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From the Prison-House of Soledad: The Forging of Black Nationalism and Masculinity in Solitary Confinement

Self-writing can be seen as a form of empowerment and a way of controlling one’s self image. Yet, as Michel Foucault pointed out, producing the self in writing is a way of subjecting it to social control: “turning . . . real lives into writing . . . functions as a procedure of objectification and subjugation” (Discipline and Punish 187). This dual mechanism is particularly pronounced in autobiographical prison writings. On the one hand, by writing convicts expose themselves to examination and subsequent disempowerment wrought by prison corrective programs aimed to erase their identity (Aswadu 31). On the other, faced with a threat of social erasure by confinement and isolation, convicts use self-writing to consolidate their sense of self, creating a narrative space within which to resist the hierarchies of power and refute the “criminal” identity that reduces them to a number and a record file.

This essay traces the double impact of the biographical/therapeutic prison discourse and black nationalist discourse on George Jackson’s identity formation in Soledad Brother: The Prison Letters of George Jackson (1970). The discussion then shifts to gender and sexuality as major social divisions affecting the production of revolutionary black male subjectivity. Before proceeding to analyze Jackson’s work, I provide an overview of the Black Panther Party’s ideology, as well as the popular and critical reception of their prison writings.

Soledad Brother belongs to the body of prison writings published in the heyday of the Black Power Movement. Next to Jackson, other Black Panther Party members such as Bobby Seale, Huey P. Newton, and Eldridge Cleaver articulated a new brand of black masculinity informed by the nationalist ideology of the Black Panther Party. Established by Huey Newton and Bobby Seale in October 1966, the party drew, among others, on Franz Fanon’s analysis of the colonial system to define black communities as spaces colonized by the American state or “a nation within a nation” (Seale, Seize the Time 92). By pointing to class and

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1 This paper is a short version of a chapter titled “Imprisoned Masculinities: Eldridge Cleaver and George Jackson” in my book Black Masculinities in American Social Science and Self-Narratives of the 1960s and 1970s (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2010).

2 See Franz Fanon, Black Skin, White Masks and The Wretched of the Earth.
racial hierarchies of power, the Panthers disavowed the ideology and the rhetoric of integration as a tool employed by the state to “obscure the [class] struggle with ethnic differences” (Seize the Time 92) and thus maintain state hegemony. Following Fanon, they saw revolutionary potential in the lumpenproletariat, the economically marginalized segment of the society, the politically unaware, un/employable masses. In light of the party’s revolutionary nationalism, black nationhood posed an alternative to “the black colony” if it rejected the exploitative relations written into the capitalist mode of production, and adopted a more equalitarian system, such as socialism.

The Panthers’ anti-neocolonial, anti-imperialist rhetoric pointed at the American nation-state can be illustrated by Jackson’s overt condemnation of the capitalist economy. According to Jackson, this economy reproduced a mode of race-class oppression akin to that of chattel slavery. Neoslavery, Jackson explained was “an economic position that manifests itself in the total loss or absence of self-determination” (Soledad Brother 91)—it is a system of economic marginalization and disempowerment of blacks by the coercive state.

Those revolutionary ideas found expression in the Panthers’ landmark political activity—a most spectacular and disquieting intervention in the criminal justice system. Monitoring the streets to put an “immediate end to POLICE BRUTALITY and MURDER of black people” (Seale, Seize the Time 88) was the strategy with which the party set out to implement community control of the public space in segregated black neighborhoods. A less spectacular yet much more palpable form of activism initiated by the Panthers were a series of the so-called “survival programs.” ³³ Their significance was downplayed or downright neglected by the media which produced a one-sided image of the Party as run by dangerous radicals, or as J. Edgar Hoover put it, “the greatest threat to the internal security of the country,”⁴ and thus subject to political and physical decimation by the FBI’s COINTELPRO program by the early 1970s. This harrowing experience, including the death of many colleagues, underpinned the Panthers’ ideological shift away from revolutionary nationalism, through internationalism, to what Newton called “revolutionary intercommunalism.” To disentangle themselves from the colonial relationship, African American communities and other groups worldwide would become “liberated zones”—self-sustaining and self-governing political and spatial bodies independent of the state’s ideological and economic hegemony (Newton 20-38; Bush 198-200).

