

# Uncovering American Prison Writing

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## Incarceration in the Land of the Free

Thesis concerning the identity politics of US prison culture  
and the evocative potential of prison writing  
for recovering what is concealed

Final Thesis

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## Introduction

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Since the rise of the penitentiary during the first half of the eighteenth century in Europe and America, the prison has become a 'natural' phenomenon in today's society. It has assumed the function of a control mechanism for our moral behavior that we are supposed to take for granted, because it effectively and economically solves the problems society has with individuals. This naturalness informs its very legitimacy. Although heavily concealed and secretively kept from the eye of society through isolating not merely the body, but also the voice of prisoner, the prison nevertheless continues to function as the face of our legal system.

During the 1960s and 70s however, an effective explosion of prison writings was released upon American society that disputed the legitimacy of prison culture and the practices of its system. These writings, most notably *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (1964) and George Jackson's prison letters *Soledad Brother* (1970) showed what later social and economic research validated: the prison has resulted to be an manipulative institution, because it has not functioned as a control center, but rather as a site of domination over the socially and economically disenfranchised. Prison writings, obviously more than scientific investigation, as Doran Larson in "Toward a Prison Poetics" (2010) asserts, help us "to understand how and whether the penal institutions to which we offer our implicit or explicit support actually approximate justice" (Larson, 160). Quentin Miller writes, "By reading this literature we become witnesses with a moral responsibility" (Miller, 4). Although a source of great value, Larson's and Miller's work on prison writing lack both an historical as well as a cultural substance in their analysis of prison literature, substance that is yet of profound importance if we want to look deeper into this literary quality of prison writing. What I mean by this is that the writings of prisoners, apart from an artistic genre, also is an utmost sociopolitical genre and therefore needs to be understood as such. It deserves an investigation into the historical (both social and literary) background from which it departs in confronting it. It is thus that I will use historical and sociocritical works of Foucault, Lyotard, Bruce Franklin and Angela Davis to embed the literature I will discuss in relation to the (his)story of American society. The main reason, as I will show, is that prison writing is ancillary to history (as the novel was) and can not be regarded as a distinct object of investigation, but is, already

in its name, a genre that emerges from a sociopolitical and cultural need.

The topic of this thesis thus, the functioning of prison writing within American culture, stands in relation to this sociopolitical debate instigated by Angela Davis, who pleads for the abolition of the prison system as a racial institution, as well as in regard to the everyday expansion of the US prison on an industrial scale that keeps a growing amount of people incarcerated the crime rate has been reduced. In a 1994 article by Thomas Marvell and Carlisle Moody, "Population Growth and Crime Reduction", it is stated that the US State prison population increased from 177, 113 to 732,652 prisoners, that is by 314%, from 1971 to 1991. In contrast, the authors point out that the "reported index crime grew only 73% in these two decades". Also, "crime estimates from the National Crime Victimization on Surveys declined slightly between 1973 and 1991, from 35.7 tot 34.7 million" (Marvell: 109). These numbers implicate a widening variety of offenses and consequently an exponential expansion of the idea of crime and criminals. Thereby taking into account that prison is becoming a *profit based* institution under the banner of being "efficient and market-friendly" (Jing 2010: 364), it can be argued that prisons, most obvious since the second half of the twentieth century, never actually improved the life of people in the form of disciplinary attention to the deviant individual.

Instead, as Julianne Malveaux argues, the goal "of prison work is not to free anyone (...). [T]he prison industry stands to make more money with more prisoners" (Malveaux: EBSCO web). Complementing this with the thirteenth amendment of the US constitution – "Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, except as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted, shall exist within the United States, or any place subject to their jurisdiction" – such penal discourse, perhaps unconsciously, transforms detainees (again) into economic useful instruments. Consequently, as Angela Davis has become famous for arguing, the prison loses its ethical rationality that legitimated the rise of the penitentiary around 1800 as a result from the social changes that occurred during the Age of Reason.

The industrializing scale with which the prison is expanding also has affected the prison population in racial terms. In a brief statistical account in the *Time*<sup>1</sup> in 2008, we can read the striking conditions of mass imprisonment for non-whites.

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More than 1 out of every 100 U.S. adults is behind bars, according to a new Pew report.

1 Author unknown. "America Incarcerated", *Time* 171.11 (2008), 14 – 16.

Violent crimes have dropped 25% since '87, but harsher sentencing for lesser crimes has caused overcrowding and fueled a thriving private-prisons industry. A look at who's doing time in the land of the free:

National prison population

'87 585,084

'07 1,596,127

Of every 100 inmates in prison or jail (91% male, 9% female)

40.3 are black

36.2 are white

20.5 are Hispanic

3.0 are other

1 in 9 black men age 20 to 34 are in prison

1 in 36 Hispanic men age 18 or older are in prison

1 in 100 black women age 35 to 39 are in prison

1 in 106 white men age 18 or older are in prison

1 in 355 white women age 35 to 39 are in prison (*Time* 2008).

A system that was historically transported from Europe's Age of Reason to contemporary's multiculturalism in America has its profound effect upon non-white people. Regarding these numbers, we could question the function and therefore the ethical (if not an ethnical) rationality of the prison system. The mechanism of the ethical rationality is the pivotal point in Michel Foucault's historical and philosophical work on the phenomenon of prison. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of The Prison* (1975/1991) has shown that imprisonment is the state's most compromised site of control over the individual body. It is thus, according to Jonathan Simon, that Foucault's understanding of the prison embodied the "central image and analytic scheme for the humanities in the late 1970s", that is a scheme or metaphor for the objectifying or performative gaze of society and for how society regulates itself in terms of essentialist narratives (Simon: 332). Although Simon argues that Foucault lost relevancy for

understanding today's "warehouse prisons" because of the rising of the new model of mass imprisonment that is "based on demographic categories of the population rather than the disciplinary investment of the deviant individual", Foucault's theory of the institutional formation of the individual as a subject that is linked to power and knowledge, holds major importance in terms of the narrative mechanisms that are supporting the power of prison institutions within society. The reason why this is so, is that today's functioning and the very possibility of "demographic categories" can and should be related to Foucault's analysis of the social order during the Enlightenment. I will argue that the contemporary prison system, with its racial character, is to be traced back to Foucault's history if we recognize his analysis of the modern social order in terms of a grand narrative of emancipation that sought to rationalize an idea of humanity and thus based political and social institutions upon this narrative. There exists an irrevocable link between the situation today and what was changed in regard to the order of things, particularly in terms of the prison system.

Although the current situation of prison development in the US demands urgency in developing new sociological and political debates about this fashion, the mechanisms behind this power exercise remain the same; isolation is the common purpose, regardless to whom, where and when it happens. Doran Larson calls this the "fixed schematic" of prisons and understands national or cultural difference but variations of it. Prison always has been an autonomous system that is, needless to say, functioning in terms of legal, cultural and material concealment, whatever the moral stripe of the subject incarcerated (to which access hence has been lost as well). Prisoners are "heavily documented and materially mapped". Larson writes:

S/he [the prisoner] is also discursively fixed as the "othered" subject in public debates on law, order, and national or local security—a discourse carried out by politicians, administrators, and private citizens at the federal, state, and local levels. To different ends, Foucault has documented and historicized these circuits of "power-knowledge", both inside and outside the prison. (Larson: 145).

In order to look into prison writing, something this thesis aims at, we have to be firmly aware of the prisoner as a symbolically dominated subject who finds him- or herself on the oppositional side of global history through which human beings have access to democratic

emancipation. In order to look into the functioning of prison writing, I will open the discussion on the local subject position of the prisoner in order to determine the concept “prison” in prison writing. Because prison can be seen as a development that necessitated from the new social order, I will draw the theoretical discussion of Lyotard's grand narrative into Foucault's historical framework. Modernity is, according to Simon Malpas defined as a “reliance upon grand narratives that depict human progress”. This grand narrative, taking the form of a universal story through which knowledge and experiences are explained and social institutions are legitimated, will be argued as central to the prison model we know today (chapter 2). It therefore also determines the working concept of prison writing. Prisoners, seen as outcasts or outlaws, can be understood as not belonging to the realm of emancipation. They are, as Larson already noted, extremely documented by the members of society, since the only identity they have is constructed by the public realms that accepts and justifies their isolation. Prisoners are defined by the principles of the grand narrative of emancipation as local identity as those who do not longer participate in the same language game, that is the formal set of rules and ends that define legitimacy of society's practice. They are left out and their biography is taken away. I will look into prison writing as writing both within and against the narrative that has led to their social position of a prisoner. The question I will investigate in this thesis is: How is prison writing constructed to become culturally valid to the hegemony of the American social discourse surrounding imprisonment (i.e. criminals, prison, punitive system)? I will explore whether, or to what extent literature that is written by American convicts can or have the potential to destabilize the discourse in which prisoners are caught. This discourse, vastly controlled and intensified by mass media, legitimizes an industrialized prison system and objectifies prisoners as others. The concept of hegemony, a much debated concept will be more vastly defined along the path investigation of Lyotard's grand narratives and local narrative. Only when this discussion is formulated more thoroughly, I will be able to insert both the understanding of hegemony and its antithesis in relation to the legitimating narrative as seen in mass media and state coverage. This will be done in the third and last chapter.

In the first chapter, I will concentrate on parallel between the rise of the penitentiary and the novel (focusing on the autobiographical “I”). Here I will discuss both Michel Foucault and John Bender, who wrote a study on the function of the modern novel and the penitentiary

during the Age of Reason. I will introduce therefore the idea of a modern viewpoint of narrative (i.e. the idea of personality through occurrence of events) as present in the ideal formation of a prison culture, that is punishment in the form of rehabilitation in temporal isolation. I will argue that the rise of the penitentiary runs parallel with rise of the novel and thus with the recognition of the subject, since both draw upon the idea that people can change through a sequence of events through time (knowledge and self-reflection regarded as means of progression). Controlled isolation through time in this narratological sense is the proper means for altering one's moral personality. All in obvious servitude of a rationalized society. As an obvious example, I will discuss Daniël Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, in which the hero becomes isolated from society and develops a renewed moral stance towards the world. In the second chapter, I will discuss Lyotard's narrative of emancipation and look into how it formulated the current situation of the prison system in an age of postmodernism, an age that is marked by the famous words of "the incredulity towards metanarratives". I will do so with regard to the development with the autobiographical novel in terms of global and local narratives, since the debate on metanarratives discloses participation of the local in the identity politics of the global. The narrative of emancipation is firmly connected to the rise of the novel, in which the "I" of the protagonist is regarded as perfectible, while prisoners, regarded as local identities, whose theoretical representations are "finished", because defined within and limited by their marginal position. After this theoretical part, I will introduce the prison writings of Malcolm X, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (1964) and George Jackson's *Soledad Brother* (1970). The reason for choosing these two personal narratives, apart from the international acclaim they received, is that both authors seek to manipulate the narrative of emancipation through using both the traditional notion of autobiography, yet also by professing dissociative tropes through which they reinstate both the isolating society and the isolated "I" and therefore destabilize the oppositional context of their identity. I will investigate how they try to rewrite, or reinstate the principles of a liberal democracy through the use of autobiography. Apart from looking into the realm in which their work is placed, I will look at how these works are structured in terms of a literary tradition, defined by, and supporting the hegemonic ideal of individualism. I will return to the analysis of the novel started in the first chapter, in which the autobiographical "I" was firmly anchored in the social order in which it acted (although isolated, Crusoe still shared the same history and language of

the global). But as it is clear in relation to the prison writings I am discussing, this can not be the case for Malcolm X and George Jackson. The reverse is true, since their biography is defined in opposition with the global narrative by which they are written out of public history. What I will do thus, is looking into their systematic reinstating of this identity politics and how they are restate their subject position through manipulating their autobiographical "I" and that of society.

# Chapter 1

## American Prison Reform

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### 1.1 Introduction

This chapter investigates the turning point of the American prison during the Age of Reason and analyzes how the novel, or narrative literature, formulated new attitudes towards penitentiary prisons and thus culturally supported (re)inventing them. In this chapter I will predominantly introduce a modernity based understanding of the prison system, inherently connected with the narrative of Enlightenment (chapter 2) that promised equality, freedom and economic and scientific progression. Associated with this narrative, as it is argued by both Angela Davis and John Bender, is that the modernist prison system, as we still take it for granted nowadays, assumed “novelistic ideas of character and re-presented the sensible world (both to their inmates and to the public at large) in order to alter motivation and to reconstruct the fictions of personal identity that underlie consciousness” (Bender, 2). Today's construction and expansion of the American prison system refers back to the historical conception of the penitentiary in the beginning of the eighteenth century when the American Revolution happened to result in a moral renewal towards humanity and consequently towards prisoners. During the birth of the modern age, a period that marks the birth of the modern American prison, the first panopticon prisons were build and the practice of punishment became invested in “creating conditions of punishment based on solitary confinement” instead of applying – European based – methods of corporal punishments (Davis 2003, 47). Within the process of prison reform, Angela Davis writes, “(...) incarceration within a penitentiary was assumed to be humane – at least far more humane than the capital and corporal punishment inherited from England and other European countries” (40). During that Age of Reason, European as well as American reformers put an end to horrifying penalties such as whippings, brandings and amputations and defended the value of incarceration as the principle mode of legal penalty itself. Incarceration did exist before that time, but was, prior to the Enlightened alternative, only a liminal space between life and death, without any juridical-political function or status. Obviously, the process of reformation is closely related to the rise

of capitalism and “to the appearance of a new set of ideological conditions” that invited thorough revision of the ideas about the individual subject, morality, identity and social reality. In her 2003 book *Are Prisons Obsolete?*, Davis touches upon the involvement of the novel – that by then was becoming a literary genre – as one of the key processes that supported to shape a renewal in thinking about how isolation would help the individual to transgress his or her moral state and thus to contribute to a rehabilitative form of punishment. She writes, in following John Bender's 1987 study *Imagining the Penitentiary*, of which I will talk later in this chapter, that “the emergent literary genre of the novel furthered a discourse of progress and individual transformation that encouraged attitudes toward punishment to change” (Davis, 51). The novel, in emphasizing the power of confinement to reshape personality, is said to have moved reformers into action and made possible the popular idea of an 'enlightened' alternative to the older prison system. John Bender in his 1987 book thoroughly connects the novelistic representations with institutional (re)formation and intriguingly shows that the discourses became a part of cultural understanding and thus a significant contribution to the emergence of the new prison architecture, which in principle is based on the ideas of the utilitarian social reformer Jeremy Bentham. This chapter starts with a brief introduction into the history of the development of the European prison system as it was transported to the United States by English colonists. I will show how the reformation of the penitentiary is thoroughly connected to the cultural movements that posed difficulties against the randomness of society and thus of prisons. What I want to do eventually is argue that the link between literature and a reformed institutional society is a link that is informing one another and thus that the history within this chapter is not a closed architecture, but that this is, allowing to paraphrase Foucault's introductory words of *Discipline and Punish*, a history of the present. This chapter serves as the foundation for my theoretical terminology on the critical potential of prison literature, that – as history shows – is inherently connected to the order of things that it attacks. I will ground my investigation in terms of a collaboration with the study of Foucault, Davis as well as with John Bender's study of the modern novel. The scope of interest in this chapter obviously lies in the fact that the rise of the novel during the late seventeenth century is seen as a contribution to the a 'more humane' mode of punishment, whereby isolation is regarded as a penal instrument that aims beyond the practice of punishment itself. This chapter shows us an historical overview of a literary genre that has

influenced the conception of prison as an humanistic ideal.

## 1.2. The Premodern Order of Things

Imprisonment was not employed as the prime mode of punishment until the eighteenth century in England and the nineteenth century in the United States. Prior to the reformation from the 'old prison' system to the new one, closely associated with the American Revolution as I will show later, incarceration was not intended as a penal instrument. Rather, prisons were used as places of detention "prior to judgment or disposition" (Bender, 11). The actual modes of punishment, on the other hand, existed in (public) attacks against the psychical body of the convict, whether in the form of torture, banishment or death. Michel Foucault is clear in depicting these forms of punishments in the first pages of his book *Discipline and Punish*, in which he sets out the visually detailed account of a 1757 execution in Paris and shows that a gazed upon pain, "more or less to a horrible degree" was the constituent element of the penalty (Foucault, 33). During this age and day, variations of crime were merely reflected in variations of torture and death. What was most important for the power who invested these practices was the reconstitution of a "momentarily injured sovereignty" (48). The spectacle of the public practice of torture and death was meant not only to mirror the crime in the body of the convict itself, but also to recover the state's power that was damaged by the convict when he succeeded to trespass the law. Not (only) the immediate victim of the crime was avenged, but also the law and therefore the sovereign itself. Foucault writes: "It (the convict) attacks the sovereign personally, since the law represents the will of the sovereign; it attacks him physically, since the force of the law is the force of the prince". In other words: by breaking the law, the criminal touched the very person of the prince. The public execution then, has a juridic-political function, for it is a ceremonial restoration of sovereignty in the most spectacular and psychical form. It did not, in the first place, re-establish justice. Rather, it reactivated power in its most visible form. It was a ritual that belonged to the dissymmetry "between the subject who has dared to violate the law and the all-powerful sovereign who displays his strength" (Foucault, 49). Therefore, the punishment before prison reformers began their protest was by definition an unbalanced and excessive practice. The ritual most importantly was a power exercise of the state; a visual concentration of the strength and truth

of the sovereign, anchored in the visible body of the condemned. Obviously, this exercise not only reactivated the power of the sovereign, it also endangered its terrorizing strength.

