acceptance of God (Step 3) who induces the conversion experience and
removes “defects of character.” The conversion experience requires a confession, followed by
the ongoing repetition of ritual confessions (Step 9). Finally, the confession also acts as a form of
entrance into a new community (here, the community of alcoholics). These stages move from a
fall—being completely powerless to addiction—through tortured conscience—the “fearless”
inventory of wrongs committed against others followed by the confrontation of past guilt—and, through prayer and meditation, redemption, and a new life (“Twelve Steps”).

41 Upon entrance to the prison system, the prisoner met with a classification committee usually split between those interested in security and those in rehabilitation. Malcolm Braly, in his memoir *False Starts*, describes the makeup of the California Classification Committee in 1948:

> The Classification Committee was made up from representatives of the various prison departments. The real power was shared by two cooperative branches—Care and Treatment, and Custody. . . . Custody was usually represented by a captain or lieutenant of the guards, and Treatment sent an associate warden. One of the chaplains would be present, as well as a psych, or sociologist, or, later on, a correctional counselor, and, usually, some one from Education came in. (165-166)

‘Treatment,’ therefore, did not necessarily serve the best interests of the individual prisoner; negotiated by representatives from a number of different subdivisions of the prison, it was subject to the tensions and dynamics of power that played out between these groups and their interests.

Chapter 2: From “Primitive Manhood” to “Humanity”: Rehabilitation, Education, and Citizenship in Jimmy Santiago Baca’s *A Place to Stand*

42 My use of the term “personal truth” comes from Deborah Posel’s reading of a taxonomy of truths in the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). The TRC established a “rainbow of truths” in order to validate the stories of witnesses, victims, and perpetrators of the apartheid regime that often troubled the narrow limits of traditional, legal truth-telling. Posel
writes that the “solution in the [Commission] report is to differentiate between four notions of truth: factual or forensic truth; personal or narrative truth; social or ‘dialogue’ truth [. . .] and healing and restorative truth” (qtd. in Moss 100 n. 6). Autobiography theory has been very concerned with the intricacies of truth-telling in life writing, and other theorists have established similar taxonomies of truth to that of the TRC and Posel. For example, in her analysis of *I Rigoberta Menchú* and the controversy surrounding the apparent factuality of Menchú’s autobiography, Peaches Henry defines three registers of autobiographical truth-telling that seek to capture the different forms of truth that may be at work in an autobiographical text. The first register is “referential truth,” which denotes the “potentially verifiable details provided by an autobiographer that allow a reader to connect the author to the world of reference, factual truth.” The second is “subjective truth,” which accounts for the “inner workings of a person adumbrated by public displays, which attempts to render visible the inmost aspect of a human being, the personal identity.” The third form of truth that Henry identifies in her taxonomy is “ideological truth,” which “extends beyond the life of the author but that she wishes to advocate through her life; ideological truth is the personal conviction of an author concerning an aspect of human existence such as human rights, political rights, or social justice” (11). Legal discourse can certainly lay claim to different registers of truth, but autobiography, more so than the law, has historically claimed authority over personal truth or what Henry identifies as subjective truth. Not that personal truth is absent in legal discourse (or that factual truth is entirely subordinated to personal truth in autobiography), but the law highly mediates, and often constricts how personal truth enters into discourse. For more on the relationship between the discourse of the law, autobiography, and truth-telling, see Leigh Gilmore’s *The Limits of Autobiography*. 
Absent and/or abusive fathers are a frequent theme in prison life writing. For example, like Baca’s *A Place to Stand*, Tom Runyon’s *In for Life* (1953) begins with discussing how Runyon’s father abuses and eventually abandons him. Runyon’s narrative, and to some degree Baca’s narrative as well, emerges out of or against the image of the abusive, alcoholic, and eventually absent father.