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³ For a detailed discussion of the Panthers’ community programs, see Rod Bush’s chapter on “The Crisis of U.S. Hegemony” (1999).

⁴ That statement was made in 1969 when J. Edgar Hoover was serving as the Director of the FBI. See: http://www.blackpanther.org/legacynew.htm
When the prison writings of black revolutionaries became national bestsellers in the late 1960s and early 1970s, the authors were applauded as representatives of a new generation of eloquent, well-read, and politically active black men. For example, Cleaver’s *Soul on Ice* sold several million copies, while Cleaver himself became a widely admired symbol of countercultural revolt. White radicals such as Jerry Rubin identified with the ex-convict’s message: “We are all Eldridge Cleaver” (Rubin, *Do It!*, qtd. in Kimball 214). Jackson’s work, in turn, was read as a “tragic-heroic reflection of the apocalyptic state of mind of millions of black Americans whose hopelessness it will encourage” (Lewis, “Last Will and Testament of a ‘Soledad Brother’”). His depiction of the prison experience was regarded as authentic, “a voice, a will, a revolutionary force that embodied the collective thrust of oppressed peoples throughout the world” (Chrisman 3). Despite the authors’ imposed invisibility, the insights they offered became an intrinsic element of Black Power activism.

In his 1978 *Prison Literature in America: The Victim as Criminal and Artist*, social historian Bruce H. Franklin made a claim that the prison writings of Black Power activists should be thought of as “a coherent body of literature” (233) sharing common themes and functions. Franklin’s assertion fit into a larger project of a “fundamental redefinition of American literature,” whose long tradition was built on its alleged universality, “whiteness” and elitism, in abstraction from social context (xxxii). Prisoners were “members of the oppressed classes” (Franklin xxxi) and their writing, alongside ethnic minority literature, should be incorporated into the national literary canon, Franklin suggested. Further, the prison experience of black nationalist authors was “typical and representative” rather than “unique or even extraordinary” (250), he argued.

A common theme of 1960s black convict writing, with Malcolm X as its “political and spiritual leader,” was the vision of America as “the prison house of the Black nation,” Franklin noted (239). Regardless of whether the prison authors were “the common criminal[s] thrust into political activism” or “the political activist[s] thrust into prison” (242), their writing was an “arena of struggle” (Franklin 235) against world imperialism and capitalist exploitation both at home and in the Third World. Finally, what made these works particularly appealing to white readers were the insights into the American class system (Franklin 248).

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5 In his introduction to *Soledad Brother*, Jean Genet wrote: “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, tough and sure, both a weapon of liberation and a love poem” (*Soledad Brother* 1).

6 In 1989, ten years after the first publication of *Prison Literature in America*, Franklin claimed that his book significantly changed the perception of prison writing in the U.S.: “Writings on contemporary prison authors ran the gamut from doctoral dissertation to *Parade*, the weekly magazine stuffed into twenty-four million copies of American newspapers each Sunday. Big movie studios vied for rights to novels by convicts. Some of the authors discussed in this book were finally admitted into college curricula and academic anthologies” (xxi).
A similar reading of the texts produced by male Black Power activists was offered in *Black Autobiography in America* (1974) by Stephen Butterfield. He analyzed Jackson’s *Soledad Brother*, along with the works of Malcolm X, Eldridge Cleaver, H. Rap Brown, Bobby Seale, and Julius Lester, as fostering a “black identity” (read: black male identity) as well as documenting the development of the authors’ “revolutionary self,” their quest for “humanity” through writing, and an articulation of counter-hegemonic political views. He considered it “revolutionary” (read: male-specific) since it embraced a neocolonial perspective on class and race in America and rejected “whiteness” as a cultural attitude. Further, Butterfield emphasized that author-convicts such as Jackson resisted the “dehumanization” and “devaluation of [their] existence” in prison by achieving “freedom of the mind” that allowed them to “come forth with a conscious humanity . . . to be whole” men (232). It is worth noting that by reading these autobiographies as representative of black prison writing and Black Power activism, both Franklin and Butterfield gave primacy to the *blackness* of the male autobiographers, downplaying the gender of the “speaking subjects” —a problem I shall refer to in the second half of the paper.