Ritual and ceremonial force were also to be found in the prisons of that day. Typical residents of the prisons that existed both in Europe as well as in the United States were debtors and people awaiting trial (Bender, 13). Again, prisons were not designed as places of confinement, as Bender shows, but “were domestically organized” and “microcosmically condensed the society that created them” (14). Since these sites of incarceration were not under the command of the state (i.e. confinement was not part of the punitive system, hence not available to the eye of the state), they were independent of legal practice and hence of the sovereign. The regime, the governance, the finance and the architecture of the prisons, none of these were part of the state's affairs. Although the jail's keeper served as an agent of the legal system, he did not serve not as an officer of that system: he was not a sign of institutional punishment, since punishment was reserved for the sovereign alone. The keeper only had a representative function of a self-evident authority (based on tradition), but the prison itself was not a legal object. Hence prisons were not formed according to a planned framework of measured isolation, appropriately structured according to the moral stripe of the criminal. Rather the old prisons were loose structures “bounded by authority yet out of its reach” (Bender, 33). Prisoners had the opportunity to buy themselves privileges or specific services and even could buy themselves a degree of freedom in the form of the removal of chains or by joining a “largely unsupervised population within the guarded boundaries” (19). The old system thus was based on jailers' fees that prisoners had to pay when entering as well as when leaving the prison. Hence the ritual based formulation of prison life. On the top of that, new prisoners had to buy themselves the loyalty of the associated prisoners in the “custom of garnish”, which meant that a stranger needed to purchase drinks all around. In case he was not able or willing to pay this large set of fee, his clothes where stripped of and sold as a surrogate 'garnish'. This ritual was a version of the social order that structured the social reality outside the prison walls as well; the prison was closely integrated in its surrounding society. Although these rituals are not restricted to the movements ascribed to statuses and hence accessible to everyone, the economic system that drove this absolute social freedom maintained a strict parallel with society. In the words of Bender, who follows Gadamer's analysis of the premodern society:

In coffee houses, according to Habermas, lord and commoner could converse on equal terms in the public sphere, outside the rules of status governing the period's usual social intercourse. At the same time, the system of fees for lodging and services (...) transparently demystified social standing by reducing it to the terms of a purely economic code. (Bender, 30).

The relevant categories of governance for jailers were economic, which meant that also in prison, great differences existed in the social-domestic environment and consequently within the psychological conditions of the prisoners, ranging from private apartment within the keeper's quarters to more "common side wards where crowds of half-naked prisoners huddled in a filthy straw, and finally the collective dungeons, where solitude could be considered a blessing by inmates who might expect to share quarters with the insane, the desperate, or even the deceased" (18). Because of the lack of a rationally motivated governance, prisons were randomly ordered and unpenetrated by precisely formulated rules. The true order of things was not inscribed by narrative (written) rules. The rather providential order of things was explained by the (public) appearances and acts of the prisoners and the will of the jailer that manifested themselves in a ceremonial reality. Therefore, against this background of randomness of chance and fortune – hence of life and death, we could say – no appeal was made towards a moral improvement of the prisoners. Prisoners could and would live the life that was lived before and, in case of release, probably thereafter.

### 1.3 Reformation of Punishment

During the Enlightenment in the second half of the eighteenth century the emergence of empiricist secularism as well as the growing protest against public practice of execution and torture, formulated the opinion that a reformation was needed of the psychological conditions, the governance and the manners within prisons in order to actual reform the morals of prisoners. I will now turn towards the particular historical moment of this process of reformation, beginning in England in the 1770s and prevailing throughout American and Europe during the 1840s (Bender, 22). As we can read in both Bender and Foucault, is that protests "against the

public executions proliferated in the second half of the eighteenth century; among philosophers and theoreticians of the law, among lawyers and the parlementaires; in popular petitions and among the legislators of the assemblies” (Foucault, 73). No longer was the physical confrontation between the sovereign and the condemned accepted as a ritual of power. The badly regulated distribution of power needed to be reformulated and the super-power of the monarch, who's right to punish was closely related to the person of the sovereign, had to be redistributed in a new economy that was integrated in society. The reasons that led to this cry for reformation are large in number, yet the overarching objection was that there existed a huge space between power and body of society. Power and society were not coextensive; therefore the punishments were unregulated, discontinuous, unpredictable and excessive, and thus not able to create a homogeneous frame of control of society. According to famous reformers such as Voltaire, Cesare Beccaria, John Howard and Jeremy Bentham, disproportionate punishment was ineffective in a society, a society that still more wanted to “embrace the development of production” and valued the increase of economic wealth. Foucault does not in the first place hold a growing humanistic consciousness responsible for the strength of the reformation of the power regulations, as well as, quite contradictory, the call for a systematic machinery that would guarantee the continuity and economic development of society. Foucault writes:

It was an effort to adjust the mechanisms of power that frame the everyday lives of individuals; an adaptation and refinement of the machinery that assumes responsibility for and places under surveillance their everyday behavior, their identity, their activity, their apparently unimportant gestures; another policy for that multiplicity of body and forces that constitutes a population. (Foucault, 77,78).

The language of economic development entered the field of the penal system and transcended the human individual: measurement, mapping and calculation defined the redistribution of power in the form of universal codes of behavior; the power to punish was given an economic mode in which punishment would be measured in terms of time, cost and effect. In Foucault we can read that the reformation was a result of the close interaction with the economic development of the late eighteenth century instead of an emergence out of a humanistic

consciousness. Indeed we could say that the birth of man (not merely regarded as an bodily object) during the Age of Reason was a humanistic ideal, but according to Foucault this was a result rather than a cause of the reformation. The reformation process into a system of thinking and perceiving man and society as essential for economic and scientific progression, as Edward Said also notes, indeed contradicts “the core of humanistic thought”, because the “individual cogito was displaced, or demoted to the status of illusory autonomy or fiction” (Said 2004, 10). Eventually the need for more social control resulted in what Foucault calls 'generalized punishment', a mode of punishment that not just defended the person of the king, but was meant to defend society as a whole, since one person's illegality could effect the production process that was invested in society and hence was related to all individual members. Therefore, the aim of punishment would be altered into a direction away from the sovereign that invested authority into the human body only to reactivate its power. Firmly anchored in an utilitarian idea of efficiency, the body should instead be invested in a positive and productive way, making the human individual more effective and useful for the society as a whole. The transformation into a disciplinary form of punishment resulted in the introduction of prison reform, in which human planning, both inside as outside prisons, became the profound instruments of controlling the individual body and therewith society. Just as society became economically and scientifically organized, based on (utilitarian) pronouncements of progress and development, prisons were reshaped in correspondence with the new system of political ideals. The randomness in penal law as well as in the old prison system had to give way to narrative order: “a programmatic course of events with the end of shaping personality according to controlled principles” (Bender, 35). What is the story of this new prison?

#### 1.4 New Order

John Bender regards the development of this new social order as the consequence of the emergence of a new narrative form that fictionalized material reality in rational ordered (causal) sequences. The reformation into disciplinary action that would result in a personality that was shaped “according to controlled principles”, presupposes the hypothesis of man's ability to reconstruct subjectivity according to new laws. This idea of a material reality and the

subsequent development is associated with the English philosophers John Locke, David Hume and eventually adapted and transformed into institutional practice by the utilitarian reformer Jeremy Bentham. Locke's epistemology of the concept of self and Hume's examination of "natural fictions" stressed the constructed, that is to say "fictional" aspect of concepts such as self, character, justice, law, nature, final causation by arguing that ordinary understanding is structured by habit, convention and linguistic convenience. Material reality therefore was understood as a special form of fiction, existing in a conceptual framework that is made up by social texts that are constructed not by logical and real entities, but rather were based upon our "sentiments of pleasure and uneasiness" (Hume, quoted in Bender, 37). Every aspect of reality was related to the in(ter)vention of the human mind. Reformers such as Bentham were fond of the implications and pragmatic possibilities that this position generated. For understanding reality as a fictionalized creation of the human mind meant that the story of society could be reconstructed in changing the fictions that informs it, and hence would redefine concepts as self, character, justice and law into a positive direction for the society (hence of social and economic control).

Since reality became to be considered as a narrative system of different perceptions that are linked together in a scheme of cause and effect, based on convention and education, the sense of a stable identity and character gave way to the idea that human beings were able to alter their relationship to these notions. Narrative sequence and the fiction of personal identity were regarded as inseparable, as we shall see later in regarding the new prison system that functions as a story that determines the fictions that constitute identity. First, however, it will be of major importance for us to follow the empirical and utilitarian idea of a fictional self down the grain. After Locke's and Hume's thorough denial of a rational support for a belief in an ontological ground of knowledge – all knowledge was based on repetition and convention, i.e. on experience instead of rationality – knowledge of a substantial self would never be feasible as a rational construct. Hume explains in his *Treatise of Human Nature* (1739):

I may venture to affirm of the rest of mankind, that they are nothing but a bundle or collection of different perceptions, which succeed each other with an inconceivable rapidity, and are in a perpetual flux and movement (...) The mind is a kind of theatre,

where several perceptions successively make their appearance, pass, re-pass, glide away, and mingle in an infinite variety of postures and situations. There is properly no simplicity in it at one time, nor identity in different; whatever natural propension we may have to imagine that simplicity and identity. (...) They are successive perceptions only, that constitute the mind; nor have we the most distant notion of the place, where these scene are represented, or of the material of which it is compos'd. (Hume 1739/1973, 1- 4-7).

The idea of a self thus was an ironic construct: although we are aware of a necessary theater, there is according to Hume no binding principle outside the human mind on which all different perceptions come together in one intelligible whole. Most important therefore to read in this quote is that the identity of human beings is thought of as a narrative through which a complex idea of the self arises, by which is meant that the idea of the self is made up out of perceptions, but that the bundle of perceptions itself can never be understood in terms of an external, stable reality. Therefore the self became a construct bounded to the limits of actual experience, that is, bounded or restricted to the contingent succession of related objects that fill our ideas on reality. Our mind tells us how we experience the world, without that we are being able to transcend this idea. In the next part, we shall meet the adaptation of this view within the penal system.

### 1.5 Narrative Fiction

Although thoroughly skeptical towards our capacity to transcend our rational limits of knowledge, social reformer and utilitarian Jeremy Bentham read Hume's enterprise in a fruitful way for his works on the realms of politics, education and punishment. Bentham used the fictional idea of the self and wished "to master reality by reshaping, and by rendering visible, the modes of its fictional construction" (Bender, 36). Bentham used the apparent negative discoveries of Hume for utilitarian ends: he used the fictions of Hume's epistemology for social useful practices. As I noted above already, personal identity in Locke and Hume was viewed as a fiction, based on the belief that our ideas are constructed out of experience. Bentham however went further than Hume did and posed that personal identity thus also

could be understood as an artificial creation. Furthermore, it was feasible to put this identity under control, since personality was inherently connected with the manifest conditions the subject is surrounded by. It is from this philosophical groundwork of Hume that Bentham extrapolated a philosophy of punishment and eventually spelled out the utmost “sensible” prison that is still in use today: the panopticon. Here I will quote Bentham on the profit of mastering the sensible world for the control and manipulating personality:

If it were possible to find a method of becoming master of everything which might happen to a certain number of men, to dispose of everything around them so as to produce on them the desired impression, to make certain of their actions, of their connections, and of all the circumstances of their lives, so that nothing could escape, nor could oppose the desired effect, it cannot be doubted that a method of this kind would be a very powerful and a very useful instrument which governments might apply to various object of the utmost importance. (Bentham, quoted in Bender, 39).

The government, in the form of a disciplinary and omniscient narrator would become physical again, yet not by way of the guillotine or by quartering, but in an utmost representational and sensible system of the Panopticon. These prisons were material fictions, because they, as buildings, would demand and prescribe the experience and thus formulate the “successive perceptions only, that constitute the mind” by isolating the individual to a limited mental framework. A disordering of familiar perceptions and temporal relation would, eventually, result in a reordering of the orientation towards the self and others as temporal dimensions provided by the state. This is also recognized by David Gross, who wrote “Temporality and The Modern State” (1985) and mentions the same principle of structural isolation that govern the meanings and memories on a supra-individual level, which is, “in principle, not much different from the concentration camp experience. He writes:

In the camps prisoners were faced with a radical narrowing of temporal relations, since familiar durational perspectives were no longer available. This disordering caused a confusion of values, for without a larger framework of understanding it was difficult to separate what was inherently trivial from what was wholly serious. Under

the circumstances, some prisoners were inclined to look beyond the self for a larger orientation toward life. Not surprisingly, the SS guards often provided this orientation, and some inmates of the camps came to adopt the world-views of their captors. (Gross, 73).

The architecture of the mind paralleled the architecture of the prison, or, as Gross argues. even the camp, because temporality, as directed by the modern state as the meaning system of both individual and collective experience (e.g. collective history and memory, as will be discussed in chapter 2), forms the background of interpretive administration. Indeed, temporality as factual notion itself did not come into being just with the age of Enlightenment, but its theoretical significance as a cognitive structure and therefore its political use did, most profoundly in the design of the schools, the factory and prison. The politicization of time, in its full dimensions, whether in the form of penal isolation or official history, forces the powerless into frames and structures that instigate a narrowing of consciousness. Gross: "By controlling how time is thought about, the [modern] state could plausibly affect, in almost imperceptible ways, not only the attitudes people hold, but their incentives and motivations as well" (Gross, 78). The instigation of this ironic process of systematic individualization, although denying a transcendental ontology of subjectivity, performs meaning in relation to the narrative forms that society deduces from its historical models. The role of narrative in the politicization of time is anything but original, as this topic has been discussed by numerous of philosophers and literary scholars, perhaps most evidently by Hayden White's study of history as a (moralizing) fiction-making. Yet, as Frank Ankersmit tells us, it is also the other way around; the truthfulness of history not only is informed by its narrative or literary structure, also the novel itself is deeply entrenched in the narrative form of history. Ankersmit in his 2010 article "Truth in History and Literature" writes that both the novel and the writing of history share that same cognitive aspirations, relying on the same basic set of truthfulness, but that the difference in them lie in the variation of "showing" and "saying" (Ankersmit, 45). Although Ankersmit is focusing his analysis on the representations of historical reality, he recognizes that the cognitive principles around which these representations are structured, both the novel and history share the focalization of events in meaningful teleological representations. They share the very same idea of temporality, that is a humanized notion of time, as the

ordering principle as well as the interpretive administration of experience. It is therefore that both John Bender, David Gross as well as Solange Leibovici (2009) believe that both the genre of autobiography, the novel and history as an institutional form emergence at the very same time of the reformation of identity politics. These three genres, as Leibovici writes in “Over narrativiteit en fictionalisering in de (autobiografische) ruimte”, “All assume a value for the diversity of people and an historical understanding of life” (Leibovici, 12, my translation). Against this background, the next part will be discussing the role of the novelization of literature in the eighteenth century that formulated and enabled attitudes that led to the realization of new methods of incarceration.

### 1.6 Emergence of the Novel and the Autobiographical “I”

The attitudes towards prison reform in the eighteenth century are closely connected to the emergence of the novel. As I already have indicated in the above sections: the penal system became structurally reshaped in terms of discipline. Supported by economic, scientific as well as philosophical developments, the randomness of the old prisons was reformed into a discourse that was structured by the categorizations (fictions) of social life and rationalization of personality. This structure, Benders argues, was informed or influenced by popular novels by, among others, Daniel Defoe and Henry Fielding, in which the transformation of personality in relation to (social) surroundings manifests itself in a temporal representation of consciousness-centered events. These narratives are regarded in line with the utilitarian architecture of human consciousness as the frame of reference for experience. The modern novel, Bender writes “embodies the fabric of urban culture: the very self-consciousness concerning the narration of minute particulars that defines it implies not merely an awareness of being watched, but the technical ability to keep track by writing and to retrieve by reading” (Bender, 58). The narrative patterns to recover one's personality in both the modern novel and autobiography through self-presence are essential in the aesthetics of the reformed penitentiary, an aesthetics that is based on the relationship between the experiencing self and the reader (or: the keeper's eye). It is therefore that we can say that reality in both the prison as the novel is constituted through material causes. Bender explains this as follows: It articulates reality within a fine network of visible, observationally discoverable causes

which are the motor factors of the narrative itself, for example, the internal forces of psychological motivation, the details of perceptual experience, the “natural” requirements of physical survival, the social demands of law and decorum. (Bender, 43).

The modern novel, such as *Robinson Crusoe*, through a psychological (that is, though inner strategies) motivated “I” who is the governing consciousness of the narration. The “I” is determined by the intersection of the perceiving mind and the material causes or circumstances that are at work. Hence, as will be discussed next, the material forces that structure the self are made tangible by the narrative construction of experience.

Daniel Defoe wrote his novels during the age when the old prison system still was present (*Robinson Crusoe* in 1719, *Moll Flanders* in 1722), but has acclaimed the significance in the history of the novel for Bender since his work made the “structures of feeling accessible”, a vision that will not be institutionally constituted for decades. In *Robinson Crusoe*, we read Crusoe's personal reflection (hence retrospective) on both the traditional randomness of the liminal society he used to live in before his shipwreck and on his quest for a (re)formation of consciousness on a deserted island. The island, evidently relieved of any societal dictate and custom, forces the protagonist to reconsider not merely the previous standard and comfort of life (in which he obeyed “blindly the Dictates of my Fancy rather than my Reason” (Defoe, 40)), yet also to rethink the nature of the human mind and how it should be structured through axiomatic social values in order to exercise a new (economic) status and to reconstruct a mental life that coheres with the solitude of the island. The custom liminal experience of his homeland loses its tangibility and hence its validity for the current situation. That situation is oppositional to his former life, since no myth, no social categories and no customs are available to Crusoe. The solidarity in the beginning of the narrative is reflected as negative, punitive, random and vengeful., as Bender also points out (Bender, 55). However, eventually, due to the him being thrown back upon his mental self, isolation is represented as a mental reformation that helps him to function materially on the island. The axiomatic social values thus, based on categories of productive intellectual wealth, through interaction with Friday and mutineers, form the foundation of his new born consciousness, that is the “private realms of reflective thought” (Bender, 54). Crusoe for example first teaches Friday the idea of causation and craft in order for him to become recognized as human being, all before Crusoe himself becomes aware of the enabling force of the use of narrative structure in his

relationship with others. Bender explains: "Crusoe uses the explanatory power of story-telling to exert control over the mutineers and to police the future civil order he envisions upon the arrival of the sixteen Spaniards" (Bender, 56). The productivity of this (re)formative intellectual wealth empowers Crusoe to control and effect material ends (e.g. economic prosperity and Friday as human resource). The narratives used by Crusoe, that is the authoritative language with which he explains his self in relation to his new environment, proves to be his salvation. The construction of his narratives refers inherently to the salvation that immanently awaits him. Narrative order, so to say, in which Crusoe's personality changes in relation to the direct material reality he is confronted with, defines the representation of character and reality.