Although Baca claims that his narrative is written for his father who “was never blessed with the good fortune [that Baca] had in discovering a new path,” his book is deeply informed by his fraught relationship with his mother (6). For example, Baca’s incarceration is consistently tied to his mother’s rejection of him. He writes that his sister, Martina, refuses to help him pay for a lawyer when he is on trial for drug charges because his mother wanted him to be sent to prison. He writes that Martina “had been hanging around with [their] mother” (90), who, he claims, “had already succeeded in turning Martina against [him]” (89). After his sentencing, he imagines his mother “convinc[ing] her that [he] needed to go to prison” (96). This might explain the intermingling of the maternal with the carceral in Baca’s narrative. Womb-analogues are often used to describe cells, and cell-analogues are often used to describe wombs, or images of wombs. For example, Baca writes, “I waited on my bunk, thinking of my cell as a womb from which I was repeatedly born into a person with greater and deeper convictions” (243). While Baca is describing a positive “rebirth” here, he makes manifest a connection between the womb and the cell that is suggested throughout the text. Early in the narrative, for example, Baca describes a crawl space under their family home—a “shack” called La Casita—that is womb-like: a “moist” “peaceful refuge” where he can be “safe,” “alone in [his] own world” (7). When Baca is thrown into solitary confinement after refusing to work, however, he imagines himself hiding in the crawl space under La Casita, but the crawl space takes on the qualities of the solitary
confinement cell: it is “cramped and isolated and dark under the shack” (170). Baca “realizes,” “I’m not under the shack, I’m in this cell”; but for a moment the two spaces are interchangeable (170). Moreover, Baca positions his body in the solitary confinement cell in the same way that his body is positioned in the crawl space. In the cell, Baca writes, “I sat down on the floor, drew up my legs, crossed my arms on my knees” (169). In the crawl space, “I...brace my knees to my chest and hug myself” (8). Of course, in both instances, Baca’s body is in the foetal position. (I should add that women’s bodies, particularly if they are body parts associated with motherhood, can be quite violent in the text. Looking at a group of hippie girls, he writes, for example, of their “breasts swaying like sacked kittens beneath their peasant shirts” [46].) Baca’s description of the complex forces that motivate his imprisonment, including his mother’s rejection of him as her son, are also what counter how he is defined in official writing as a criminal.

45 The metaphor of prisoner-as-animal has a long and complicated history. In 1618, for example, Geffray Mynshul describes his imprisonment for debt as a trip into a “‘wildernesse of wilde beasts’” (qtd in Lauterbach 127).
46 For more on the “happy prison” see Brombert.
47 The body is a central focus of much prison life writing because, as Foucault points out in *Discipline and Punish*, it is the primary object of coercion in prison. (Although the body is only the object of coercion inasmuch as it allows for coercion and control of the self.) The body is not entirely a site of abjection in the prison, however. Bodybuilding can be a site of resistance to the prison, for example, and prison life writing often includes characters who are bodybuilders, like James Carr. In response to the control prison exerts over their bodies, men in prison exert a sense of self-control and self-production through “building” their bodies. The abject body is redefined through bodybuilding as a construct, as material, which can be moulded through the prisoner’s
physical labour. For more on men’s bodies as sites of resistance in the prison, see the collection of essays in Don Sabo, Terry Kupers, and Willie London’s *Prison Masculinities* (2001).

**Chapter 3: Narratives of Murder: Jack Henry Abbott and In the Belly of the Beast**

48 In *My Return*, Abbott addresses the argument that his release was the consequence of Norman Mailer’s intervention, contending that “Mailer’s letter [to the parole board] did not result in [his] parole” (6). Mailer certainly did play a role in Abbott’s early release; but it is also quite likely that Abbott would have been released anyway, since he was due (even, past-due) for parole.

49 As Terrence Doody, in *Confession and Community in the Novel*, writes, “[a] confession is the deliberate, self-conscious attempt of an individual to explain his nature to the audience who represents the kind of community he needs to exist in and to confirm him” (4). What goes for the confession (and Doody is more often than not discussing conversion narratives) also goes for conversions: the final act of the conversion is an entrance into a community of some form, a group of like-minded believers.