Who was George Jackson (1941-1971)? What made him a criminal and a political radical in succession, or as Franklin put it, “the common criminal thrust into political activism” (242)? At the age of nineteen, he was given a one-year-to-life prison sentence for a $70 robbery, which he claimed he had not committed. By the time of his murder at the hands of the prison guards in 1971, he had spent a total of 10 years at various California prisons—Folsom, Soledad, and San Quentin—including eight years in solitary confinement. Jackson was regularly rejected for parole because of his politically subversive activity: educating and organizing the prisoners in the spirit of anti-Americanism, anti-imperialism, and communism. As a convict, he joined the ranks of the Black Panther Party and was responsible for recruiting new members. He envisaged the prisoners as “a mighty reservoir of revolutionary potential” and the prison movement as an inseparable element of class struggle against the oppression outside prison walls (Jackson, “Towards the United Front” 157, 158). In 1970, Jackson and two other inmates, Fleeta Drumgo and John Cluchette, became known to the American public as Soledad Brothers, defendants in the murder case of a prison guard. The case, which was a frame-up, would take Jackson to death row if he were found guilty. A huge political campaign was launched by the Black Panther Party and other radical activists on university campuses, and the

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7 Although Butterfield mentioned Jackson’s bitter letters to his mother in which he accuses her of failing to bring him up to be “a man,” he noted that shortly before his death Jackson did come to recognize women as equal participants in the revolution. Thus, it seems, Butterfield was making a conscious gesture towards recognizing the black women’s role in what was otherwise regarded as black men’s struggle.
case was widely publicized by the Soledad Brothers Defense Committees. The publication of Jackson’s *Soledad Brother* was part of the campaign against the charge. This collection of personal correspondence with his family, political activists, and friends offered a severe criticism of the prison system. It documented the daily terror and intimidation experienced by the inmates, and the ruthless workings of racist hierarchies of power. Other letters, especially those addressed to his family, showed Jackson’s personal development by way of a gradual immersion in an oppositional political ideology. Awaiting trial, Jackson worked intensively on his second book, *Blood in My Eye*, a collection of letters and essays on revolutionary ideology, which was published in 1972, after Jackson’s murder at San Quentin in August, 1971. Jackson was remembered as a “martyr,” a “hero” of the prison movement, who “set the standard for prisoners, for political prisoners, for people” (Newton *Revolutionary Suicide* 346); as a man who “embod[ied] the unified will of the people to resist the monstrous evil, to create a better world devoid of racist hatred, of rapacious seizure of the people’s resources for individual wealth” (Chrisman 4).

Not unlike Malcolm X and Cleaver, Jackson used the time in prison to educate himself, reading the classic texts of socialist and communist ideology: Marx, Lenin, Fanon, and Mao Tse Tung. Those staple readings, combined with the prison experiences, developed in Jackson an oppositional political consciousness. He worked to politicize the black inmates and organize them to collectively resist persecution and racist attacks launched by the white prisoners on behalf of the guards. Further, by meditating and writing in the solitude of his cell, he engaged in what anthropologist Laura Nader called “studying up”—a form of resistance to the pathologization of the black community by outsiders. Writing from a unique position—solitary confinement—allowed him to study critically the power structure of the society at large. Unlike the sociologists and anthropologists who did their research in close proximity to their objects of study (the underclass inner-city black population), Jackson took advantage of his “detached” status—the physical and emotional distance created by incarceration—to reverse the traditional relationship between the subject and object of ethnographic study, where the lower class black community’s “difference” from the norm was tantamount to the group’s criminalization, and thus an object of unrelenting “studying down” by outsiders.