Typical for *Robinson Crusoe* is the narrator-character transformation of personality through reflection that is he is forced to by the unfortunate state of isolation. What is suggested, is that his consciousness adopts the material reality of social solidarity in order to come to a "proper inner comprehension of life as a story" in which each "circumstance is meaningful" (Bender, 55). It is clear that in the story of *Robinson Crusoe*, the reformation from the old prison to the modern one is already hinted at as a social and economic useful change. Bender writes: "Prison, now equated with solitary reflection, is first viewed as negative, random, punitive, vengeful; but it slides into another thing entirely – something salubrious, beneficent, reformatory, and productive of wealth and social integration" (Bender, 55). The novel itself here, certainly in the presented form in which *Robinson Crusoe* is read, actually produces his life while writing his autobiography, for it functions as the discursive framework that informs the coherence of experience (the above sequence of experience is read through the use of Redemption, Salvation, Providence, Heaven and the like). The sort of transformation as Crusoe's became the hallmark of the transformation of the penal system. The (autobiographical) novel, the medium of personal story *par excellence*, makes the change of personality over time culturally valid through the alliance of the narrative "I" and the discursive network it is read in. This latter point is also analyzed by Paul de Man in his 1979 article "Autobiography as De-Facement", in which he argues that the autobiographical "I" never can be self-referential, but should be understood as a figure of reading, that is, a linguistic construct. The validity of the narrative depends the (literary) history on which it is set. Although Bender's analysis of Defoe is presented as re-installment of the self in relation to a

potentially verifiable position in a narrative form, we should be careful with understanding that autobiography, as a Western genre, exist purely by reference to historical fact, that is, that the “I” we read is the logical consequence that experience produced. Bender is quick by drawing an exact similarity between the fabric of the novel and modern, urban culture in regarding both as generic when it comes to the formation of subjectivity (that is, reduced to a dangerous simplicity: narrative produces the “I”). We however also should take note that autobiography, the story of the “I”, is not a mere form of transparent communication between the internal and external world. Indeed Bender recognizes from the beginning that it partakes in the narrative resources at hand and these resources are the interpretive administration for how reality is experienced, but it is also important is to understand that the “I” is a mere linguistic construct and therefore informed by the macro-narrative structures in which it is produced. Regarding the linguistic, autobiographical “I” as similar to the historical “I” is called by István Dobos one of the stereotypes of reading that presupposes a linear aesthetics between the mind and (perceptual) experience. Dobos rightly asserts that this view has been thoroughly contested by post-structuralist thought (e.g. by Lacan, Barthes, Derrida, de Man). It is with the work of these scholars we have become aware of the discursive logic that lies at the hearth of every narrative, whether assumed to be fictional or non-fictional; both are constructed through the discursive system of communicating experience and both are fabricated through the language in which the experience is embodied. Therefore, not even on a deserted island we gain a neutral stance towards our experience, nor are we able to fully suspend a “goal-oriented process of the narrative” of our experience that “connects the individual elements of the story to one another” (Dobos, 29).

### 1.7 The Teleological Construction of Narrative

I will close this chapter by a section on the teleological aspect of an inherently discursive narrative. By this I mean that the autobiographical novel itself already is informed by a goal-oriented narrative. Indeed, Bender did understand prison, as well as the novel, as an teleological instrument towards personal, if not moral renewal through authoritative narrative resources. But one of the flaws I find in Bender is its passing by of the means of historicization of psychological and psychological means, as if the narrative that flows from it is itself determined by the subject that narrates and whereby the authority of narrative is located in

the sender. This authority also, consequently, refers to the instance of “I” as the unifying source of experience. Indeed, this is similar to the ideas of Locke, Hume and subsequently Jeremy Bentham, who regarded the self as the accumulation of perceptual experience, and hence that personality could be altered in any useful way. The language used for this qualification is left aside. However, this (indirect) claim that language is the expression of universal reason also is the claim that scientific, or at least rational development, justifies the use of control over those who do not possess this quality. Therefore, as seen with Crusoe's education of Friday, it also leaves unquestioned the legitimacy of imperialism and suppression, because it is presented positively as instances of education and salvation. The written language of legal and scientific laws, upon which narratives such as Crusoe's is built, implies a strong relation between the architecture of modern society and language. This is also what happens in *Robinson Crusoe*, where writing functions as a medium of exchange; since written language Crusoe it is used as something that “represents its objects abstractly and renders them transferable across time and space (...) [Written language] gains value only as a medium of exchange” (Bender, 58). Through his narrative, Crusoe builds a small society in which language serves as the authority of reason. However, we should be aware that the language that Crusoe uses is actually directing him in his narrative and therefore in his development as an social architect. His language is already informed by metaphors of progress and personal and societal development. His solitary condition for example finally becomes understood as “supporting, comforting and encouraging me to depend upon his Providence here, and hope for his Eternal Presence hereafter” (Defoe, 112). Although utmost religiously colored, his present state is better understood in teleological terms; that is, in terms of a narrative progression towards a better future. Language is his explanatory, judgmental as well as its productive force in his relation to himself, Friday and the mutineers (hence a minor version of society). The validity of the narrative representation, through the use of these metaphors, then must be vastly script in the social context in which it is produced. This social context, as we have seen, prefigures the macro-narratives of an (English) history (of ideas). Crusoe presents the path to enlightenment and salvation to English readers, but it is only possible to read it as such when Daniel Defoe fabricates this path in a representational and therefore legitimate discourse in which a shared ideal of human development is presented. Crusoe mixes religious commitment to the rational capacity of man to create an universal

paradisiacal state. Therefore, the means of historization itself are already conditioned by the language of the urbanized culture of England (albeit in a religious way). Because it hence is utmost discursive, the narrative is therefore also very culturally restrictive, since it proclaims to represent the only valid and inevitable path to salvation, whereas the significance of salvation is bound to its social history. Here the use of salvation in rational terms already addresses a universal goal-oriented language use that, albeit presented as universal, is yet still determined by an authoritative set of people. The road to salvation through solidarity and social isolation is presented as the cause of better life, but we should not lose sight of the discursive context in which it is produced.

### 1.8 Conclusion

A social theory that is developed through this idea of mind, language and society, regarded as an universal expression of reason, can never be original nor objective since it is based the history (of ideas) of a particular society. In the language used by Crusoe, language that is ultimately England-based, is theologically determined. As for the example of salvation, it echoes England's religious background, but in Crusoe this becomes connected to the idea of personal development. This progression, referred to in the narrative as a conscious and rational improvement of the self as also that of Friday's, already gives away the idea of rational authority of narrative (a master narrative that explains his reality as well as that of others on the island) that prefigures the prison system. I argue thus that not the autobiography informs the idea of progression, but rather that the idea of a programmatic progression captures the idea of autobiographical history. This is visible in the discursive system in which the story is narrated; the discursive context is the constitutive part of the narrative it produces. This argument also implies an understanding of the prison as a discursive institution, since it is produced by the story of salvation through solitary confinement and a rational motivation of (religious) experience. However, this also implies that the prisoner is understood in terms of a narrative order that defines his or her (lack of) identity and forces the prison onto the road to salvation. However, because identity, rationality and salvation are determined by the teleological direction of the narrative, the oppositional status is also determined by it. Just as Friday needs to be taught the lessons of causation and crafts in order for him to become recognized as human being, such is that fate of the prisoner who is captured by the power of

narrative. This narrative thus not only serves as methodology for salvation, it also functions as justification. Crusoe's narrative has a explanatory power since it makes material reality legible. But, because the narrative is historically teleological, it also determines the direction of the future and with that, authorizes society's practices of the present.

## Chapter 2

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### Ambivalent Processes of Emancipation

#### 2.1 Introduction

In recent publications on the subject, such as by Monika Fludernik (1999) and Doran Larson (2010), it is argued that the majority of works of twentieth century American prison writing are placed in direct opposition with the rationalized and rationalizing prison culture that started about two hundred years ago in Europe and was shortly thereafter introduced in America. Colored by anti-imperialist vocabulary and profoundly showing the effects of its wake in American prison culture, contemporary literature written by convicts consciously informs readers about the hidden parts in American collective memory. Monika Fludernik for example, recognizes in her article “Carceral Topography: Spatiality, Liminality and the Corporality in the Literary Prison” that prison literature are filled with *topoi* of dehumanization based on the old prison model, such as monastic enclosure and incarceration in dungeons, thereby producing images of the penitentiary and incarceration that run against the humanistic ideals of the new prison system in the eighteenth century. Doran Larson too, derives from his analysis in “Toward a Prison Poetics” (2010) that the literary genre of prison writing is “occasioned by institutionalized pain and the instinctive yet politically resonant recoil from that pain into a post-traumatic identity that reaches beyond the prison” (Larson, 159). The experiences of this institutionalized dehumanization process of the prison system challenges the ideal of emancipation that is based on the democratic principles of equality, as I have tried to explain in the previous chapter. Convicts that become writers and public intellectuals, such as Malcolm X, George Jackson and Angela Davis, inform their public of a culture that minimizes and oversimplifies the actual experience of incarceration. This, as I will discuss later in the chapter, happens through the monopolizing identity politics in mainstream media en state coverages. Here, or at least along the way of argumentation, one should think the prison writer in similar terms to what Edward Said's view of the intellectual's role in society, that is to “challenge and defeat both an imposed silence and the normalized quiet unseen power wherever and whenever possible” (Said 2003, 135)<sup>2</sup>. It will be shown that the

2 In *Humanism and Democratic Criticisism* (2003).

prison writers that I am discussing in this thesis need to uncover and elucidate a discourse that is used to “justify, disguise, or mystify” the working of a “mass overbearing collective interests” that lies at the heart of the prison culture and its justifications in American society.

In order to look into this 'heart' however, functioning as what Doran Larson calls the “flexed muscle of power” (Larson, 151), I will need to leapfrog two hundred years from Foucault's setting of a history of the prison to Lyotard's initiated discussion on the postmodern condition and the alleged “incredulity toward metanarratives”. The reason for doing so is that the mentioned scholars as well as the prison writers point out the existence of a dichotomy between a narrative or aesthetics of justification by the US (global) power and the experiences of prisoners that I mentioned above as an explicit and general feature of the genre. The term metanarrative as it was introduced by Lyotard referred to knowledge in the form of a narrative. These narratives, whether in the form of the accounts told by great religions in pre-modern times or by the modern era's social theory and historiography (history as interrelated sequences of events into the direction of the emancipatory ideal, that is a history that would testify to a social development), for legitimating knowledge were applied to a gradual development of social systems. However, the experiences of prisoners offer alternative, if not contrasting perspectives on the images of prison and prisoners that run through society and function to legitimate these images within a narrative that makes sense of prison practices. These cultural images that are produced by the mainstream media as well as by official state coverage, are widely functioning as symbolic domination that is grounded in what Said also refers to as the “national identity, pride, history and tradition” (Said, 136) of America. Although Said himself does not explicitly refer to prison writings (through he does mention Angela Davis and former Nigerian prisoner and writer Wole Soyinka), we can read his thesis on the role of the writer-intellectual as frame of reference for the greater value of a genre that challenges discourses of domination.

It is this cultural domination that governs the definition of citizenship from which the stability of social reality emerges. This domination furthermore equals a systematic silencing of differences and oppositions, thereby producing legitimation over the instruments that are used to put people in socially and culturally submissive positions. Then again, here we could recall Walter Benjamin's dictum: “There is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism” (Benjamin, 256). The narrative of human progress that

included the vision of identity formation through controlled temporal movement into the direction of a better future, a narrative that was institutionalized during the days of Enlightenment, also implied the formation of a split between people who had the right to participate and the ones that were left. This discursive opposition inherent to modernity's idea of citizenship, implies the presence of symbolic superiority and eventually has led to political and geographical domination over people who do not fit the scheme of what Hegel (in)famously called 'Universal History'. Clearly, this narrative that was produced and expanded by the West also functions as an instrument of value in relation to and domination over other societies that lack such a narrative of civilization.

Lyotard's concept of a *metanarrative* is understood as functioning to legitimize "political or historical teleologies" that stimulated "the great 'actors' and 'subjects' of history - the nation-state, the proletariat, the party, the West, etc" (Jamson, xii). I take this concept as referring to the narrative on which Western, modern society based its legitimacy of production and practices of knowledge. Other words that point to the similar stories that are used to "assimilate different cultures into a single course of history dominated by the West" (Klein, 275) are master narrative, the already mentioned Universal History (Hegel) and 'speculative philosophy of history' (Marxism). All these concepts "describe and explain the worldwide interactions of diverse cultures and communities", yet obviously from one narratological or ideological points of view. What marks the main difference with other concepts however, is the *metanarratives* is intrinsically linked to and defined within the relation to its historical successor of *postmodernism*. Here the prefix *post* connotes a radical departure from the legitimacy of history for incorporation and explanation of difference into one narrative whole. "Pressed by the twentieth century's diversity" (Klein, 283) these concepts, all referring to an all-encompassing ideology, have become something to avoid, as Kerwin Lee Klein asserts in the 1995 article "In Search of Narrative Mastery: Postmodernism and The People Without History". Since the rise of new works in "cultural studies, comparative literature, ethnography and history of anthropology" (Klein, 275), much of the situations of scholarly attention have been revised.

This idea already is present in the premise of Lyotard's famous and central work *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* in which he defines postmodernity as the "incredulity toward metanarratives". This declaration however left the foundation of US prison

culture and the cultural domination it provokes untouched. Departing from signaling the presence of a metanarrative in prison culture that seems to succeed in postponing a social challenge against an historically contingent (since discursive) institution, I will further discuss the issue of a metanarrative as governing not only internal prison culture but also the social reality that assumes the prison system as a natural phenomenon. As Angela Davis points out, we still consider to be “an inevitable and permanent feature of our social lives” (Davis 2003, 9). I therefore first will introduce discussion by Lyotard of metanarratives and the formal principles that differentiate between “master” and “local”, “historical” and “non-historical” “modes of discourse (Klein, 276, 277). What this chapter aims for is to show that the prison system is informed by a politicized aesthetics that increases its strength as institutional phenomenon through institutionally controlled collective imaginary.

## 2.2 Grand Narrative's Cultural Apparatus

In both the works of Malcolm X and George Jackson, it is recognized that presence a grand narrative of American history works through in the cultural system both are confronted with in prison. Jackson for example recognizes that his state of imprisonment and agenda of the system he is confronted with stems from Europe's capitalist and imperialistic culture of the eighteenth century. He writes:

Their [the Europeans] abstract theories developed over centuries of long usage, concerning economics and sociology take the form that they do because they suffer under the mistaken belief that a man can secure himself in his insecure world best by ownership of great personal, private wealth. They attempt to impose their theories on the world for obvious reasons of self-gain. Their philosophy concerning government and economics has an underlying tone of selfishness, possessiveness, and greediness because their character is made up of these things. (Jackson 1971, 43).

Jackson as well as Malcolm X (in *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, 1964) structure their language through the kinship – perhaps in sometimes uncompromisable vocabulary – between their state of incarceration and the social and economic order that eventually led to a

justification of slavery and the loss or absence of self-determination due to the very reason of being born outside that order. It is in this above quoted passage that Jackson points towards the implications of Europe's social testimonial for people that are marked in relation to their difference with Europe's heritage. Jackson, as well as Malcolm X, both Afro-American, articulate throughout their autobiographical works that the Western, white man's philosophy has become a "gigantic fraud" (Malcolm X, 208). By this it referred to that the prison system is fostered by Western supremacy and still supports further disintegration and polarization of socially differentiated groups of people. The position of these people is articulated in relation to other disenfranchised segments within the American population: the poor, the victimized and the imprisoned. In a foreword by Jackson's nephew, Jonathan Jackson Jr., it is stated that the political environment Jackson existed in was "strongly linked to the values and premises on which it was founded" (Jackson, xv). These values and premises – part of what Lyotard understands by knowledge, as informing the construction of social and institutional reality – are functioning, perhaps unconsciously, to provide a vehicle for exclusion and ultimately to "oversimplify and minimize immoral events in order to legitimize history and the state's very existence simultaneously" (Jackson, xv). This is part of what Lyotard recognizes as the modern construction and the production of knowledge that is used to "state useful regularities" (Lyotard, xxiii).

The rise of the penitentiary as a social institution was legitimated by the economic and philosophical structures that accounted for the new forms of (social) experience and the way the human as well as political reality should be designed. Although no consensus has been reached on when exactly this new order of things came into being, I will mark its departure in the initiation of liberal affairs that Europe's century of Enlightenment and the years that followed upon the American Revolution in the eighteenth century produced. It is within the scale of time, that includes the French Revolution, the industrial Revolution in Britain and the epistemological shift in philosophy (referred to by Foucault as the 'birth of man'), that human beings began to conceive themselves and their communities in relation to change, development and history. In the words of Simon Malpas:

Modernity is concerned with progress, whether that is the development of ideas, and technology, the generation of wealth or the movement towards justice for all. It thinks

of society as in a state of constant flux, innovation and development as changes in knowledge and technology alter the identities and experiences of individuals and communities. Modern systems of thought strive to find universal answers to the questions facing society, and the different answers found by different groups become the bases of political systems and organizations that strive for supremacy. (Malpas, 10).