50 To put Abbott’s “paranoia” and impulsive anger in perspective, however, it is important to note that at the time of writing *Belly*, Abbott claims he had spent “a good fourteen or fifteen years in solitary” (8). Whatever the conditions of these various forms of solitary confinement—and regardless of the degree to which Abbott might be exaggerating his time spent in solitary—studies of isolation and prison segregation show that even the more benign forms of solitary confinement (if one can speak of solitary as in any way benign) severely impact a prisoner’s psychology. In their survey of the literature on solitary confinement and “supermax” prisons (prisons based on a solitary model, where prisoners spend the majority of their time in segregated
Isolation research supports the notion that greater levels of deprivation contribute to more psychological and emotional problems . . .” For example, when “inmates face greater restrictions and social deprivations, their levels of social withdrawal increase” (255). Moreover,

[inmates in isolation, whether for the purpose of protective custody or punishment, suffer from numerous psychological and physical symptoms, such as perceptual changes, affective disturbances (notably depression), difficulties in thinking, concentration and memory problems, and problems with impulse control. (emphasis added 256)

A number of studies have found that prisoners subjected to long-stints in solitary confinement not only have difficulty with “impulse control,” but specifically with controlling violent impulses, like those described by Abbott. At least two of the studies cited by Pizarro and Stenius, for example, observe that prisoners subjected to solitary confinement experience “chronic rage reaction” (Korn) or “a tendency to strike out at people” (Kupers) (256). Stuart Grassian, in “Psychopathological Effects of Solitary Confinement,” one of the most influential articles on isolation in prison, describes a number of prisoners in his study who “reported episodes of lack of impulse control with random violence. One prisoner said, ‘I snap off the handle over absolutely nothing” (1453). This squares all-too neatly with Abbott’s “hostility,” “hatred,” and with his feeling that he “can’t help this anger”: “anger I’m not even conscious of, always burns within me,” he writes (124).

51 I use Giorgio Agamben’s reformulation of Carl Schmitt’s terminology to signpost the degree to which the prison is usually defined as an exceptional space on the civic landscape where the laws that typically govern the relationship between sovereign power and the subjects of
sovereign power are suspended. Although Agamben cautions against defining the prison as a state of exception in *Homo Sacer* (20), the term usefully explains how the prison is routinely bracketed from the presumably normal or non-carceral polity in prison writing and in theories of incarceration. I should add that I agree with Agamben that the prison does not constitute a state of exception—and the prison is certainly not the camp—because the law is not suspended in the prison, since prisons come under the jurisdiction of penal law. However, Agamben does not address the degree to which prisons can—and historically do—become states of exception where prisoners are defined as having no political identities, making them subject-less or *homo sacer*. Something of this slippage from legal space to exceptional space is seen in the definition of prisoners as the civil dead, for example. For more on Agamben’s formulation of the “state of exception” paradigm see *State of Exception* (2005).

Understanding Abbott involves—as his dedications page suggests—an examination of the prison, including figures that emerge from and influence prison cultures. I question the desire to read Abbott as a Mailerian hipster *in extremis*, as a “philosophical psychopath” hell-bent on challenging the “square” “totalitarian tissues of American society” (“White Negro” 214, 211). Despite the similarity between the hipster and a figure like Abbott, I argue that the connection obfuscates the lineage that Abbott is explicitly slotting himself into, one that emerges out of the prison, and not, as many repeatedly insist, out of Mailer’s writings and ideas. I make this point because, since the Adan murder, it has become commonplace to define Abbott as a mere reflection of the nihilistic hipster that Mailer celebrates in “The White Negro.” For example, Carl Rollyson writes, “The vehemence of Abbott’s expressions, literally underlined in nearly every page of his prose, delineates a view of repressive society that Mailer had held in ‘The White Negro’” (305). Likewise, Mary V. Dearborn argues that while it might not be fair to “hold
Mailer to the standards he promoted more than twenty years earlier, it’s hard to distinguish the long-term convict from the hipster of ‘The White Negro’ taken to extremes” (357). As with much of the media coverage after Abbott murdered Adan, there seems to be a desire, prevalent even among meticulous biographers like Rollyson and Dearborn, to define Abbott as a creation of Mailer’s—as a living (killing) consequence of the writer’s earlier ideologies.