**Prison writing and criminal identity**

I approach *Soledad Brother* as a discursive space where criminal and masculine identities are forged and negotiated in a particular locale—that of a prison house. Foucault has written extensively about the disciplining power of writing, whereby the individual prisoner is transformed into a “case” that has to
be “trained or corrected, classified, normalized, excluded, etc.” Inmates’ lives are duly recorded by prison administrators and “this turning of real lives into writing . . . functions as a procedure of objectification and subjugation” (Discipline and Punish 191, 187). Similarly, autobiographical accounts by the prisoners themselves make the subject available for examination. According to ethnologist Brigitta Svensson, who studied oral autobiographies of Swedish prison inmates, such self-narratives generally reflect a “criminal” subjectivity fostered by the prison. Convicts internalize the criminal identity of the biographical/therapeutic discourses. As a result, they tend to rely on the official scripts of biographical discourse to tell their life stories as if their lives consisted mainly of crimes, and locate the cause of those crimes in the past: an unhappy childhood, early exposure to crime, an overbearing mother, or a weak absent father. In line with the official script, they speak of their crime as a sin to be repented or as a debt to society. Yet, as Svensson further explains, “the reflexive project” is a double-edged sword: it is “both emancipatory and coercive. One fulfills oneself as subject and is constituted as an object” (91).

The questions addressed below are: Does Jackson conform to the biographical discourse of the prison? What is the relationship between the masculine and the criminal identities imposed on Jackson by prison administrators, parole officers, lawyers, and guards? To what extent does he exercise agency and control through the act of writing? How do the prison masculinities of other inmates affect his masculine self-presentation?

Jackson’s prison correspondence with family members, lawyers, and friends written between 1964 and 1970, was addressed to specific individuals. Soledad Brother, in turn, was aimed at a broad readership as part of the political campaign to clear Jackson of the murder charge in the notorious “Soledad Brothers case.” In this context Jackson was asked to preface the would-be collection of personal letters with a short autobiography which he duly produced. The section’s title, “Recent Letters and an Autobiography,” if only through the use of the indefinite article, points to the hidden intentionalities of the narrative. I would suggest that by selectively incorporating certain experiences of pre-imprisonment life, Jackson establishes his authority to explore a wide range of

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8 The knowledge of the convict’s past allows the biographical discourse of the prison to “establish the ‘criminal’ as existing before crime and even outside of it, ... a psychological causality” (Foucault, Discipline and Punish 251-2).
9 William F. Pinar notes that unlike law in other democratic countries, “American law does not recognize political crimes, although many prisoners—for instance, a number of 1960s political dissidents—have claimed that their imprisonment was in fact political. . . . Consequently, the American political system has tended to regard prison as punishment for misdeeds or as institutions of rehabilitation (Jacobs 1983). This ‘psychologization’ and ‘medicalization’ of imprisonment sidesteps rather than confronts the political elements of ‘crime’” (985).
issues connected with American race relations and international politics. Operating at the intersection of criminal and masculine discourses, he nonetheless engages in a counterhegemonic struggle over black masculinity.