During the modern era, a different perspective upon (scientific) knowledge was initiated, a perspective that would explain that truth could only exist within the domains of science and rationality, in accordance with the underlying assumptions that these cognitive domains are universal, progressive and unified (sharing the same goal of development for all humanity). It is in two closely related major versions of this narrative that Lyotard gives his explanation to the modern history of knowledge and its institutions. The first one is “more political and the other more philosophical” in nature (30). The political version is based upon the idea that all of humanity should have access to science. It presents scientific knowledge as what Fredric Jameson calls “the liberation of humanity” (ix) from dogmatic ideology and mysticism. This version of “justification for institutional scientific research”, as Jameson puts it, “is of course the tradition of the French eighteenth century and the French Revolution, a tradition for which philosophy is already politics”(Lyotard, ix). The second, philosophical version of the modern grand narrative is based upon the Hegelian idea of an Universal History that incorporates all knowledge to be united into an Ideal whole. This version is referred to as speculative grand narrative. This version of the modern grand narrative refers to progress into the direction of absolute knowledge. The narrative embodies the idea, to quote Malpas “that human life, or 'Spirit' as Hegel calls it, progresses by increasing its knowledge”(Malpas, 26). Therefore, all different branches of knowledge are projected into “the future as being the answer to the problems facing society” (27).

In both versions of this modern grand narrative the production of knowledge is inherently connected with an end of liberating human reason from mysticism and domination and to allow morality to become part of scientific reality. Morality, thus, also became part of the scientific field of measurement (i.e. according to universal principles of moral value). As Lyotard puts it: “Knowledge is no longer the subject, but in the service of the subject” (Lyotard, 31). But clearly, the narrative of emancipation understands the subject as part of progression

for all humanity, whereas humanity however is perceived through the lens an institutionalized history. Therefore, although the idea of emancipation in itself would warrant the democratization of values, it instead is a forced upon narrative that decides over the course of history and its participants. This also is already referred to in the above quoted passage by Jackson, in which he understands an “underlying tone of selfishness, possessiveness, and greediness” on which the narrative is built. This narrative still determines American culture in which difference are regarded as inferior to the the principles of emancipation. From the point of view of Jackson, we can also regard the narrative of emancipation as build from its difference with other histories: “The whole of the Western European's existence here in the U.S. has been the same one long war with different peoples. This is the only thing they understand, the only thing they respect — the only thing they can do with any dexterity” (Jackson, 67). In another letter, Jackson writes: “Every mass movement in history has been led by one person or a small group of people. Although everyone is born with a brain only a few choose to use it. The difference between successful and unsuccessful mass movements is in the people who lead them” (Jackson, 161). What Jackson tells us here, is more powerfully expressed than in both Lyotard, Klein and Malpas, the ones I use for theoretical support. Here Jackson points to unbalanced path of history and the notions of success and heroism. In the history of the prison culture, prisoners are defined by opponents of what Jameson called “the nation-state, the proletariat, the party, the West” (Jameson, xiii). Prisoners belong to the oppositional side of these, by the grand narrative instigated, values and are captured and controlled by an historically preconditioned perception of human dignity. I am not, whatsoever, referring to an extreme form of moral relativism here, but rather to the identity politics that such a narrative provokes for the creation of categories for potentially dangerous bodies. These bodies they have not been embraced by emancipation in the first place(I will discuss this point more broadly in relation to the relation between slavery and the identity politics applied to a criminalization of black people). It is therefore that prisons came into being, because the new prison system resonated in material form the institutionalized practice of identity politics: controlled temporal isolated was assumed to alter one's personality in a more social constructive and (economically) emancipatory way.

### 2.3 Dehumanization of Values

It is not until the insertion of this grand narrative that a thorough politics of time came into being and that the implication of historical schemata would become useful for political domination as well. History, thus, became the ground for sociopolitical theory as it became the story of development of the state. This narrative mechanism, reflected in the practices of capitalism and the obliteration of differences into a single, universal (his)story, obviously functioned in accordance with a predetermined teleological image of society. The consequence of a renewed temporal orientation toward the future for collective as well as individual experiences, due to the nationalization and politicization of education, was that the state was placed in control of historical thinking and therefore was able to link progress with social and cultural expansion, thereby legitimating also the material widening of the an Enlightened state. In an article by David Gross, "Temporality and the Modern State" (1985), it is noted that a metanarrative that exists upon the concern of progress also warrants the legitimacy of superiority over different societies.

(...) [I]f progress were defined, as it often was, as the gradual transition from the simple to the complex, or from chaos to order, then progress could very easily be seen as the movement from underdeveloped to developed societies: or from "stateless," primitive communities to modern collectivities supervised by power-states. Indeed, just this framework became fundamental to the nineteenth century's understanding of how time unfolds in a forward direction. It was simply assumed, and uncritically taught in the schools, that the passage of time means the transition from anarchic statelessness to ordered statehood.

It becomes clear, this way seen, that the narrative of emancipation erases locality and cultural differences in order to control and further support the state's progression into the direction of a history of totalization. It is during this reformation, or perhaps even before that process, that the prison became a signifier within a society that was structured according to the narrative principles of liberation and emancipation. Prison thus, has not to be understood as merely an entirely new institution that refers to back to the word 'prison'. Rather, it is understood within

the discursive multiplicity of other concepts as well, such as schools, students, workers, criminals and convicts that perform new ways of classifying, structuring and ordering the social field from above and, eventually, through which the public opinion and political consensus is made manifest. Prison, in this line of thought, has become the representational mode of not only bodily domination, but also of social and cultural domination (just as schools and the factory are), since it made possible the transformation of concrete individuals to concrete subjects of (Western) society. As a cultural sign the prison, both on a social level as well as a discursive level, performs a function of generating a unified and general experience to a public identity through exhibiting otherness in order to safeguard our own knowledge and practices. Here I want to touch upon the 2010 study of Leonidas Cheliotis, "The ambivalent consequences of visibility: Crime and prisons in the mass media" in which he states that an aesthetics that is informed by a rational linearity - in which the mediated is no longer recognized as such and therefore is projected as a mere natural, if not essential "sensuous delight" - may deepen social conflicts and enforce traditional group ties (Cheliotis, 172). He argues in his analysis of mass media that coverages of criminals and prisoners reinforce public perceptions of the "overall essentialness of the prison institution and of the essentialness of its further growth and harshening". These coverage, he goes on, "serve subtly to sanction and naturalize our cultural aversions and hawkish reactions to Otherness" (175, 176). In return thus, such rendering of the cultural and social marginalized individuals offer legitimacy of public and social attitudes of punishment and deepens the bond between the ones that share the grand narrative of emancipation and the ones who do not, thereby authorizing through reiteration the hegemony on justice. Such, for example, was the case in the coverage of the torture and abuse of prisoner's in Abu Graib. The official reaction on the few yet shocking photographs that appeared in different media was constructed into a metanarrative that limited understanding and public debate on the situation in which it had happened. The dehumanization of nonwhite prisoners that was visible in these pictures became marginalized as incidental and exceptional and both politicians and media (not all, however) placed the violence outside an historical story of American imperialism. This was done by the reiteration of the same set of photographs in the media (thereby reducing its reality to only a limited number of incidents) as well as by the reactions of the Bush administration in which the government distances itself and thereby refusing to take

responsibility for the acts that fell under their command. It is argued by Tucker and Triantafyllos (2008) that the narrative that was created around only a few perpetrators fits a broad historical field that engenders a positive American identity, an identity that rationalizes the homogenization of conflicts into incidents and exceptions that are not part of the American tradition itself.

As for the victims of torture, they remain unnamed, unexamined—non-persons who seemingly have no role in the larger story. This had the effect of distancing Americans from the behaviour in the photographs, as if it had nothing to do with them, their culture or the economic and imperial framework that makes the lifestyles of modern Americans possible. In the end the metanarrative exempted Americans from confronting race and the racialized violence that structures both the discourse and practice of the so called “war on terror.” (97).

In this process of framing the acts of violence, the story became isolated in a way no further harm was done to the actual, larger aims of war and occupation. The framing of prisoners in mainstream media, whether overseas or within the state's borders, is limited by the moral and ethnic agenda of a public history: an history that, as the example of Abu Graib tells us, leaves little space for stories told by other people. Tucker and Triantafyllos, as well as Cheliotis, again remind us of the relevancy of Hegel's philosophy of an Universal History in which it is implied that history belongs to some people but not to others. Even as today's decolonization, multiculturalism, globalization and the postmodern fragmentation of a grand narrative, have proven much Hegel's thesis, that claims other cultures would assimilate themselves to the rising West, invalid, as Kerwin Lee Klein asserts (Klein, 275), these metanarratives on war and prisoners illustrates the way in which differences still are forced into assimilation in order the legitimate suppressive actions.

#### 2.4 The Prisoner's Status

The impact of the hegemony of the modern state upon cultural signs is also relevant for us to understand the history of the American prison. Although this national prison system came

into being according to the same principles as Europe's penitentiary, that is through a narrative that rationalized humanity and places time over space for the control and the construction of identity, we also should take note of the particular conditions under which the penitentiary in America evolved, as Jackson and Malcolm X repeatedly forces us to remind. Malcolm X writes on how the white man has been treating non-white in a exploitative manner:

[T]he white man had brought upon the world's black, brown, red, and yellow people every variety of the sufferings of exploitation. I saw how since the sixteenth century, the so-called 'Christian trader' white man began to ply the seas in his lust for Asian and African empires, and plunder, and power. I read, I saw, how the white man never has gone among the non-white peoples bearing the Cross in the true manner and spirit of Christ's teachings – meek, humble and Christ-like. (Malcolm X, 204).

It will not be too hard to understand that this inherent (sub) structure of the grand narrative challenges the narrative of liberation and emancipation itself. Apart from the facts that facilitate the idea of the prison as a racist and racializing system (as told in the introduction), it is also the discursive logic or the aesthetics of the prison in popular culture that is responsible for the longevity of a modern institution in postmodern times that are characterized by diversity in which the grand narrative seems to be “fractured beyond repair” (Klein, 283). I will shortly elaborate on the birth of the American prison and show that the deep connection between slavery, black culture and imprisonment is a connection that has informed a major part of the prison writings that I will be discussing in this project. After that I will continue the discussion on the grand narrative as it is still visible in the way the prison is made visible in mass media culture.

The years of birth of the American prison reveal a tense relationship between slavery and the prison system that took over “over some of the social, political and economic functions that the slave system had fulfilled” (Allen, 313). Amy Allen traces the Foucauldian backdrop against which Angela Davis derives her prison criticism. She notes that “whereas Foucault traces the birth of the prison as a means to the end of exposing the mode of power unique to Enlightenment modernity, Davis examines the ways in which modern racism, sexism, class exploitation, and the legacy of slavery are inextricably bound up with the prison as an

historically, culturally, and socially specific and concrete institution” (316). It is shown by Davis as well as by Bruce Franklin that former slave states revised “Slave Codes” (i.e. legal statements that regulated the status of slaves and the rights of slave-masters, in order to regulate the newborn freedom of black people. These Slave Codes became the alleged “Black Codes” that prescribed a legal list of statements that criminalize certain acts that were only of applicative to black people, such as the possession of firearms, drunkenness, vagrancy, absence from work &c. Obviously, the Black Codes racialized the justice system and thus determined the composition of the penitentiary's color. Although with the passage of the Thirteenth Amendment in 1865 slavery and involuntary servitude were abolished, the concepts of crime and criminality hence were still defined by the skin color of the delinquent. The Amendment reads: “Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, except as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted, shall exist within the United States, or any place subject to their jurisdiction”. The problem within this Amendment lies in its understanding of crime, a concept that is formed within the Western white world upon the knowledge of slaves and their status within the socioeconomic realm. Angela Davis quotes Matthew Mancini, who writes in his 1996 book *One Dies, Get Another: Convict Leasing in the American South*:

Among the multifarious debilitating legacies of slavery was the conviction that blacks could only labor in a certain way – the way experience had shown them to have labored in the past: in gangs, subjected to constant supervision, and under the discipline of the lash. Since these were the requisites of slavery, and since slaves were black, Southern whites almost universally concluded that blacks could not work unless subjected to such intense surveillance and discipline. (Mancini, quoted in Davis, 32-33).

The history of enslavement and slaves, a history of subordination on the bases of differences, works through in the modern penal system. No longer were black people just a subcategory of the human race, they now also became to be thought of as a race of criminals. This also is what George Jackson recognizes in one of his letters:

The forms of slavery merely changed at the signing of the Emancipation Proclamation

from chattel slavery to economic slavery. If you could see and talk to some of the blacks I meet in here you would immediately understand what I mean, and see that I'm right. They are all average, all with the same backgrounds, and in for the same thing, some form of food getting. About 70 to 80 percent of all crime in the U.S. is perpetrated by blacks, 'the sole reason for this is that 98 percent of our number live below the poverty level in bitter and abject misery'! You must take off your rose-colored glasses and stop pretending. (Jackson, 68).

The argument I take from this that crime is regarded as closely connected to the prison system (prison as the signifier for crime), whereas the prison system is closely connected to race. Therefore, I state, the penal system is associated with crime in that it informs the understanding of delinquency and even informs the acts of delinquency itself. Crimes are defined by its performer, and performers are defined by the opposition between master and local narratives. This also is recognized by Deleuze and Guattari, who refer to the prison not only as a formal institution, but as a concept that determines understanding of prisoners as well as of criminality. They write:

This thing or form [the prison. JS] does not refer back to the word "prison" but to entirely different words and concepts, such as "delinquent" and "delinquency," which express a new way of classifying, stating, translating, and even committing criminal acts. "Delinquency" is the form of expression in reciprocal presupposition with the form of content "prison." Delinquency is in no way a signifier, even a juridical signifier, the signified of which would be the prison. (Deleuze and Guattari, 66).

Prison, in both its form and content, as also the history of the American prison shows, informs the discursive tools with which individuals are classified as subaltern within the broad scheme of the story of history. Post-Civil War America used the discursive content of the grand narrative of emancipation to identify its opponents and to subordinate them in order to economically control them. This discursive content was informed by the history of an Eurocentric cultural tradition in which, contaminated by logic of Western power and interests, was able to what Said calls "dehumanize on presumably humanistic grounds" (Said, 48). The

opposed narratives, those that do not share these humanitic grounds and are marked of from the discursive network that operate in a dominant culture, are characterized by an absence of omniscience that grand narratives provoke. Kerwin Lee Klein writes, rather in simple but no less effective words:

Meta or master narratives are simply those that are canonized by party and state. Local narratives are those which are not. Perhaps the clearest insight into what might count as a metanarrative comes when Lyotard described its alter ego, local narrative. He associated local narratives with their typical narrators: 'abortionists, prisoners, appellants, prostitutes, students, peasants'[reference not given, JS] (Klein, 281)".

In case of the prisoner, who's identity is authorized solely by the public, he or she is in danger to become trapped within the Universal history that informs his or her identity and secures the prisoner's position within a discursive context. Hence not mere material isolation.

## 2.5 Prison Writing: the Issue of Local Narratives

To repeat Lyotard's famous definition of postmodernism as the "incredulity toward metanarratives", we should now turn over to prison writing as local narratives, since they are, by definition of prison as a by the mainstream public dominate site of difference, written in a subaltern position, both in terms of social structures as well as of a symbolic realm that does not allow prisoners to exist within the grand narrative of citizenship. Local narratives, as it has been argued by Lyotard, have the potential to denounce and destroy the received names of the grand narrative, thereby resisting what Klein calls "totalitarian universal history and political oppression" (Klein, 284). On this note, it should be said that prison writing was banned between the 1970s and 1990s (Franklin, 236). As the most important reason for this legal act, according to Bruce Franklin, was its inherently disruptive critique on the prison system as it was expanding across the borders (e.g. Abu Graib) and transforming the nation (in terms addressed by Jackson as the existence neoslavery, for example). Although this banning, under the name of the "Son of Sam" law, was ostensibly designed to keep convicts from making profit while incarcerated (hence from their crimes), the main purpose of this law was to conceal and

repress the local experience of prisoners that could destabilize the state's plans to further their control against individuals. Furthermore, we should keep in mind that this law did not put an end to a long-lived tradition. Rather, beginning with the *Autobiography of Malcolm X* in 1965, American prison writing reached its widest audience and cultural and political upheaval most significantly only in the 1960s and 1970s. Franklin writes:

This was the decade of George Jackson's *Soledad Brother*, Malcolm Braly's *On the Yard*, Piri Thomas's *Down These Mean Streets* and *Seven Long Times*; splendid poetry by William Wantling, Etheridge Knight, Norma Stafford, T. J. Reddy, Michael Hogan, Carolyn Baxter, and dozens of others published in chapbooks and collections from prison workshops; Iceberg Slim's fiction and memoirs; and sixteen novels by the most widely read of all Black fiction writers, Donald Goines. A torrent of prison literature was pouring out to the American public in mass-market paperbacks, newspapers, magazines, and major motion pictures. This era ended with the downfall of the Nixon regime in 1974, the final defeat of the United States by Vietnam in 1975, and the reactionary epoch that soon followed. (Franklin 2008, 236, 237).

Franklin is clear in saying that the banishment of prison writing from the public realm, helped fuel an ongoing production of images of prisoners as “agents of evil” that enforced the dominion and expansion of the American prison system. Today still the debate runs about the position of prison literature in the American literary tradition. Although the 2006 *Heath Anthology of American Literature* published a cluster of prison writing, the book became heavily criticized by the *New York Time Book Review*, because the space of twenty-seven pages that was given to five convicted writers was larger than the space that was given to the poet Elizabeth Bishop. For Franklin this reveals how dominant cultural institutions collaborate with the “political apparatus to suppress prison literature” (239). Although I do not regard this example as an overpowering argument for the suppression of the prisoner's voice, it does give support to what Angela Davis also writes about the connection between the expansion of the prisons system and the dismantling of the education programs during the 90s, including creative writing courses and inside journals. As a result, literary journals that were specialized in prison writing collapsed and hence the share of convicted authors within the literary field

reduced. Clearly, these acts of disestablishing education and writing courses are responsible for the lack of representation or marginalization of prison experience in the literary discourses as well as for the incommensurable nature of these local narratives. The latter not only points toward the hegemonic character of American culture, but also to the fragmentary and discontinuity of the principles of emancipation.