53 For more on Sam Melville, see Leslie Pickering’s *Mad Bomber Melville* or Melville’s posthumous *Letters from Attica*.

54 For an interesting qualification of Mailer’s biography of Gary Gilmore, see Mikal Gilmore’s auto/biographical account of the Gilmore family and his brother’s execution, *Shot in the Heart* (1994). See also Leigh Gilmore’s (no relation) account of Gary Gilmore’s execution and Mikal Gilmore’s autobiography in “There Will Always Be a Father: Transference and the Auto/Biographical Demand in Mikal Gilmore’s *Shot Through the Heart*” in *The Limits of Autobiography: Trauma and Testimony* (2001).

55 Panzram even drafted a letter to then-President Herbert Hoover, arguing,

> I believe that I am within my constitutional rights when I refuse to accept a pardon or commutation from the death penalty to a sentence of life imprisonment, either in a prison or an insane asylum.

> I absolutely refuse to accept either a pardon or a commutation should either one or the other be offered to me. (304)

56 See, for example, Giorgio Agamben’s *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*.

57 As the socially dead or the “civil dead,” prisoners are ghostly legal subjects. This ghostly undecidability affects how prisoners write about their incarceration. Dylan Rodríguez writes, “a discourse of death and disappearance has become a common way for the currently and formerly
imprisoned to describe both the social logic and the experience of incarceration” (58). Abbott, for example, writes:

…A man is taken away from his experience of society, taken away from the experience of a living planet of living things, when he is sent to prison.

A man is taken away from other prisoners, from his experience of other people, when he is locked away in solitary confinement in the hole.

Every step of the way removes him from experience and narrows it down to only the experience of himself.

There is a thing called death and we have all seen it. It brings to an end a life, an individual thing. When life ends, the living thing ceases to experience.

The concept of death is simple: it is when a living thing no longer entertains experience.

So when a man is taken farther and farther away from experience, he is being taken to his death. (emphasis in original 62)

58 There are traces in the indoctrinated prisoner of a figure called the “Muselmann” that survivors describe encountering in the concentration camps in the Second World War. In Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive (2002), Giorgio Agamben discusses how survivors speak of victims in the camps who are “walking corpses,” “living dead,” “shadows” (54-55). The Muselmann are those who have “abdicated [their] inalienable freedom and [have] consequently lost all traces of affective life and humanity” (56). They are neither dead nor alive, but instead liminal people; they “mar[k] the threshold between the human and the inhuman” (55). Clearly a prisoner like Gerard is no Muselmann, just as a distinction needs to be maintained between the space of the prison and that of the camp. But there is something in Gerard’s
subjective in-between-ness that is shared, if only in a minor sense, with the Muselmann. And the reaction of the other prisoners in the cases of both Gerard and the Muselmann is uncannily similar. Agamben writes, “[a]ccording to the law that what man despises is also what he fears resembles him, the Muselmann is universally avoided because everyone in the camp recognizes himself in his disfigured face” (52).

59 In My Return, Naomi Zack writes that the “extreme emotional disturbance” defence (the argument that “Abbott was predisposed to kill anyone who aggressed upon him,” she writes) was “misinformation and prejudice”—an assertion that Abbott repeats throughout the book (118).

60 In retrospect, Abbott’s post-release behaviour indicated the extent to which his social compass was attuned to the prison. Mary V. Dearborn writes, “Abbott hated New York and especially the Lower East Side [where he was living, in a halfway house], which seemed to him as dangerous as prison.” If the Lower East Side was as dangerous as prison, then he needed to be prepared for prison-like violence—a conflation of life inside and life outside that would prove fatal. So “he quickly bought a knife, which he carried everywhere.” Dearborn continues:

Everywhere Abbott perceived dangers and threats; if a store owner was surly in giving change, the ex-con feared that this was an affront to be punished by murder. He simply could not function, either: he had no decent clothes until [Errol] McDonald took him to Macy’s, and he was bewildered by such matters as where to buy toothpaste and how to use a subway turnstile. The theft of his three-piece suit—the only thing he owned of any value—totally undid him. Norman [Mailer] and [Barbara] Norris had him as a guest in Provincetown for a few days and urged him to hold on until August, when he could come with them to Maine, but Abbott’s fuse was very short. (359)
Sloop does an admirable job of documenting the prevalence of the image of the prisoner as irrationally and brutally violent in the 1980s. See, in particular, 142-146.