**Jackson’s life story as a subversion of his own “criminality”**

While realizing that autobiographical writing empowers narrators to omit certain facts or events from their lives, Jackson gives up that “privilege” with respect to his adolescent life in the street: “I could play the criminal aspects of my life down some but then it wouldn’t be me. That was a pertinent part, the things at school and home I was constantly rejecting in the process” (9). On the surface, “Recent Letters and an Autobiography” reads like a coherent narrative documenting a succession of “crimes” Jackson was involved in due to poverty, from petty theft in his boyhood, through numerous robbery charges in early adolescence, to a murder charge. Yet, despite the litany of crimes and ten years spent behind bars, Jackson does not project himself as a well-institutionalized “criminal” who has been “corrected” by the prison programs; nor does he offer an apology for his youthful wrongdoings. On the contrary, in what sounds like a penitent voice of a disciplined “criminal,” Jackson actually shows no regret for his past behavior:

> My disposition towards guns and explosions is responsible for my first theft. . . . I confess with some guilt that I liked to shoot small animals, birds, rabbits, squirrels, anything that offered itself as a target. I was a little skinny guy; scourge of the woods, predatory man. (14, emphasis mine)

Instead, he appropriates the confessional mode to express remorse for shooting small animals, an activity that is not considered criminal. Also, while the last sentence in this passage is obviously filled with self-irony, Jackson does not prepare the reader for a didactic narrative of development. Far from adopting the normative perspective of a well-adjusted (rehabilitated) member of society, he inserts his “criminal” past into the larger narrative frame of the Bildungsroman (as does Bobby Seale in *A Lonely Rage*).

When Jackson admits that “the record that the state has compiled on my activities reads like the record of ten men. It labels me brigand, thief, burglar, gambler, hobo, drug addict, gunman, escape artist, Communist revolutionary, and murderer” (10), he foreshadows the structure as well as the content of the account. Not only does he confirm being involved in various crimes in the past but he also elaborates on his prison record by confessing that “my troubles began when we were in the projects” (15) and “my disposition towards guns and explosions is responsible for my first theft” (14, emphasis mine). Thus, he
becomes, if only allegedly, complicit in his own “criminalization” produced by the biographical discourse of the prison.

The tongue-in-cheekness of this act of contrition does not reveal Jackson’s true intentions unless read within a larger framework of his oppositional activity. He gives in to the objectifying power of the criminalizing discourse as long as it allows him to engage in reverse discourse. In fact, Jackson makes a strong political statement about state-legitimized racial oppression: “Black men born in the U.S. and fortunate enough to live past the age of eighteen are conditioned to accept the inevitability of prison. For most of us, it simply looms as the next phase in a sequence of humiliations” (9). Thus, his emphasis on black men’s collective “criminalization,” a process that divorces the punishment from the crime, destabilizes the very notion of the “criminal” making Jackson’s account inherently subversive.

A criminal and a slave

Jackson challenges the biographical discourse of the prison with the discourse of slavery, making his identity as a “criminal” marginal to his identity as “a slave in a captive society” (9). It is the racial hierarchies of power that determine black men’s collective predicament as “slaves,” and are central to the “criminalization” and subsequent marginalization of their masculinity. Adopting the identity of “the runaway slave”—a strategy that individualizes his own experience—he acts as the agent of his own objectification, ironically, in keeping with the hegemonic project. The emancipatory function of the discourse of slavery involves coercion into the “criminal” identity that Jackson seeks to oppose. This is exemplified in the statement: “I was captured and brought to prison” because “I couldn’t adjust” (10, emphasis mine). When we locate this statement in the realm of the discourse of slavery, the capture of a slave who cannot adjust to bondage emphasizes resistance to assimilation into the “dominant enemy culture” (12). This defiance of the status quo is targeted, among others, at the black family as a structure of racial oppression.

Jackson assumes an Afrocentric perspective of a “captive slave” to reminisce on his mother’s role in his education: “my mother sent me to St. Malachy Catholic mission school” where a “small group of missionaries with their costumes and barbaric rituals offered the full range of Western propaganda” (11). Adopting the slave’s point of view allows him to defamiliarize the familiar, and ascribe a “primitive” otherness to the high civilization of Western culture (religion). Jackson makes his mother complicit in his cultural/religious enslavement. The

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10 J. G. Miller called the young black men’s imprisonment “an ambiguous puberty rite of disrespect and symbolic castration” (qtd. in Pinar 1008).
following excerpt demonstrates this strategy more poignantly: “As testimony of her love, and her fear for the fate of the manchild all slave mothers hold, she attempted to press, hide, push, capture me in the womb. The conflicts and contradictions that will follow me to the tomb started right there in the womb” (9-10).