While the postmodern “incredulity toward metanarratives” runs across and through a multiplicity of critical debates such as philosophy, literary studies and the humanities in general, we might say, together with Angela Davis, that one of the most central and profound institutions in society, the prison, has is growing to become a model for modern society. This model lies at the heart of the history of Western modernity. While prisons have come historically into being in an age of relative cultural unity and was built upon an humanist ideal, the twentieth century is marked by diversity and in which each story goes with numerous alternatives. Klein writes: “The postmodern is characterized by a widening array of incommensurable language games, such as local and master narratives, each with its own players, rules, and ends” (Klein, 283). We therefore must look further into prison writings, still assumed to be local narratives within the logical opposition of grand narrative

Indeed, regarded as local narratives, prison writings are not institutionalized or canonized by party and state. Therefore prisoner's histories are not part of institutionalized collective memory. Prisoners, as a form and content that is signified by an institutional system, are identified in opposition with the hegemonic culture that informs the routes of personality and thus claims the position of the judge of validity. The separation of the criminal body is at the same time the creation of the global body that defines the legitimacy to speak. Prisoner thus are local identities, because they do not make part of collective history. They do not belong to the field of cultural production and they do not emancipate within social reality. However, this is not to say that prisoners are completely out of the social order that places him or her in isolation. The isolation of the prisoner is not the same as an absolute state of exception, or as Giorgio Agamben would refer to, as a place that is topologically different from the social order, because, as we have seen, the prison, hence the prisoner, is still ordered and understood according to the same narrative principles that structures the prison institution. The reason for referring to Agamben's most famous work *Homo Sacer* here, is that his analysis of the camp prisoner gives us material from of a difference he implies between the

concentration camp and the regular penitentiary. The camp prisoner falls outside the state's law and penal command as his or her body becomes politically unrecognized and therefore "bare life". Agamben writes:

The camp – and not the prison – is the space that corresponds to [the] originary structure of the nomos. This is shown, among other things, by the fact that while prison law only constitutes a particular sphere of penal law and is not outside the normal order, the juridical constellation that guides the camp is martial law and the state of siege.

In this state of bare life, the humanity of the prisoner's life is decided by something outside the realm of normal order. Prisoners of the penitentiary on the contrary are very politically recognized, because prisons themselves are politically structured and prisoners are still included in the law. Prisoners still enjoy political and legal representation (which is at the same time the reason for being incarcerated). Therefore, it would be too easy to say prisoners are automatically the "typical narrators" of local narratives, because it is the social order that defines his or her biography on which the legitimation of incarceration is based. Their condition is marked by the cultural politics of the social order.

## 2.6 Conclusion

The next chapter will discuss the autobiographical prison writings of among other Malcolm X and George Jackson and place them in the discussion I have started on the issue of local identities and local narratives, the latter defined as narratives with different players, rules and ends, the first as different and incommensurable within the concept of identity in the grand narrative, that is, structured in a different way than the identity politics within the global. What I have wanted to do in this chapter was to make clear that the constellation of the prisoner's local identity is formed against the background of a modern grand narrative that is used to socially conceal its own superiority towards criminals that it itself defines. I have shown that the logic of the modern grand narrative also work(s) through within the American prison culture, where slaves, regarded as economic subjects, were placed almost immediately

in prison in order to manage and control their economic and social position, based upon the knowledge that slavery had produced. Profoundly and extensively as I have shown throughout this chapter, is that the prison system is based upon an universal idea of humanity, while it has ignored the racial tendency that such a principle is provoking. Therefore, in an age in which local stories proliferate, the globalization of the prison system and its subsequent identity politics it evokes are no longer legitimate. The discursive domination of the prison over disenfranchised segments in American society is highly in need for further examination by looking into the stories of the people who are identified as local and therefore made into potential criminals. What is to be done now, is to look into the discussion of the identity politics of prisoners and question their alleged oppositional status within the grand narrative of emancipation.

## Chapter 3

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### Uncovering Prison Writing

#### 3.1 Introduction

This chapter is dedicated to showing that prison writings are not, by definition, local narratives, regarded as inferior to the master narrative because of a lack of legitimate explanation power. Therefore they embody the potential to (re)create social truths that are more democratic in nature. Contrary to Lyotard's assumption that prisoners are examples of local narrators – that is those who do not have access to participate in the language game of its narrative masters – I argue that the two prison writers I discuss here construct new social truths (i.e. a valid and validating narratives) through reinstating the systematic hegemony from the inside. These authors do not only deconstruct the global sentiments of a complex prison culture, but also, variously, rethink the present state through a forgotten albeit determining history. Claiming that prison writings are not local narratives, should allow for an affirmation of the potential of prison writing in a broader theoretical debate concerning the power of master narratives and its alleged conservative hegemony that seeks to inscribe plurality into a totalizing narrative.

The above explanation of rethinking the present through history should be accompanied with some further notes, however. Stated merely this way, prison writing could now be understood as fitting in with postmodernism. For Fredric Jameson, the postmodern condition of which I have spoken in the previous chapter, is a forgetting of history, while “the concept of the postmodern is an attempt to think the present historically in an age that has forgotten how to think historically in the first place”. Joseph Hillis Miller also describes postmodernism “as an intellectual and aesthetic style, [that] is a way of thinking about the postmodern condition or representing it, in the arts, in literature, in philosophy, in theory, and in criticism” (Miller, 23). Miller lists a set of features of the postmodern narrative, such as “pastiche, that is, an incoherent mixture of styles from different periods (...), mixing of genres, depthlessness (...) attenuation of the 'omniscient narrator' (...), a turning of the narrative back on itself to raise questions about its mode of existence and its social function” (Miller, 23,24).

What this list is telling us is that a postmodern narrative is averse to the rules of representation as they are inscribed in modernity's metanarrative. The prefix 'meta' in metanarrative, indeed, corresponds to Lyotard's assertion of the idea of a narrative that tells a story while pretending that it is not a story. The postmodern, thus, re-installs the notion of a storyteller and hence foregrounds the narrative as a constructed, if not to say artificial, principle itself. Contrasting the modern grand narrative, the postmodern narrative is aware of its narrative debts and not capable of intellectual mastery. This however, corresponds to the "provisional, contingent, temporary, and relative" (Barry, 87) nature of local narratives, or as to what Peter Barry refers to as 'mininarratives'. These narratives "provide a basis for the actions of specific groups in particular local circumstances". Barry further writes that these mininarratives, embraced by postmodernism, deconstruct "the basic aim of the Enlightenment, that is the idea of a unitary end of history and of a subject"(Barry, 87). Is this to say that local narrators, those who are in local circumstances, are automatically deconstructing these basic aims? And does this practice evolve from being a local narrator, or is the local narrator a subjectivity that derives from the narrative he or she tells? The problem in formulating an alternative to modernism's grand narrative is, this way seen, that we can hardly escape a dualism that forces us to think in either an all encompassing narrative that is informed by an hegemonic history, or in a local narrative that only exists in the margin that is formulated by the center. The alternative, hence, is always a discursive opposition in the practice of knowing or identifying the subject.

Interesting to note, here, is that Spivak in her famous essay "Can the Subaltern Speak" (1988), deconstructs the very notion of a subaltern space (referring to spaces of differences, and not just the oppressed) itself by claiming this discursive opposition to be a form of epistemic violence. This is so since this oppositional concept re-inscribes the notion of being in the position to know one's position and to have access to one's subjectivity (e.g. local). Hence, the academic notion of the subaltern does violence to the heterogeneity of localized bodies, i.e. those who do not have access to a culture (imperialism). The local bodies are defined through the logocentric assumptions of Enlightenment, just as the mechanisms of racism and legal discourse that are defined or determined by the grand narrative. But, as I have suggested in the introduction already, as well as in the previous chapter, we can not take prisoners unproblematically for localized bodies in terms of a post-colonial subaltern, as

someone who does not have access to the hegemonic discourse because of being in a subaltern position. Prisoners, indeed, I have argued, are within such a position, but their writings are not. The question this chapter seeks to explore, is how are prison writings I look at understood as culturally valid and how are these writings constructed as part of a struggle in and for hegemony? In order to work this question out, I will now go over to the readings of *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* and George Jackson's *Soledad Brothers* (1971). I will discuss them in order of publication.

### 3.2 Malcolm X

Before discussing the book, it is necessary to briefly mention the position Malcolm X was in when he, together with Alex Haley, published his autobiography in 1964. A year later, Malcolm was assassinated on February 21<sup>st</sup> 1965 after he had addressed a meeting in Harlem. In a famous interview in the television show *City Desk*<sup>3</sup>, broadcast in 1963, Malcolm is addressed by Len O'Connor who asks to tell his real name. By the time the interview took place, Malcolm already had become a leader of the Black Muslim movement, a platform that strives for justice and freedom for the 20 million "so called 'Negroes' in this country" as well as for the recognition of the human righteousness of black human beings by all other "righteous human beings on this earth". Malcolm, born as Malcolm Little in 1925, Omaha, Nebraska and killed as Malcolm X in 1965, New York, refuses to answer the question, because his real name was destroyed by the slave masters and he refuses to acknowledge the name "Little" that his (great)grandparents were given. The reason for changing his name from Malcolm Little into Malcolm X was his (self-) education in the history of black people in America. This awareness of being left out the history books came into being when Malcolm was imprisoned between 1946 and 1952. In prison, he became involved with the teachings of Nation of Islam leader Elijah Muhammed. Malcolm X writes in his *Autobiography*:

The teaching of Mr. Muhammed stressed how history had been whitened - when white men had written history books, the black man simply had been left out. Mr. Muhammed couldn't have said anything that would have struck me much harder. I had never forgotten how when my class, me and all of those whites, had studied seventh-

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3 Complete interview available on Youtube. Direct link: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bvzvQpv1XrE>.

grade United States history back in Mason, the history of the Negro had been covered in one paragraph, (...). You can hardly show me a black adult in America – or a white one, for that matter – who know from the history books anything like the truth about the black man's role. In my own case, once I heard of the “glorious history of the black man,” I took special pains to hunt in the library for books that would inform me on details about black history<sup>4</sup>. (Malcolm X, 201).

Malcolm's educational and professional ambitions were crushed by an American teacher who said that he had to be realistic about “being a negro” and instead of applying for a professional job as a lawyer, he told Malcolm to move his ambitions to the field of carpentry. From this moment on, Malcolm became aware that black people, in spite of the reconstructed constitution after the Civil War in 1865, still were repressed by the white supremacist hegemony that rules and defines the social realm and determines the legal constitution of segregation. Black people in the first half of the twentieth century suffered under harsh economic and social conditions of oppression. In the 1960s, when antiwar movements, civil right movements and Black nationalism were at their peak and enjoyed global support, Malcolm X had become both the protagonist and antagonist of the black freedom struggle that sought and fought for political independence. On the one hand he became regarded as the violent alternative to desegregation and nonviolent revolutionary Martin Luther King Jr., closely associated with the Black Power movement, while on the other hand, especially in the year before he was killed, he turned away from violence and instead preached that the “Negro revolution” would take as its goals “loving your enemy”. James Cone, professor at the Teleological Seminary in New York writes about Malcolm's first, violent revolutionary image:

The media (both white and black) portrayed him as a teacher of hate and a promoter of violence. It was the age of integration, and love and nonviolence were advocated as the only way to achieve it. Most blacks shared Martin Luther King, Jr.'s dream that they would soon enter the mainstream of American society. They really believed that the majority of whites were genuinely sorry for what America had done to blacks and were

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<sup>4</sup> Interesting to note at this point is that George Jackson, who was imprisoned about twenty years later, could not access such prison facilities. He instead had to ask his acquaintances, with permission by the prison management, to send him the books of authors he had taken an interest in, such as Du Bois and Frantz Fanon.

now ready to right the wrongs and to treat blacks as human beings. (Cone 2011).

Malcolm even expressed his aversion to King in a speech by ridiculing him with the words: “While King was having a dream, the rest of us Negroes are having a nightmare” (Malcolm X qtd. in Cone). Malcolm in his early years as a revolutionary did not believe in the possibility of nonviolent desegregation and instead chose for the path of radicalism. Later, however, as James Cone explains, after breaking with the Muslim leader Muhammad and after his television interview, Malcolm reclaimed his independence from the religious connection that his former radicalism embedded and turned the revolutionary perspective toward a global political goal, abandoning the harsh tactics of revolution. Malcolm X's autobiography has become one of the most significant literary works in the twentieth-century; not only in terms of cultural relevance for the socially oppressed, but also as marking a pivotal moment “in the development of prison literature and a moment of vast promise for prisoners who try to make education a major dimension of their time behind bars (...)” (Davis, 56). Contemporary prison writings, such as those by George Jackson, Elridge Cleaver, T.J. Reddy and Etheridge Knight, find in Malcolm X their literary ancestor (Franklin, 236). In 1992, Spike Lee released the movie *Malcolm X*, largely based on the autobiography, yet completely lacking the creative effects that the book provokes. John Locke, a reviewer for *Cineaste*, points out that like any “narrative contemporaneous with a past era, the autobiography [of Malcolm X, JS] contains elements that most moviegoers today would find antiquated or irrelevant. From the outset, then, Lee's intent to tell history is at odds with the needs of a mass market, and the film's transformation of Malcolm X to meet contemporary expectations has significant consequences for historical accuracy and dramatic impact” (Locke, 5). However antiquated these element of the autobiography may appear to some, it nevertheless is of utmost importance for the analysis of Malcolm X as a local figure who, despite his subaltern position, reclaims his position in a cultural (literary) climate. Without such awareness, it hardly is possible to understand the value of prison writing in its full critical potential.

### 3.3 Malcolm X and the Autobiographical Subject

The story of Malcolm X, “as told to Alex Haley”, is cast as fitting in what would be an traditional

American genre: autobiography. Indeed, this so-called American genre (see Carol Ohmann) has its predecessors in Europe, perhaps most notably including the names of St. Augustine, Jean-Jacques Rousseau and John Stuart Mill. Also, the use of a first person narrator in famous autobiographical novels, such as in *Robinson Crusoe*, marks the genre to be of a major historical significance for the recognition of the human being, that is the existence of the “I” of the narrating subject for the representation of its (chronological) experience. The form *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (from now on referred to as *AMX*), not only designates an aesthetics, but also an historical function. John Bender (chapter 1) as well as Karl Weintraub argue that the autobiographical genre took on its full dimension during the years of Enlightenment. Weintraub recognizes that the “growing significance of autobiography [is] part of that great intellectual revolution marked by the emergence of the particular modern form of historical mindedness we call historicism or historicism” (Weintraub, 821). Also, Carol Ohmann regards *AMX* placed in a broader historical American tradition in which “stories of men who move from inexperience to sophistication, from ignorance to enlightenment, from obscurity to worldly prominence” (Ohmann, 133). This notably places Malcolm X in a centrally Western literary discourse in which the “I”, both in cognitive (rational) as social (relational) terms is placed next to the “I” of Western consciousness. The “I” in *AMX* is primarily valued just as manageable and manipulative as in the traditional Western or American autobiographies, in which the subject is regarded as independent and in control of time and place as Western agency is regarded in the grand narrative of emancipation.

However, it must be noted that the first section of the book, entitled *Nightmare*, also draws attention to another, uniquely and truly American genre, that is the genre of the slave narrative. In an introductory article to this genre, written by James Olney in 1984 and entitled “Slave Narratives, Their Status as Autobiography and Literature”, a general description is given on the conventions of life accounts of ex-slaves. The reason for what perhaps today would count as a conventionally generalized and homogenous report on a genre as a whole is that Olney regards slave narratives as an institutionalized form of autobiography. He is utmost aware of the irony of exposing a politically incorrect “Master Plan for Slave Narrative” (his terminology), yet he defends his analysis of formal and extra-textual qualities by referring to the extrinsic values of these narratives of slaves that were demanded by abolitionists. Olney writes that the logic behind the relationship between the ex-slave, the audience and 'sponsors'

determined a major part of the general structure of almost all slave narratives. This obviously is why we can relatively easily define and recognize adaptations (e.g. Toni Morrison's *Beloved*) and adaptations (as is the case in *AMX*) of this genre in subsequent American literature. Olney pins down the general quality of the genre, which is yet of essential importance for our further analysis of prison writing:

The central focus (...) of nearly all the narratives, is slavery, *an institution and an external reality*, rather than a particular and individual life as it is known internally and subjectively. This means that unlike autobiography in general the narratives *are all trained on one and the same objective reality*, they have a coherent and defined audience, they have behind them and guiding them an organized group of "sponsors," and they are possessed of very specific motives, intentions, and uses understood by narrators, sponsors, and audience alike: to reveal the truth of slavery and so to bring about its abolition. How, then, could the narratives be anything but very much like one another? (Olney, 52; my italics).

In both Olney's article as well as in the studies of Bruce Franklin (1989 and 2008), the global features of this collective 'training' or conventions are iterated in relation to both the actual narrative as well as to extra-textual qualities of such narrative. The latter field includes, among others, but most profoundly shared in *AMX*, an accompanied photograph or engraved portrait of the slave, a claim of authorship of the narrator (e.g. "Written by himself", or "Written by a Friend" or indeed "As told to") as well as a testimonial of authenticity by the actual writer, in which the writer declares that he acted honestly and without interference in the story as it was told to him. The latter can be found in the epilogue of the book, in which Alex Haley narrates his experiences with Malcolm X as he visited him during the process of writing *AMX*. Also, Haley reiterates the insistence that no word would have made it from manuscript to publication without Malcolm's authorization. Other, perhaps roughly objectified conventions of the actual slave narrative that are located by Olney and Franklin are the opening with a statement of birth (involving the narrative form "I was born on..."), a "sketchy" account of parentage (often involving a white father), an account of cruel masters, an account of an hardworking, 'pure African' "who refuses to be whipped" and who does not believe in the

possibility of social intercourse (Olney, 50), the difficulty of cultural encounters of the slave with the ruling and dominant culture, an account of families being separated and destroyed, the description of patrols and eventually the taking on of a new name. The first chapter of *AMX* is structured along many of these principles, albeit in an adaptive way. I will only discuss four of these principles (although these can be seen as related to all others); because of the relevancy these principles have in my further argument on how Malcolm X writes himself into society by reinstating its (literary) history.