See Christian Parenti’s *Lockdown America* for an effective analysis of how conservatives stoked populist fears about crime, which enabled retributive prison policies and “tough on crime” sentencing to produce unprecedented growth of the prison industry and prison populations.

Eric Schlosser coined the term “prison-industrial complex” (troping on President Dwight D. Eisenhower’s famous definition of the “military-industrial complex” in his 1961 farewell address) to define “a set of bureaucratic, political, and economic interests that encourage increased spending on imprisonment, regardless of the actual need.” According to Schlosser, the prison-industrial complex “is a confluence of special interests that has given prison construction in the United States a seemingly unstoppable momentum” that has culminated in an unprecedented growth in prison populations and that, in turn, has fed a carceral economy of interlocking businesses, from medicine to law, education to catering. Importantly, Schlosser also emphasizes the psychological implications of the term “complex,” suggesting that the prison-industrial complex “is a state of mind,” an “overreaction to some perceived threat” like the image of the irrationally violent prisoner and the populist fear of an emergent criminal underclass.

**Chapter 4: “Bad Motherfucker:” Lying, Badmen, and Breaking the Rules of Genre in *The Autobiography of James Carr***

While several theorists argue that normalized or commonsensical regulations are best recognized when interrupted or contravened, I develop this point specifically from Paul John Eakin, who writes in “Breaking Rules: The Consequences of Self-Narrative” that rules of
autobiography or identity are “most clearly displayed and articulated” when “they are perceived to have been broken” (113).

65 In a November 19, 2008 email, Cronin confirms that the CDC had no role in censoring Bad. He maintains that censoring the book was the publisher’s “decision alone, they controlled the final content of the book.”

66 Carr was shot by two men, Richard Rodriguez and Lloyd Mims, who had been hired to assassinate him. They never revealed their contractor(s), however, and law enforcement officials were not interested in finding out who paid for Carr’s murder. “The DA explained in his opening statement [at Rodriguez’s and Mims’ trial] that these dudes were hired killers, only the triggermen in a well-planned murder,” writes Betsy Carr. “But, he added, he wouldn’t try to prove who had hired them” (224). All Rodriguez and Mims “would say about their motive to one of the lawyers appointed to the case was that they had been told Carr was a police agent” (Durden-Smith 125). Carr has never been confirmed as a police informer but suspicion and rumour may have been enough to have him killed at a time when frequently well-founded paranoia about informants was common in the Black Panther Party and the prison resistance movement in the early 1970s.

67 Jackson and Carr had become close friends in prison, and they had formed a gang together in the 1960s called the Wolf Pack. Most of Carr’s writing about Jackson focuses on their early relationship, shedding little light on Jackson’s development as a revolutionary figure and a public intellectual. The George Jackson in Bad is an interesting counterpoint to the moral hard badman of Soledad Brother because he is invested in the violence, brutality, and illicit operations of the prison subculture and is not involved in political activity. Carr chooses not to sanitize Jackson’s image by avoiding descriptions of his involvement in the prison’s day to day sadism and
corruption. To do so would be to police the text in a way that is at odds with Carr, Hammer, and Cronin’s desire to avoid representing prisoners as “innocent victim[s] of social injustice.”

Instead, Carr foregrounds Jackson’s involvement in the bloody and predatory world of the prison that all prisoners have to negotiate if they are going to survive it.

68 For an account of these incidents and Carr’s suspected involvement in them, see Durden-Smith’s Who Killed George Jackson? (1976).