This metaphorical “capture” in the womb locates Jackson’s relationship with his mother in the slavery discourse (rather than in the psychoanalytic framework) and makes her the prime agent of her son’s ideological “enslavement.” This allows Jackson to subsume his adolescent crimes under his quest for “freedom,” and temporarily avoid complicity with the biographical prison discourse. As a consequence, Jackson’s defiance of social bans itself becomes liberating: “All my life I’ve done exactly what I wanted to do just when I wanted . . . which explains why I had to be jailed” (19). Yet he cannot escape reasserting the objectifying “criminal” identity.

To sum up, Jackson makes a subversive use of the “criminal” identity which he pretends to adopt to create the autobiographical self. He uses the biographical/therapeutic discourse of the prison only to question the legitimacy of the punitive system’s power to discipline him. Further, to resist his own “criminalization” he draws on the discourse of slavery which, despite its coerciveness, proves to be emancipatory. Incorporating the black nationalist neocolonial perspective, he fashions himself as a “runaway slave” who sees his alleged and real crimes in terms of a quest for ideological freedom.

On another plane, Jackson’s unique speaking position makes possible a reversal of the traditional ethnographic gaze and the subsequent defamiliarization of American culture as “primitive.” Speaking from a marginal position, at the bottom of the prison hierarchy, he lays bare the day-to-day workings of the state-controlled institution, which ruthlessly replicates the larger society’s racial hierarchies that control and discipline the racialized bodies of inmates through intimidation. Also, by leveling a scathing criticism at America’s class, race, and gender relations, as well as the country’s imperialist foreign policy, Soledad Brother sends a powerful message to the Black Power Movement, thus serving as much a “weapon of liberation” (Jean Genet, Soledad Brother, “Introduction” 1) as a site of revolutionary black masculinity formation.

**Racialized sexual hierarchies in prison**

Though sexuality is central to his autobiographical presentation, Jackson imposes a taboo on the sexual hierarchies of power at work in prison, erasing the issue almost completely from his letters. Therefore, I would suggest that he constructs his masculine heterosexual self in opposition to what Carl Bryan Holmberg calls the “compulsory and punitive” homosociality of the prison (88).
The homosocial environment and the absence of women produce new divisions among men, which Don Sabo et al. refer to as the intramale hierarchies of dominance. Based on extensive studies of U.S. prison culture, the authors argue that the gender order of the prison is maintained primarily by means of sexual assault and prison rape. As Stephen “Donny” Donaldson points out, prison rape “is considered rather a male than a homosexual activity, and is seen as a validation of the penetrator’s masculinity” (119). Sexual activity, then, becomes crucial for the enactment of prison masculinity, next to toughness, violence, aggression, sports, and fitness.

Within the space of Jackson’s narrative the issue of sexuality is conspicuously absent even though accounts by other inmates at the San Quentin and Folsom Prisons, published immediately after Jackson’s murder, reveal the workings of intramale racial and sexual hierarchies maintained through sexual assault and rape. Several years later, Huey P. Newton estimated that four-fifths of the inmates at California Men’s Colony, San Luis Obispo, where he was a prisoner, were “homosexuals.”

In light of the above, Jackson’s overt silence on sexual hierarchies in prison prompts questions about the act of writing as empowerment against the backdrop of the homosocial and racist environment of the punitive institution. Likening the prison to a “concentration camp” run by white “right-wing cons” under the supervision of racist guards, Jackson locates the black inmates at the very bottom of the prison power structure. The guards, Jackson informs us, in addition to exercising official power over all inmates through intimidation, maintain the pecking order of the prison by provoking racial antagonism between the two groups of inmates.