As for the first of these principles, which is the opening with a statement of birth, we read this in the very first two sentences already. Here we read how his family is being treated and eventually attacked by members of the KKK. "When my mother was pregnant with me, she told me later, a party of hooded Ku Klux Klan riders galloped up to our home, Nebraska, one night. Surrounding the house, brandishing their shotguns and rifles, they shouted for my father to come out" (Malcolm X, 3). Here Malcolm does not only state his existence (as the statement of birth, "I was born on..." implicates), but also that of his father and mother and the hostile territory he would be living in soon. On part of the statement of birth in slave narratives, Olney rightly asserts: "The standard opening "I was born," is intended to attest to the real existence of a narrator, the sense being that the status of the narrative will be continually called into doubt, so it cannot even begin, until the narrator's real existence is firmly established" (Olney, 52). Therefore, drawing upon Olney's observation of a statement of existence in slave narratives, we could read this opening of the autobiography of Malcolm X as that his history is not limited to the existence of his individual body, but is informed by the aggressive racial segregation that the history of his parents provoke. This is accomplished by drawing attention to a presence of his unborn body in the experiences of his family, even before his actual birth.

The next principle is the "sketchy parental description". This principle in the first chapter in *AMX* is twofold. Malcolm's father, a Baptist preacher named Earl, was believed by Malcolm to be anti-white, as he was a close supporter and messenger of Marcus Garvey, leader of the UNIA, the Universal Negro Improvement Association. However, Malcolm also believed his father was "subconsciously afflicted with the white man's brainwashing of Negroes that he inclined to favor the light ones, and I was his lightest child" (Malcolm X, 7). The reason for him to believe so, was that his father was aggressive to all his mother and siblings, except to

Malcolm himself. "Nearly all my whippings came from my mother", he writes. The image that his father has of him, as Malcolm tells his readers, is based upon the historic conception of the "mulatto"<sup>5</sup> The reason why Malcolm is born visibly nearest to white in relation to his siblings, is that his mother, Little Louisa, was born after his grandmother was raped by a white man. Malcolm perceives that he is a kind of status symbol by being the lightest amongst his siblings and father. Within the further narrative, no explanation is given for the relation between his light-complexioned status and his father's liking of him. One may pose the argument that his father could have expected a realization of integration with the white world for his son by having a whiter skin. Yet we also should take account of his father's "crusading and militant campaigning with the words of Marcus Gravey", "scaring these white folks to death!" (Malcolm X, 9). The sketchy account of the slave's parents, as Olney holds, referring to the uncertainty of parenthood, is not as clear cut in *AMX* as in Olney's general reading of slave narratives. It is clear, from the first sentence, who his parents are. However, I do take the brief account of his biracial skin color as denoting a racial ambiguity in terms of the social consequences it has for Malcolm, as he confronts the ambivalent and contradictory nature of a polarized America. This I read from the father's favoring of Malcolm on the one hand while on the other Earl repeatedly praises the coming of Africa's redemption, when "Africa would be completely run by Negroes" (Malcolm X, 9). The relative absence of retrospective explanation on this situation marks that Malcolm X, the child (then still Malcolm Little) is the focalizer in this first narrative (i.e. internal focalizer). I herewith refer to what Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan calls "a position within the story from which things are observed (...)" and "whose vision 'colours' the information conveyed in the text" (Rimmon-Kenan, 76). Although Malcolm X is the autodiegetic narrator (i.e. the narrator as protagonist), the experiences are filtered through his youthful mind. It is noticeable that Malcolm Little is the center of events and experiences that only occur in his presence *as a child* (without anachronistic feedback). This results in that we can abstract the ambiguous world view of a young boy who is unaware of the social forces of history (in contrast to the outspoken rhetoric of the later Malcolm X). His opinions lack

<sup>5</sup> After slavery was abolished, a "mulatto", a child with (grand) parents with different racial backgrounds, was nearer to white and "therefore better". This advantage is referred to by historians as more common in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, both from the perspective of white as well as black people. Howard Bodenhorn writes in his 2002 article that a lighter skin was also by African-Americans regarded as an advantage in a white dominated world, since, as Bodenhorn argues: "Mulattoes climbed the agricultural ladder more quickly and accumulated considerably more wealth than black in antebellum Maryland and Virginia" (Bodenhorn, 23).

straightforward articulation and the boy's actions do not pass for a solely anti-white or a solely pro-black culture, but rather are a result from the contradicting racist agenda he confronts. This way of presenting the story enables the narrator to depict the transformative site in which Malcolm becomes aware of the double standards of racism in America and the presence of a violent segregation. Black people are tolerated, as long as they do not interfere with the hegemony of white people. Because Malcolm is regarded as embodying both races, he grows up in a twilight zone of racism; he clearly is not sure what to think of the opposed fields of hostility. Later Malcolm becomes aware that he embodies the very conflict situation between black and white; he is accepted at schools, where he is a first class student, yet at the same time he is left out of the socioeconomic order. This can be seen when Malcolm's teacher tells him to be realistic about being black, after Malcolm told him to be thinking of a career as a lawyer. "Mr. Ostrowski [teacher] looked surprised, I remember, and leaned back in his chair and clasped his hand behind his head. He (...) said: 'Malcolm, one of life's first needs is for us is to be realistic. Don't misunderstand me, now. We all here like you, you know that. But you've got to be realistic about being a nigger. A lawyer – that's no realistic goal for a nigger'" (Malcolm X, 43). Initially, after this, Malcolm still blames himself for not being smart enough and thus connects being black with not (yet) intelligent enough, although he earned marks that nearly none of the other students happened to earn. "Apparently I was still not intelligent enough, in their eyes, to become whatever I wanted to be" (Malcolm, 44). It is from this moment on however that Malcolm begins to change "inside", and begins to draw away from white people, yet he does so without being able to explain what motivates him. "Mr. and Mrs Lyons, and their children (...) also tried to get me to tell them what was wrong. But somehow I couldn't tell them, either". As the second chapter makes clear, Malcolm feels being regarded as a "mascot" at school. Here we already read the presence of other slave narrative principles as well. Within the sketchy account of his father clearly there is visible the convention of a hardworking, 'pure African' "who refuses to be whipped" and who does not believe in the possibility of social intercourse; features that are reflected in the account of Malcolm's father. Next to this, is Malcolm's experience within the educational and social system, hence 'the difficulty of cultural encounters of the slave with the ruling and dominant culture'.

The third and last principle I want to point out is the separation of the family. Malcolm's

father is killed in 1931 (when Malcolm had the age of six), presumably by members of the Black Legion<sup>6</sup>; “negroes (...) have always whispered that he was attacked, and then laid across some tracks for a streetcar to run over him. His body was cut almost in half” (13). Malcolm does not confess his emotional and cognitive perspective toward this event, nor does he account for that of his family. Indeed, he just had reached the age of six. Not long after his father dies and his mother is fired because she has turned out to be a child of a black woman, the family falls apart. Little money was left after all sources of income were suddenly lost. This was followed by Malcolm starting to gamble and steal. Little Louisa soon becomes diagnosed by the state Welfare as incapable for raising her children, mainly because Malcolm feels that he is the one that is responsible for the family situation. “And when my mother fought them [state Welfare, JS], they went after her – first through me. I was the first target. I stole; that implied that I wasn't being take of by my mother”. Malcolm eventually is taken away from his family and transferred to a detention home where he finishes his eight grade and with that he also finishes his attendance at the official education system. His mother is taken to a mental hospital and the rest of the family scattered throughout America.

Not only do these features, characteristic to the genre of slave narratives, embed *AMX* within the same – political as well as literary – network as for instance Frederick Douglass, it also marks the position of Malcolm X as an historical figure and spokesman or referent of an anti-slavery movement. It connotes thus, in reinstating the current situation through repeating the historical function of slave narratives, the presence of an urge to render and reveal the experience of a prisoner, regarded as a slave. But what does this imply in terms of prison writing? As Lindon Barret recognizes, the genre of the slave narrative exists on the verge of literacy and illiteracy, referring here to a contracted space in which the literacy of the slave, just as the white non-slave, “represents a privileged state of mind” while the genre “also connotes the material body and, ultimately, the alleged overwhelming corporeality of blackness” (Barret, 415). The genre of the slave narrative is inextricably connected to the blackness of the body of the narrator. Conversely, the slave text hence is determined by “the rituals of identity formation” in the form of a narrative, as told in the beginning of our analysis, that is constructed from above in servitude of the aims of white abolitionists. The body of the slave – although it is told to be his or her narrative – is vastly constructed. Therefore, personal and as well as social identities are maintained. Slave narratives can be seen not as much a

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6 Organisation that splintered yet stayed closely associated with the Klu Klux Klan, operating during the 1930s.

literary genre as well as a primarily historical genre that informs society of its neglected past. It is not, whatsoever, conceived in terms of the “empowerment and the transformation of identity” (Barret, 418). What I mean by this is that slave narratives can be perceived as ideologically constructed narratives that do not necessarily negotiate the authority of black people, but rather presents a testimony of racialized literacy. The genre, by any means the only instrument for a black man or woman to speak into the dominating collective, forces him or her thus to narrate according to the same structures that define the Western idea of identity, that is through narrating a set collection of events that eventually draws attention to the same idea of identity formation through time. The so-called recognition of the “I” is done through a Western instrument, where the actual black body is presented through a manifestly white construction that makes *sense*. Here I wish to draw in the prison writing discussion in terms of local vs. grand narratives. What Malcolm X does then already in the first chapters of his book, is present his subject position of a local identity within an ideologically constructed narrative; a narrative that is racially informed by the body of its sponsor and ultimately serves the extra-textual goal of the white writer. The resemblance of *AMX* to slave narratives, is that the articulation of the autobiographical “I” of the slave/prisoner at the very same time is the destruction of the authentic “I”, because it is informed by Western (political) aims. The very subtitle “As Told to Alex Haley”, underlines the very illiteracy of Malcolm X.

Yet it is well known Malcolm X was not illiterate and could very well think and voice his arguments. Apart from being busy with teaching, he could have written the book all by himself. There is no point in discussing that. I rather like to return to a narratological analysis of the autobiography and look further into Malcolm's development as public figure and a revolutionary. After some years of travel during which he eventually gets involved in criminal acts, drug abuse, and racial animosity, Malcolm is caught and imprisoned for burglary in 1946, when he had reached the age of 20. He will be in jail for seven years (he is released on parole 1952). What shimmers through the chapters in which his incarceration is presented, is the transformative effect it produced upon Malcolm's character. Most profoundly in this is his becoming utmost religious by adopting the faith of Elijah Muhammad, representative of the Nation of Islam. Once a free man again, Malcolm had become a good deal wiser in terms of historical and political consciousness which he subsequently seeks to turn into an unequivocal and global support for his cultural revolution in which white hegemony would be abolished.

Leaving details and further historical rendering of circumstance aside, the complete (his)story of Malcolm X clearly evokes a teleological end towards which his identity, from the beginning to the end of the story, is structured and eventually is formed. Here I adopt my analysis in the first chapter of the discursive context in which the “I” is presented. Obviously, an teleological end is an inherent gesture of autobiography. However, as I have argued, this teleological end itself again is informed by the discursive framework in which it is set. *Robinson Crusoe* directed the narrative of experience through metaphors of reprieve and salvation, used to represent stable categories that structure the subject's rational development. The “I” of Crusoe already prefigured the idea of progress that he narrates, that is, an ideologically constructed “I” who lives and understands by culturally fabricated notions (and not the other way around, as a neutral, rational motivation for this process would go). These culture bound notions functioned as the homogenization of experience on which the narrative is built and through which generalizations that are used to describe experience and others are legitimated. As I have argued, in collaboration with John Bender, *Robinson Crusoe* anticipated the grand narrative of emancipation, but this argumentation was accompanied by the warning of its determining force for the cultural landscape that it creates. Due to the analysis in chapter 2, we have seen, the legitimacy of Crusoe's language of experience was possible only in relation to the vocation of institutional knowledge with which reality is known by the participants of his (English) society (knowledge understood as statements that are valuable to society, because they fit in the all encompassing narrative of emancipation). This is also recognized by Pierce Armstrong in his 2010 article “Reading the Ethnic Other”. He states:

The representational legitimacy of the work is bound up in the representational profile of the author in contexts scripted by macro-narratives of history, and these are applied positively to Others, negatively to those from within Western hegemony speaking about Others, but very little to Western hegemonic insiders describing their own milieu.  
(Armstrong: 75)

We for example do not contest the right of Walt Whitman to represent America (hegemonic insider describing its own milieu), but we do contest the representation Kipling gives of India. On the other hand, writers such as Isabel Allende are justified to represent Chile and Latin

America, because she is a Chilean woman (examples given by Armstrong, 75). Through these examples, Armstrong asserts that the legitimacy of representation is bound to the position within cultural background against which it is produced. The legitimacy of Crusoe story of self-construction depends on the base of knowledge he builds his narrative upon, that is, the discursive rules that he used.

### 3.4 Malcolm X: The Autobiographical Shift

Malcolm X initially represents himself as an outsider in terms that are defined by the dominating white public. Like slave narratives that are meant to “negotiate a hazardous rhetorical terrain with their white readership (and editors)” (Berger, 35), in *AMX* we read the discursive control over Malcolm's childhood narrative. Not only in the form in which it is presented (i.e. slave narrative, focalized through the young Malcolm) but also in Malcolm's unawareness of the identity politics that he is confronted with. He is unaware of the history of his surname, the word “nigger”, “mullato” and eventually what it meant to be black in a white society. In prison, Malcolm liberates himself from this control, that is Malcolm liberates himself from his initial and forced upon “I” and starts to cast his narrative of experience in terms that are applied to the general, reading public, rather than to particular experience. The individualized “I” of Malcolm becomes a collective “We” of black people who share the same discursive domination as experienced by Malcolm in the first chapters. Prison time for Malcolm is experienced as a process of decolonization, in which he functions first as the decolonized (through the teachings of Muhammad) and later as the decolonizer (if I may coin a term) of black people. The prison narrative, thus, starts functioning on two levels: on the level of personal experiencing the oppositional identity politics, as well as on the level of acknowledging the pitfalls of a national history for the mainstream reader.

Two other areas of experience which have been extremely formative in my life since prison were first opened to me in the Norfolk Prison Colony. For one thing, I had my first experiences in opening the eyes of my brainwashed black brethren to some truths about the black race. And, the other: when I had to read enough to know something. I began to enter the Prison Colony's weekly debating program – my baptism into public

speaking. (...) When one was ripe – and I could tell – then away from the rest, I'd it on him, what Mr. Muhammad taught: "The white man is the devil. (Malcolm X, 210,211).

Malcolm history, written in the wake of slavery, becomes understood as typical for a whole class of disenfranchised black people. "The black brother is so brainwashed that he may even be repelled when he first hears the truth" (Malcolm X, 211). Unlike *Robinson Crusoe*, *AMX* is not, from the beginning towards the end, a model for a life, so to say, because he rejects the initial position of the slave and turns it into a vehicle of resistance. Whereas *Crusoe* presented his story as a universal development, in *AMX* we above all read resistance to the spirit that, among others, *Crusoe* evoked – that is wherein the white man in the absolute center of experience. In *AMX* Malcolm is both the global as well as the specific agency of experience (whereas *Crusoe* was only the global). We can except his global representations of the black man, as "brainwashed" thus, from the emergence of his representation of his childhood, regarded as specific experience, at the time he did not directly understand his father either. His self in prison is not longer regarded as the center and therefore specific site of experience, but rather becomes understood as a mediator of black people's history and their social position, "above all Negroes, the black prisoner" (Malcolm X, 211). "You let this caged-up black man start thinking, the same way I did when I first heard Elijah Muhammad's teachings: let him start thinking how, with better breaks when he was young and ambitious he might have been a lawyer, a doctor, a scientist, anything" (Malcolm X, 211). Evidently present in the narration of his prison experience, is that the shift between specific and global agency also involves, respectively, the use of fragmentation and generalization. The first is already made clear in the above section. Malcolm's youth can be understood as a local narrative, because it avoids essentialism (visible in the ambiguous world view of the young boy) and draws attention to the particular rather than the global in which it is placed. Generalization, as a textual stance, on the other hand, is also used by Malcolm, in his presentation of the historical narrative of black people in which he childhood is located. In order for Malcolm to this, he reduces both white and black people to essentialism. As an example of this I quote Malcolm's articulation of his initial readings of Muhammad:

The black man, original man, built great empires and civilization and cultures while the

white man was still living on all fours in caves. 'The devil white man,' down through history, out of his devilish nature, had pillaged, murder, raped, and exploited every race of man not white. (...) The devil white man cut these black people off from all knowledge of their own kind, and cut them off from any knowledge of their own language, religion, and past culture, until the black man in America was the earth's only race of people who had absolutely no knowledge of his true identity. (Malcolm X, 187 – 188).

In this exemplary passage Malcolm's growing consciousness is made manifest within the discursive apparatus he adopts from his religious education that provokes a reductive essentialism (i.e. the white man is understood as the devil, the black man as the original and truly authentic man). This consciousness is not limited by his own, individual body, but covers the whole community he belongs to, a community that exist in its negative relation with society. Malcolm reverses the stereotypes of race, imbued with anti-colonial consciousness and oppositional figures of brotherhood and democracy. However, he leaves universal moral truths unquestioned; rationality, political and scientific freedom, emancipation and human development are still fundamental to Malcolm's prison story. Here the autobiography becomes global again "The black man never can become independent and recognized as a human being who is truly equal with other human beings until he has what they have, and until he is doing for himself what others are doing for themselves" (Malcolm X, 317). What Malcolm does thus, is confirming and acknowledging the power of storytelling, that is, acknowledging the function of a grand, totalizing history. He hence acknowledges black people's existence as left out this history by drawing upon the fundamental differences with which the very American society is objectifying him as a local identity. Bruce Franklin recognizes this as well in his study on Malcolm X:

By unflinchingly probing his own deepest degradation and then showing the successive stages of his own consciousness, Malcolm was able to reveal the upside-down structure of the U.S. political economy and the culture that makes it seem rational, just, and enduring. He was the first common criminal to create a great literary work based on a vision that has become more commonplace (...), that the biggest criminals in America

control it and that the people in prison are merely their most brutalized victims.  
(Franklin, 239).