69 David Hilliard does provide a more disruptive, menacing impression of Carr throughout his memoir, however, that does not accord with the cool militancy of the moral hard badman. He writes that “Jackal Dog acts vaguely threatening,” for example. At one point Hilliard describes getting menacing calls at his house and he recognizes Carr’s voice and expressions: “Hilliard,” the voice on the phone says, “I’m gonna mash you like a potato” (329).

70 The indeterminate sentence complicates Huey Newton’s conception of “the political prisoner,” as detailed in his January 3, 1970 pamphlet “Prison, Where is Thy Victory?.” Newton argues that there are “two types of prisoners” (155). The first, whom he calls an “illegitimate capitalist,” is “willing to go through the prison programs” and “say the things the prison authorities want to hear” so he or she will be released and “resume the pursuit of his capitalistic goals” (156). The second type of prisoner, the “political prisoner,” “refuses to accept the legitimacy of the system and refuses to participate” (156). For those with an indeterminate sentence (such as most prisoners had at the time), Newton’s conception of prison resistance as an open refusal to go along with the system would be, to adopt his term, revolutionary suicide. A prisoner who declared open resistance to the prison system—like George Jackson, for example, whose parole was always denied—might never be released. As Carr shows, prison conditions required modified but less glamorous resistance tactics.
Lying likely also intersects with (or draws some rhetorical force from) the broader American tradition of the “tall tale.” For more on the tradition of the tall tale, see Carolyn S. Brown or Timothy Dow Adams.

Henry Louis Gates, Jr. also mentions in a footnote that “[l]ies is a traditional Afro-American word for figurative discourse, tales, or stories” (56). He later notes that, along with Zora Neale Hurston (who discusses lies not only in *Dust Tracks on a Road* but also in *Mules and Men*), the use of the term “lies” to denote a form of signifyin(g) can be found in J.L. Dillard’s *Lexicon of Black English* (1977) and Sterling A. Brown, Arthur Paul Davis, and Ulysses Lee’s chapter “Folk Literature” in *The Negro Caravan* (1941) (57).

I use Henry Louis Gates, Jr.’s formulation, “signifyin(g),” to register the word’s vernacular and often oral register. For an extended analysis of signifyin(g), see Gates, Jr.’s *The Signifying Monkey*.

Black Panther David Hilliard describes this as a language register of impoverished African American communities—those communities most likely to be incarcerated in the United States. When he was criticized for advocating the assassination of President Richard Nixon in a speech, he responded that he was speaking according to a different discursive tradition: “We call it metaphor. It is the language of the ghetto. This is the way we relate. Even the profanity, the profanity is within the idiom of the oppressed people” (qtd. in Rhodes 114).

For more on “private transcripts,” see Scott.

Collectors of toasts at the time sought examples of this rich cultural tradition in prisons. Bruce Jackson collected toasts at Indiana State Penitentiary for *Get your Ass in the Water and Swim like Me: Narrative Poetry from Black Oral Tradition* (1974), and Dennis Wepman, Ronald B. Newman, and Murray B. Binderman culled their collection of toasts for *The Life: The Lore and
Folk Poetry of the Black Hustler (1976) from impromptu recitations at a variety of New York prisons—Sing Sing, Attica, Clinton, and Auburn (6).

77 In a toast called “The Lame and the Whore,” for example, the speaker argues that a pimp (a classic badman figure) must beat, rape, and even murder his whore in order to sustain his badman image: “you go to stomp that bitch,/ . . . and use her like you would a tool” so as not to be “lame” but a “hip” “pimp” instead (128-129). Bruce Jackson describes “The Lame and the Whore” as excessively misogynistic for toasting, but he writes that it is also “an extension of the same misogyny” found throughout the toasting tradition where masculinity is frequently expressed through acts of violence against women (128).