Franklin's statement on Malcolm X "unflinchingly probing his own deepest degradation and then showing the successive stages of his own consciousness" however, is not a very accurate analysis of the effects it produced, since his local identity as a black criminal would not be able to evoke a representative voice if it not would had shifted from specific agency (local narrative) to global agency (grand narrative of emancipation) . In *AMX* both the ethetical dimension (chattel slavery, which is the 1960s completely had lost its social legitimacy) and the autobiographical dimension in which the the black community is invested with the same instruments of solidarity and unity, whereas white people are referred to as painfully fragmenting black history. Pierce Armstrong writes about this gesture of essentialism:

This is not simply a question of a certain liberal hegemony in that domain which plays against a conservative hegemony in much of the mainstream media. It devolves, rather, from the need to generalize and, through the resonance of race-class -gender profiles of collective identity, to compound the validity of certain scenarios of representative social intercourse.(Armstrong, 76).

### 3.5 Malcolm X: Conclusion

I have tried to explain that, between Malcolm's youth and his prison experience, a shift occurs in how both the self and the public are perceived. The first section, in drawing a parallel between the scripted genre of the slave narrative, showed that Malcolm recapitulated his life from the viewpoint of the local, that is, most important, a local that is fabricated by the narrative constructed from a loss or difference with the global viewpoint. As local identity, it delineated a tragic or colonized image in which Malcolm is struggling to understand what has come over him and his family. The moment of decolonization comes when Malcolm, after narrating his way to the prison, receives education and becomes aware of the identity politics that is bestowed upon him and his people. Malcolm, in educating other, uses the same narrative strategies as the one he feels to be suppressed by, but in a reverse and therefore

ironic way. The narrative of his youth and his criminal history then strongly suggests that that history of white people is responsible for his loss of freedom. The autobiography, constructed by its shift from local to global identity, thus opposes the fiction of a material reality in a systematic way. The fiction of the American prison system and its racialized discourse (i.e. the American discourse on history, identity politics) is overcome by the warranted position of Malcolm as both a local (specific) and global (general, due to the same narrative strategies of essentialism) figure. Therefore his representations are both ethically and aesthetically valid for both sides. It becomes to function as a legitimate window upon the identity politics the narrative is produced in and against. It is thus, that the opposition between the local and global is suspended and the isolation of the first is acknowledged and therefore postponed.

### 3.6 George Jackson: *Soledad Brother*

The prison letters of George Jackson were released in 1970, a year before he was murdered by a tower guard inside San Quentin Prison, during “a purported escape attempt” (Jackson, x). Jackson was born in 1942 and sent into prison at the age of eighteen in 1960. Accused of a \$70 dollar robbery from a gas station in Los Angeles, Jackson would be in prison for the rest of his life. He spent seven years in solitary confinement. Towards the end of his life, Jackson skyrocketed into stardom after he was accused of murdering a prison guard in collaboration with what became to be called the Soledad brothers, a group of four black men that were found guilty on avenging a homicide on three black prisoners. Jackson could have received death penalty, if he not made himself, also with the help of Angela Davis, invincible and a “menace to the powers” the eventually killed him (Franklin, quoted on the back cover of my copy of *Soledad Brother*; unfortunately without further reference). Bob Dylan, wrote an hauntingly beautiful ballad in 1971, called after George Jackson himself, which obviously helped to anchor his name in a sociocritical debate more firmly. A brief excerpt:

Sometimes I think this whole world  
Is one big prison yard.  
Some of us are prisoners  
The rest of us are guards.

Lord, Lord,  
They cut George Jackson down.  
Lord, Lord,  
They laid him in the ground (Dylan, 1971).

As Lee Bernstein in his 2007 article “The Age of Jackson” writes, is that Dylan here helped fuel the militant opposition between what Bernstein calls a “division between keepers and convicts,” leaving “it to his listeners to fill in the subject of the ‘they’ who ‘cut George Jackson down,’ might be (Bernstein, 311).

During his prison time, Jackson educated himself with the writings of cultural revolutionists such as Marx, Lenin, Fanon and Mao. He is called the most powerful intellectual within the prison by Angela Davis<sup>7</sup>. Perhaps more than Malcolm X, however, Jackson focuses on the disenfranchised people of society and presents the prison as a control site for holding the dispossessed. What I will discuss over the next pages, is what Jean Genet has called an “unwilled” book, that is the collection of personal letters to his family, his lawyer and to Angela Davis. Genet writes: “From the first letter to the last, nothing has been willed, written or composed for the sake of a book, yet here is a book, though and sure, both a weapon of liberation and a love poem. In this case I see no miracle except the miracle of truth itself, the naked truth revealed. George Jackson is a poet, then” (Genet, 332). It has to be noted Jackson was indeed aware of the publication of his letters. He even wrote, on demand of the editor, a brief autobiographical account in which he explains himself. Because the letters are written personally and directly within prison, we should note that the writings are formulated within the limits of the permissible. Sometimes we get to read that previous letters have not been received. Jackson, throughout his letters, reminds his readers that he cannot formulate his thoughts as in radical a fashion as they are, because the prison guards are censoring his writings. Besides this, his letters were limited to two pages each. His literary legacy hence quite directly carries the traces of the prison system in itself. His letters are, like slave narratives, authorized by the forces that he tries to expose.

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<sup>7</sup> Angela Davis is interviewed for the 2003 documentary dedicated to George Jackson, *Day of The Gun*. Available at Youtube. <http://youtu.be/MPvsjc1wDwM>.

### 3.7 Soledad Brother: The Prison Letters

Beginning with the brief autobiography, Jackson already hints at the supposed individualism that was assumed to mark the narrator's existence within slave narratives, in which the "I" would designate an individual uniqueness and therefore ground its authenticity. Jackson responds to this by writing:

I've been asked to explain myself, "briefly," before the world has done with me. It is difficult because I don't recognize uniqueness, not as it's applied to individualism, because it is too tightly tied into decadent capitalist culture. Rather I've always strained to see the indivisible thing cutting across the artificial barricades which have been erected to an older section of our brains, back to the mind of the primitive commune that exists in all black. But then how can I explain the runaway slave in terms that do not imply uniqueness? (Jackson, 4).

Jackson does not want to be understood as unique, because uniqueness is defined by the cultural hegemony that places people in isolation on the (ironic) principle of individualism, regarded as a Western liberal idea of freedom of participation. Even if he exposed his history of a runaway slave, he would become understood as someone who adheres to the same individualism, that is a moral order he instead wants to contest as a profound and corrupt distribution of power. Although Jackson does not want to write himself into the same tradition as slave narratives, he still follows the same chronological path as Malcolm X did in his brief autobiography that prefaces his letters. That is, he begins by exposing his history of a tragic childhood in which he was not allowed to play on the streets and was beaten up by a white boy after Jackson wanted to touch him, because he never had seen one in the flesh (Jackson, 5). Jackson also refers to white people as the "outside enemy culture" who would arbitrate the lives of black people. Yet, in a different way than Malcolm X, Jackson does not describe these events as a sign of an insurmountable circumstance, but rather as a violent war zone in which he, for instance, opposes himself against America's greatest hero Superman by developing a "deep suspicion that I might be Supernigger" (Jackson, 5). His early involvement in criminal

affairs is never regarded throughout the whole book as a sign of moral weakness, but rather as a sign of strenuous and effective resistance against the destructive politics of America. His early prison experiences, contrary to the conversant and introvert manner in which Malcolm X describes his experience, can be regarded as a continuation of his resistance, understood by Jackson as the only hope to become powerful, that is, “aware, embittered, desperate” and “dedicated to the ultimate remedy-revolution” (Jackson, 26) against the “colonists” who hold Jackson and his people in position of neoslavery, of which the prison is just a concrete instance. In his letters, we notice the evolution of a street criminal, linked to a necessity of resistance, to a general spokesman of that resistance. His prison experience indeed alters his moral consciousness, but in a way that enforces his political anger in a rational sense. Prison time awakens his revolutionary mind.

I can't say where it started. I can't trace it, but I believe it goes back to my earliest years, I mean the feeling that what everyone else around me accepted as right wasn't necessarily so. The family, the nuns, the pigs, I resisted them all. I know my mother likes to tell everyone that I was a good boy, but that isn't true, I've been a brigand all my life. It was these years in prison with the time and opportunity available to me for research and thought that motivated a desire to remold my character. I think that if I had been on the street from age eighteen to twenty-four, I would probably be a dope fiend or a small-stakes gambler, or a hump in the ground. (Jackson, 232).

The difference with the slave narrative and Jackson's voice of resistance therefore is not as much a statement of existence of the “I”, but more profoundly a sign of the existence of a “colonial” system that must be opposed. The prison writings of Jackson, therefore, function rather as a testimony, or what critics refer to as *testimonio* of the subaltern position than a personal narrative. The concept of *testimonio* is developed by, among others, George Yúdice, John Beverly and Pierce Armstrong. *Testimonio* is a narrative told (by a witness) from a subaltern position, profoundly in the wake of social movements that challenge the role of the global or master narrative. Yúdice writes in his 1991 article “*Testimonio and Postmodernism*” that *testimonio* is closely related to the alter echo of the grand narrative as developed by Lyotard. He understands the implications of Lyotard rejection of grand narratives for a

“different subject of discourse”, as “one that does not conceive itself as searching for universal truth but, rather, as seeking emancipation and survival within specific and local circumstance”. Yúdice then explains testimonial writing:

[T]estimonial writing may be defined as an authentic narrative, told by a witness who is moved to narrate by the urgency of a situation (e.g., war, oppression, revolution, etc.). Emphasizing popular, oral discourse, the witness portrays his or her own experience as an agent (rather than a representative) of a collective memory and identity. Truth is summoned in the cause of denouncing a present situation of exploitation and oppression or in exorcising and setting right official history. [Their] challenge to master discourse relies on those texts which are written as collaborative dialogues between activists engaged in a struggle and politically committed or empathetic transcribers/editors. (Yúdice, 17).

The latter point marks the difference with autobiography, because a testimonio is the result of a mediated process: most witness accounts (offer oral stories) are written or co-produced by a professional editor, produced for the mainstream public. Although the question of authenticity of the writer itself is not relevant here, since it is impossible to define the extent to which intermingling of the co-producer effects the witness' voice – ranging from being edited/collected, as *Soledad Brother*, to a witness account written by a professional writer/journalist as *AMX* – important to note however is that testimonio's are created on the very intersection between social activism, historical situation, and an official aesthetics, legitimized “by dominant educational, publishing and professional institutions” (Yúdice, 19). The reasons for producing a testimonio, then, cannot be allocated in the witness alone. They need to be sought in the public demand for new forms of representing subaltern positions, because a reformation of national or global identity politics stirs the urge for a truth that summons, to repeat Yúdice, “the cause of denouncing a present situation of exploitation and oppression or in exorcising and setting right official history” (Yúdice, 17).

Testimonio's are concentrated on the lives or significant events of life that question the ideological alienation of the subaltern subject. The text then becomes part of the struggle against the hegemonic identity politics. Another definition, given by Ylce Irrizary, author of the

2005 article “The Ethics of Writing the Caribbean”, testimonio is understood as:

A narrative explicitly concerned with articulating a process of recognition and resistance of oppression. Testimonios foreground the need for communities to cohere and free themselves from oppression; thus, testimonio is a narrative form that not only calls for the awareness of brutality, but also documents survival and self-determination. Varying discourses—cultural, semantic, psychological, and juridical—play a significant part in the epistemology of testimonio. (Irizarry, 264).

Testimonial writing always emerges from the margin, but is only possible in a transitional culture in which the identity politics already is exposed to criticism. The dynamics of testimonio depend on the conditions of, as John Beverly writes, “dramatic social and cultural inequality that fuel the revolutionary impulse in the first place” (Beverly, 21). The concept of testimonio, is, just as postmodernism, based upon the rapidly problematizing dynamics in society. Therefore, the notion of testimonio implies a retrospective character, based on the reception (is the witness/witnessed and therefore it supposed challenge to ideology legitimate?) and subject position of the witness (as indicated by the example of Isabel Allende). Indeed, my analysis of *AMX* has shown to be deeply related to this notion of testimonio, since it promotes the expression of Malcolm's experience in edited form. This expression became an agency for what Yúdice would call a “collective struggle against oppression from oligarchy, military, and transnational capital” (Yúdice, 26). It eventually became regarded as part of the struggle for a rereading of hegemony in which black and white people would equally make part of history.

The reason for inviting the debate on the genre of testimonio just now, however, is that we can read this genre much more explicit in *Soledad Brother* than in *AMX*, although the latter indeed invites the concept on many serious levels as well of course. Nevertheless, whereas *AMX* was more profoundly connected to the formation of an autonomous “I” through the same narrative strategies as (American) autobiography, in the prison writings of Jackson the function of witnessing ideological struggle is more distinctively present. The subtitle of the book, *The Prison Letters of George Jackson*, already warrants the quality of a subaltern voice that needs to be read. Yet, the most important reason is that Jackson wrote his prison

experience within the actual moment of experience itself. Malcolm X, on the other hand, used the experience as a pivotal turning point in his greater narrative that extended far beyond the limits of the prison itself, while Jackson's letters can be read as informed by the dynamics of prison culture. Doran Larson also acknowledges this main difference between Malcolm X and Jackson. He states about the latter (in implicit contrast to the first): "He spins no theories of sexuality or evolution; he is literally too busy watching his back, awaiting the attempt that will succeed in his execution" (Larson, 157). Besides, when *Soledad Brother* was released in 1970, Jackson cannot be allocated the same public status as his intellectual and activist colleague Malcolm X had when he published his book, when he already received nation wide attention by his public speeches (1962/63). Jackson, also contrasting Malcolm X in regard to this "representational profile" (Armstrong: 75), wrote his letters behind the bars that his very audience accepted and therefore legitimated. Prisons, whatsoever, were not part of the so-called problematizing dynamics in society. No feelings towards the social and cultural inequality existed in regard to prisons. Prisoners, still, are placed outside the realm of social events. Instead, as Jackson writes, the forced upon routine that speaks from inside of the bars, proves that nothing significantly just can happen to the social order (whereas his editor, nephew and Jean Genet<sup>8</sup> must have thought is otherwise). Jackson in a letter written in December 1967:

I guess there is something to be said for a person who does as he is told, lives by the routine set up by his self-appointed bosses, etc. And of course we must learn to fight our own battles. This way we can die alone, one at a time. This is a very old and proven idea. It has worked wonderfully up to now and that is why 1967 finds us all so secure and well placed.(Jackson, 148).

The subject position of Jackson, as prisoner, then is also placed outside the realm of social existence. Before he is able to speak, he first needs to find a way of articulating this "very old and proven" idea in his current experience, but in a way that it provokes a challenge to the master discourse. He, so to say, needs to draw upon the same paradigm of the intelligentsia

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<sup>8</sup> Genet wrote an introduction to the first edition of the book, published in 1970. In the second edition, published in 1994, the introduction is replaced by a foreword by Jonathan Jackson, Jr.; George's nephew. Genet's original text is added as appendix.

and popular culture in order to remove the injunction of the prison system's identity politics. It is therefore important to take the instrumental explanation of testimonio with us in the further process of analysis, because this concept makes it possible to investigate how exactly Jackson understands his position of prisoner as subaltern and how he connects this to the universal rhetoric of a grand narrative. By this I mean is that he needs to transcend the public distribution of power and knowledge, before his letters are regarded as culturally valid. Jackson is, in the end, a social and artistic outsider; the rules of cultural articulation hence do not automatically apply to him (hence the principle of isolation in cultural terms). In the analysis that follows, Jackson's narratives will be regarded as autobiographical acts of moral realism set against the gridlock of prison culture. All the exceptional narratives bear witness to the experiences of everyday life (by which I mean the material circumstances he is confronted with), yet, they also serve for Jackson to communicate to the outside world in a legitimate and valid fashion.

Indicated in the beginning of this section, in which I briefly discussed Jackson's thirteen-page long autobiography, is that Jackson does not perceive himself as a subject victimized by its dominant opposition. Rather, in his first letters, it is distinctively and repeatedly referred to that he wants to expose and confront the conditions that brought him into prison. In December 1964<sup>9</sup>, Jackson writes his father: "I would not be in prison now if she [mother] hadn't been reading life through those rose-colored glasses of hers, or if you would have had time and the wisdom to tell me of my enemies, and how to get the things I needed without falling into their traps" (Jackson, 43).

Jackson does not, ever, acknowledge a hierarchical climate of American society, in which black people are regarded as inferior (which would define him as such as well). He instead states that most of the black people, including his mother and father, themselves are guilty of wearing "rose-colored glasses" and collaborating with what Jackson persistently refers to as his enemies and the enemy culture. In the same letter to his father as the one quoted above, it becomes clear Jackson does not regard himself in the same, subaltern position as his parents are in. In order to see the full scale of his discourse, I will quote Jackson here in some length:

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<sup>9</sup> Some letters are accompanied by an exact date, still other letters are only introduced by an indication of the month and year in which the letter was sent.

Dear Father, I guess you are right in what you say about Mother's position. If she wishes to occupy the corner set aside for us in this society and be happy with such then let it be. I merely speak of better and different things in a society greater (in my humble opinion) and more conducive to advancement for people of my kind. Always bear in mind that though I may sound intolerant and pressing at times, all I say is by way of discourse and nothing by way of advice. You see I understand you people clearly. You are afflicted by the same set of principles that has always governed black people's ideas and habits here in the U.S. I know also how we arrived at this appalling state of decadence. You see, my father, we have been "educated" into an acceptance of our positions as national scapegraces. Our acceptance of the lie is consciously based on the supposition that peace can and must be preserved at any price. Blacks here in the U.S. apparently do not care how well they live, but are only concerned with how long they are able to live. This is odd indeed when considering that it is possible for us all to live well, but within the reach of no man to live long! My deepest and most sincerely felt sympathies go out to all of you who are not able to resolve your problems because of this fundamental lack of spirit. The morass of illusionment has claimed your souls completely. I do not care about the other millions of blacks here in the land of tears, their fate is of their own choosing; but because you and the others of our family have always been close to me whatever successes I wring from the eternal foe you will share. Until I do this I know it is expecting too much for you to be impressed with the ideals I put forward. It's always been this way I imagine. One has to be shown the fruits and feel the rewards of a new or different thing before perceiving its merits. (Jackson, 40,41).

By refusing to speak in terms of a victimized people, he already avoids the qualifications of the hegemony that places black people in the position of subaltern. Also, by referring to his own people as located in the "morass of illusionment", he claims to be in the position to speak on behalf of the 'soulless'. Doran Larson also writes that Jackson's "I" represents a "history-conscious descendent of slaves" (Larson, 157), rather than a victimized person. Therefore, Jackson also speaks on behalf of all other who are regarded as soulless. Jackson embraces the popular weapon of an enlightened soul that allows him to position to revalue the marginalized

sector of people in a society that is informed by “neoslavery”<sup>10</sup>. Though using this term, however, Jackson does rely on the notions of victim and domination. Rather, within the violent conditions of incarceration, the (former) position of a neoslave as used by Jackson a platform of revolution, a platform that appeals negatively to the 1960s and 1970s in which slavery by then had grown by far a subject to be avoided and repressed in political discourse. In another letter to his father (on March 30, 1965), he namely acknowledges:

Though I know I am a victim of social injustice and economic pressure and though I understand the forces that work to drive so many of our kind to places like this and to mental institutions, I can't help but know that I proceeded wrong somewhere. I could have done a lot worse. You know our people react in different ways to this neoslavery, some just give in completely and join the other side. They join some christian cult and cry out for integration. (...) Then there are those who resist and rebel but do not know what, who, why, or how exactly they should go about this. They are aware but confused. They are the least fortunate, for they end where I have ended. (Jackson, 55, 56).

He regards being a victim thus only from a position of losing a ideological battle against the justice system itself, but he also immediately directs us in thinking of it as a false consciousness that lies at the heart of this system. This is so because it based on an what Louis Althusser would refer to as the “imaginary relationship between people” that controls their real existence and regulate subject positions on the basis of representations (Althusser, 1970). It is in this passage that two forms of representations meet as opponents that are trying to fight each other. Being a victim, however, presupposes having lost your position on unfair grounds, but by admitting to “proceeded wrong somewhere” due to being an “aware but confused” rebel, he resists the status of victim, seen as representation that governs his condition and potential within society, and therefore defies himself as a subaltern. He holds his agency by claiming its rebellious potential. The representation of himself as a victim in this passage, does not emerge from the exclusion he experiences, but rather from the interaction he has with “the system's repressive agencies” (Jackson, 56). This can be understood as a “popular-democratic”

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10. Neoslavery is explained by Jackson as : “The new slavery, the modern variety of chattel slavery updated to disguise itself, places the victim in a factory or in the case of most blacks in support roles inside and around the factory system (service trades), working for a wage. However, if work cannot be found in or around the factory complex, today's neoslavery does not allow even for a modicum of food and shelter. You are free — to starve” (Jackson, 251).

form of cultural resistance, because he reconciles his experience of resistance and his position of prisoner as part of the paradigm of social change, profoundly by drawing the notion of slavery into his narration. His (his)story is written through and against its collaboration with contemporary US society and global history; Jackson's story of resistance captures both the realities and memories of acknowledged institutional violence in order to portray his own reality in a legitimate representation (that of a revolutionary who revolts against slavery). Jackson often refers to and thus becomes a close witness of domestic violence of the U.S and, due to speaking in revolutionary terms, thus becomes more than just a victim.

The events of the Congo, Vietnam, Malaya, Korea, and here in the U.S. Are taking place all for the same reason. The commotion, the violence, the struggles in all these areas and many more spring from one source, the evil and malign, possessive and greedy Europeans. (...) They attempt to impose their theories on the world for obvious reasons of self-gain. Their philosophy concerning government and economics has an underlying tone of selfishness, possessiveness, and greediness because their character is made up of these thing. (Jackson, 43).

Through the removal of a deictic center ("I") in this discourse, Jackson states an impersonal condition and thus becomes an agent of a call for transformation. What I mean by this is that Jackson cannot be regarded from a subaltern position here, because his subject is closely linked (instead of opposed) to the struggles he describes. The value of the statement has to be judged by the public. It is not a merely a statement that belongs to the perception of Jackson alone, but rather to a nation wide subject of investigation. Jackson tries to re-establishes the authority to speak, because the reader is drawn into not merely the story of the victim, but into a collective history and identity due to the factual value of the narrative. This way, Jackson's witness account moves beyond the personal position and becomes an allegory for all the people who are similarly oppressed by the system. Jackson's voice is not merely that of a subaltern, but that of a multitude of people, including those who blindly follow the "greediness" that Europeans instigated. This process evokes the ethical qualities that produce a bond between Jackson's witness narrative and the "mainstream reader". This is also explained by Armstrong:

The more the reader considers him/herself ignorant of the author's world, the more his/her reading contributes to the Other's pedigree of authenticity. And yet, despite the reader's altruistic intent, the act of reading still implies a contractual bond and is thus a two-way street. The testimonio genre exists in the receiving culture as a construct in which mainstream preconceptions, motifs, and arguments intertwine. It is a bridge between cultures which stand like two mirrors reflecting and projecting images into each other. The mainstream culture ascribes a holistic, authentic, and inherently legitimate character to the Other culture. The latter serves to illuminate mainstream shortcomings. (Armstrong, 82).

This bridge, and therefore its cultural validity, thus is informed by the solidarity with the factual and historical values of the narrative, a narrative that reaches beyond the actual conditions that are informed by it. This value reappears throughout all of his letters. For instance, but exemplary in his correspondence with his father (July 13, 1967), Jackson again mentions his position toward the composition of history: "I see the big picture where you may never have. I think I see the larger historical concept in its full detail. The obligation you felt toward us, I feel toward history" (Jackson, 120). This obligation is corresponded in a rational rage that closely reflects alienation or exclusion as issues beyond recognition: seeing the "big picture" and the felt obligation toward it, can be interpreted as a struggle for hegemony, that is, to become part of the mainstream consciousness<sup>11</sup>. The expression of personal experience in terms that also apply to cultural and social legitimacy of the mainstream reader from an impersonal perspective imply an urge of renegotiating the democratic values that history is falsely represented to be built upon. Jackson: "In the 1770s the Europeans over here wanted to pull away from the Europeans of England. They called it a freedom fight. Now we men of color here in the U.S. Want to pull away from the Europeans and they call it subversion,

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11 I carefully would like to draw a similarity between Jackson's struggle for hegemony and David Damrosch's theory on World Literature. Damrosch in his widely acknowledged work *What is World Literature?* rethinks the notion of world literature as to "encompass all literary works that circulate beyond their culture of origin, either in translation or in their original language (Virgil was long read in Latin in Europe). In its most expansive sense, world literature could include any work that has ever reached beyond its home base, but Guillén's cautionary focus on actual readers makes good sense: a work only has an *effective* life as world literature whenever, and wherever, it is actively present within a literary system beyond that of its original culture" (Damrosch, 4). Hegemony is not so much regarded as something that must be opposed, but instead should be understood as the conscious that develops from the dynamical transformation of values/needs in society.

irresponsibility, etc” (Jackson, 118).

Other values that “illuminate mainstream shortcomings” are present as well. The by Armstrong mentioned contractual bond is also established by Jackson's (moral) responsibility that he expresses in his letters to his family in terms of encouraging self-determination, education and social integration, notions that circulate strongly in the mainstream public. In a letter to his father on December 13 1967, for instance, he writes about his sisters:

How is Penny doing on the job? Post office isn't it? Tell he I miss her and the child. Is that she married honoring his financial commitment? And Frances, are you keeping up with the movement of the guy she tied up with? I'll be want to see him first thing upon my arrival there. (Jackson, 150).

Also other, 'negative' values are communicated, for example: the loss of freedom and the deprivation of love and sex. In a letter to his female lawyer on February 26 1970, he writes:

The cruelest aspect in the loss of one's freedom of movement is of course the necessity to repress the sex urge, but after ten years I have even learned to control my response to that stimulus (one thousand fingertip push-ups a day). I probably have the world's record on push-ups completed. So, if they would reach me now, across my many barricades, it must be with a bullet and it must be final.

In another letter to Angela Davis (May 29, 1970), in communicating his feelings for her, he writes: “Do you sense how drunk this photograph had made me? You've got it all, African woman. I'm very pleased, if you don't ask me for my left arm, my right eye, both eyes, I'll be very disappointed. You're the most powerful stimulus I could have” (Jackson, 301). By mentioning these passages, I do not simply want to state a banal form of identification, but instead show, throughout his communication, signs of unquestioned (moral) truths are practiced, signs that unite Jackson with the populist opinion through rallying against a common negative experience while stimulating the uncontested values, such as self-consciousness and self-determination, which are immanently shared by the grand narrative of emancipation. Through this testimonial process he defies the possibility of negative judgment

or critical reading of the authenticity of Jackson, for it tempers Jackson's raging writing through accommodating the (subjective) structures of his morality (and needs) in the popular-democrat sense of the word. These signs are adapted to his sociopolitical circumstance in order for him to combine his sociopolitical struggle with representations of otherness with the personal responses (both in terms of anger, the sexual loss, the nostalgia, the wish to take care of his family). Through this evocation, Jackson creates a basis for moral truthfulness, since, by referring to his personal state of affairs and the consequences imprisonment has both for his mental and physical self, he closely adheres to a Western individualism that validates personal and interpersonal experience as the basis knowledge and morality.

### 3.8 Conclusion

The fusion of both a populist and political urge in the testimonio, both in Jackson and Malcolm X, marks the means and mode of expression with which they deem the reception of his person and experience culturally valid. It is not mere empathy that is evoked through this process (which, quite contrary to what happens, would enforce the narrators subaltern position), because what happens to them is not simply understood as marginal. It is effected by and effects the very ideological system the reader belongs to. This ideological system, one that informs the social context of his narrative acts, is the base upon which they build their resistance. Via these processes, especially in the case of George Jackson, they address and attack the material reality they are placed in from the inside. Although from the concealed side of the narrative, it still evokes the same structures as demanded by the humanistic ideal of rationality. Here I draw Pierce Armstrong in again, since he too regards this process of storytelling as a valid way of resistance. He writes: "Individual narratives of villainous abuse or heroic resistance may be psychologically seductive as constructs, but in order to constitute a 'social' truth the abuse must be seen as systematic" (Armstrong, 76). In *Soledad Brother* this constitution of a social truth is accomplished most significantly by his defying of the representation of a subaltern position that would draw him, like his parents, into the false consciousness that controls domination over people by making them invisible to history and disallow them access into the dynamics of constructed of a social reality. Unlike his parents,

however, Jackson exposes the powers that drove him into prison and hold him there to just a moment before he was shot. These dynamics are rendered legible through formulating from an impersonal position the principles that lie at the heart of his experiences. The reason why *Soledad Brother* can be regarded as a testimonio, understood as a narrative emerged from a struggle for hegemony, then, is that the letters and subsequently the publication of the collection, are produced from the urge of social pressures that also suffocate the personal body of the witness. It is through its actual and readable experience of the prison that the mainstream reader is drawn into the history of what is known as the subaltern. I have argued that this has been made possible only through the evocation of a collective history and identity, due to the factual and ethical values the autobiographical acts embody. These values are based on the cultural connection with the public reader, because in order to constitute a valid narrative of social intercourse, Jackson also indeed had to stay within the margins of the grand narrative. Through his testimonio, he marks himself as a revolutionary within this system and he accomplishes making the shadows of the prison system material. These can be read through the by the prison experience conditioned form (both in the very form, words and feelings in which he presents himself towards other). The text therefore becomes complimentary to the humanistic ideal on which the very suffering and revolutionary awakening is connected. On both analysis, I would like to conclude by saying that neither *Soledad Brother* nor *AMX* can be regarded as local narratives, because they clearly resonate the (pragmatic) urge for setting right history and emancipation in order for them to participate in the hegemony. Although the grand narrative as discussed by Lyotard is defied as a false consciousness, both narratives still are in search an universal truth. They do not, whatsoever, express their ambitions towards a cultural relativistic world view, for that would only emphasize their difference. However, this universal truth is not understood as a re-installment of a different history, but rather as a dynamical hegemonic truth in which a broader democratic system could negotiate a broader spectrum of people. Moral truth and factual truth may coincide, as long as they function in terms according to the dynamical transformations of values and needs of people in society. To close this chapter, I will quote Malcolm X for the last time:

In our mutual sincerity we might be able to show a road to the salvation of America's

very soul. It can only be salvaged if human right and dignity, in full, are extended to black men. Only such real, meaningful actions as those which are sincerely motivated from a deep sense of humanism and moral responsibility can get at the basic causes that produce the racial explosions in America today. (Malcolm X, 434).

## Conclusion

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The initial question of this thesis was: How is prison writing understood as a culturally valid to the hegemony of the American social discourse surrounding imprisonment (i.e. criminals, prison, punitive system)? I will now answer this question by concluding the lengthy arguments given by starting with referring to the very title of this thesis: *Uncovering Prison Writing – Incarceration of in the Land of the Free*. I hope to have made clear during the three chapters that this title contains both a contradiction as well as a ambivalent word use.

The contradiction is made clear throughout the overall argument of a grand narrative that has been legitimizing the prison system over the last two centuries on a global scale. Although this grand narrative promised liberation through institutionalizing the social, economic, scientific, artistic and educational facilities, it did leave aside that a totalizing history subsequently provokes a dichotomy between emancipators and its opponents, referred to as local identities. As a result, a bifurcation was created for people who did not participate in society, because they where not allowed access to one of these facilities, since the grand narrative was mainly applied to those who would fit the representation that history produced of human dignity. It has been argued that the prison system, as it was based on the grand narrative of emancipation, has grown out to the most central racialized institution of America. Not only does the life story of both Malcolm X and George Jackson verify this, we also have seen the statistical publications on the population in its racial proportions.

As I have argued in chapter two, the hegemony produced by the narrative of liberalism also resulted in an identity politics derived from the prison system (as historically applied to managing former slaves, whereas slavery is closely connected to the very ideal of emancipation itself and eventually led to the legitimacy of imperialism, colonialism and chattel slavery). This is so because the legitimacy of the prison also informs the legitimacy of state control and the classification of people, based on generalization and negative stereotyping. As long as these classifications are institutionalized they become the power mechanisms of control. As made clear in the prison writings, the classification mechanisms led the two authors to become recognized as potential criminals already from the day they were born. Common criminal activities are presented as ancillary to identity politics.

The issue of prison writing hence is investigated in terms of autobiography, a genre for expressing the existence and temporal development of subjectivity. I have tried to argue that emergence of the autobiographical “I”, the narratological manner for recognition of the existence and dynamics of the subject, ran parallel to the birth of the narrative of emancipation. This I have identified as the “I” defined by the genre of a narrative that demands a teleological vision and, associated with that, the perfectibility of character. Only within this classification can authenticity and therefore the dignity of human being be respected, a humanistic ideal that still runs across the prison system today. The prove that I have given on the prison population in American prison, as well as what the stories of Malcolm X and Jackson tell, then, leads us to conclude that – since it is based on classification – a major part of (non-white) Americans is treated more profoundly on the level of the public state's identity politics than on the level of individual values. This group of people is covered by a representation created by history, that is, as invisible human beings and therefore of less quality within the realization of the ideal of liberation, whether that is in the form of capitalism, imperialism or economic slavery is besides the point. I instead have argued, in relation to the text I have chosen to analyze, for the recognition of the suppressed in a system that is selective in choosing its participants for reaching its set goal.

The works I have chosen to analyze the way prison writings uncover the fixed representation show, in the first place, a resemblance with autobiographical individualism. Although written from the disturbing and personal experience of incarceration, they embody the humanistic ideals of changing through time, yet in a different manner. Their potential of criticism lies in the observation that both Malcolm X and Jackson systematically, that is in a rationally coherent structure, destabilize the images not merely of an the non-authentic “I” (local identities can not be authentic, since defined in the disciplinary relation with the global), but also deliver a renewing image of society. Thereby they reunite the two images (e.g. white people with dignity, black people without) within the same narrative of emancipation. This is done in both prison writings through the use of reversible generalization. This validity of this systematic approach towards society is based on the principle of personal experience that allows experiential truth to speak for not merely the individual, but for a whole group of people. I have shown that the opposition between local and global identities becomes uncovered as a false consciousness that puts people in subaltern positions on the basis of

history and the representations of values. The way in which this in both works is done, although on different levels, is through the evocative power of involving a collective history as the ground for personal experience, whereas the experience itself is also referred to in terms that adhere to popular demand. Through the authentic "I" (regarded as autobiographical within the narrative of emancipation) not merely the local becomes the global and vice versa (which would be relativistic), rather the local is shifted into the global. In *AMX* this was done through the involvement of ethical and aesthetic valid principles (i.e. narrative strategies of essentialism, immanent to modern autobiography), whereas Jackson did this through what has been called a testimonial process, in which the individual instead of subaltern experience guarantees truthfulness; that is values that are part of the hegemony. In accordance with these processes the isolation in terms of cultural and social distance disappear. Isolation then becomes read as a struggle for hegemony. By the legislation of the individual moral attitude emerging from a subordination in terms of the slave-master narrative, the transcendence of this opposition into a new (political/cultural) dynamical order is made possible. The hegemony, thus, no longer is controlled from the outside, because margins and therefore the center become neutralized for the sake of a larger, more dynamic idea of emancipation. Prison writing uncovers both the prisoner and the *real* collective history by revealing the identity politics in the land of the free.

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