78 One-time Black Panther and exiled social activist Assata Shakur describes how ubiquitous rape was in her community when she was young: “when i [sic] was growing up, boys gang-banging or gang-raping a girl was a pretty common thing. They called it pulling a train. It didn’t happen to any particular kind of girl. It happened to girls who were at the wrong place at the wrong time. The boys talked about it like it was a joke or a game. . .” (116). Shakur quite rightly contextualizes rape in African American communities as emerging out of the conditions of slavery, where “slaves were encouraged to take the misery of their lives out on each other instead of on the master,” and where black women were “fair game for anyone at the time” since they were defined as “breeding animals” (116). Although in his introduction Dan Hammer makes an attempt to frame Carr’s violence as the result of social determinants (like economic exploitation or structural racism), Carr resists explicitly describing gang-rape as an effect of determinates like racial oppression. Instead, he relays gang-rape as a normalized expression of power, as part of the brutality of the ghetto. Predatory violence is not normalized simply because it is the modus operandi of The Farmers; it is normalized because predation is the currency of street life,
circulated not only between gangs, but used also by teachers (21), foster home guardians (28), doctors (24), the police (116), lawyers (121), judges (26), psychiatrists and other psychiatric and psychological workers (146), and, most frequently, prison guards (61, 81, 93-94 to name just a few instances). Gang-rape is a particularly violent expression of a matrix of brutality in which Carr operates, and that governs street and prison life.

In his prison memoir *Soul on Ice*, Eldridge Cleaver also describes raping black and white women.

Abernathy’s story speaks to a very real phenomenon in American prisons. In 2001, the International Human Rights Watch released a report entitled *No Escape: Male Rape in U.S. Prisons* that documents widespread sexual violence in American prisons through the testimony of 200 prisoners in 34 states (No Escape). As John Corley writes in the prisoner-produced and published prison news magazine, *The Angolite*, the “report laid the groundwork for the U.S. Congress to pass the optimistically named Prison Rape Elimination Act (PREA) in 2003, which promised that institutional sexual assault would no longer be treated indifferently.” The report (which, according to Corley and a July 2006 article in *The Nation* that he cites, has yet to make an impact) estimates that 13 percent of American prisoners have been sexually assaulted. Corley writes that many “experts believe that the 13 percent figure is too conservative, but even so it translates into a stunning number of victims—nearly 200,000 currently incarcerated inmates—and in excess of 1,000,000 during the past 20 years” (Corley 18). Abernathy is, of course, a face behind these statistics—but so is Carr. Befitting the badman archetype that his autobiographical subject is channelling, Carr boasts about raping prisoners like Abernathy, making no attempt to shy away from the effects of his violence as a result.
Humour can sometimes provide a conceptual framework for unspeakable experiences to enter into discourse. See Steve Lipman’s *Laughter in Hell: The Use of Humor During the Holocaust* (1991), which anthologizes jokes and humorous anecdotes told by holocaust survivors. Or see Tim O’Brien’s “How to Tell a True War Story” in *The Things They Carried* (1990), which shows how O’Brien inflects a traumatic incident with a joke, possibly so as to bring the experience into his autobiography. Although these examples show how humour helps survivors to bring their traumatic experiences into discourse, some of the principles likely apply to Carr’s use of humour in *Bad*, particularly how unspeakable acts of violence can be discussed in a seemingly inappropriate storytelling mode or tenor.

**Conclusion: Rehabilitation in an Age of Retribution**

Caleb Smith likewise writes that contemporary prisons are “grotesquely violent warehouses” (201).

The American Friends Service Committee’s *Struggle for Justice* (1971), which I discuss in Chapter 1, had an early but damaging impact on the rehabilitative ideal. What made *Struggle for Justice* significant was, as Hawkins and Alpert suggest, that the critique of rehabilitation had not come from the usual conservative parties but rather from “the radical-liberal camp” (210). Jessica Mitford’s journalistic *Kind and Usual Punishment* (1973) also had a detrimental impact on rehabilitation as a guiding penal philosophy. But it was Douglas Lipton, Robert Martinson, and Judith Wilks’ *The Effectiveness of Correctional Treatment* (1975) that had the greatest impact on the public debate over prisons.
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