The white inmates are given the keys to black inmates’ cells, which are then opened one after another. The reader does not, in fact, learn what happens in the cells, which I interpret as the hidden intentionality of Jackson’s narrative project: namely, defiance of race-based sexual hierarchies. He refuses to participate in what Carl Bryan Holmberg calls the “culture of transgression,” where “transgression of heterosexual norms earns cultural capital, personal

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11 See Carl Bryan Holmberg, “The Culture of Transgression: Initiations into the Homosociality of a Midwestern State Prison.” Stephen “Donny” Donaldson, “Million Jockers, Punks and Queens” Donaldson explains that “Men” are “defined by successful and continuing refusal to be sexually penetrated”; they “rule the roost and establish the values and behavioral norms for the entire prison population” (118).

12 See Don Sabo et al., “Gender and the Politics of Punishment.”

13 See Kaidi Kasirka and Maharabi Muntu “Prison or Slavery?”

14 See Huey P. Newton’s autobiography Revolutionary Suicide (280). The word “homosexual” most probably points to relationships between two self-defined heterosexual men who engage in a power game whereby one man dominates the other one sexually, and thus reasserts his masculinity in prison. Newton’s term also covers men who would define themselves as homosexual/gay.
credibility, a place within the convicted hierarchy” (91) because that would call into question his heterosexual masculine identity.¹⁵

The only hint Jackson makes at the sexual hierarchies is in the use of the word “punk,” a common prison term for the sexually submissive man. As the following example demonstrates, “punk” is not racially neutral. It connotes whiteness: “I have heard the term ‘nigger’ 350 times today. . . . All the cons who use it are little, young, punk types. At least three are outright homosexuals. They’re afraid and it’s fear that’s impelling them” (234). By demeaning the white convicts as non-masculine as well as de-humanizing them as “animals of a lower order,” who not only “look” but “act” like “shaved monkeys” (58), Jackson positions himself along with other Panther prisoners as civilized “men” who “do not fight with their mouths” (216) or waste their energy on verbal power games.¹⁶ Rather than using violence as a masculinity-enabling resource, he makes the mind the locus of resistance to the overbearing “criminal” identity: “Locked in jail, within a jail, my mind is still free” (11). Self-control and self-discipline allow him to counter the effects of isolation without compromising his good record or giving up the hope for parole. Jackson’s erasure of the sexual hierarchies enables him to control the representations of other men in prison. He reverses the racial hierarchies of dominance and turns his own disempowerment into a momentary position of power. The power of the intellect also allows Jackson to imagine himself as a mentor and a guide for his family outside the prison. Through this role he reaffirms his heterosexuality but also promotes the hegemonic gender order.

**Enactment of masculinity in Jackson’s letters to his family**

Jackson’s letter-writing fulfills several functions, one of them being mentorship and control of his family’s life from the prison cell. He positions himself in the role of a guide who has a broad perspective on life and wants to share his insights. Not only does he assume authority as an advisor on day-to-day matters such as family finances, health and fitness, or do-it-yourself carpentry, but also as expert on the world of politics and economics. His obviously instructional letters allow Jackson to engage the family in an educational discussion on race relations from the Marxist, and anti-imperialist perspective. While engaging their views on race relations, Jackson challenges their gender identities.

Affinity with the black nationalist project leads Jackson to reconceptualize

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¹⁵ C.B. Holmberg notes that “denying male prisoners heterosexuality works to emasculate them. In many cases the compulsory homosociality also sets the boundaries and invitations to transgress the enforced emasculation” (91).

¹⁶ According to Donaldson, punks rank lowest in the intramale prison hierarchy; queens (transvestites, effeminate men) occupy the middle position between men and punks.
the gender identity of his father’s generation through the prism of his own rebelliousness as “the runaway slave.” He openly rejects Robert’s “natural slave mentality” (134), patronizing him for his faith in America’s democratic ideals, for his unshakeable belief in the “good life” (61), and loyalty to “incurable middle-class attitudes” (121). Appreciative of his parents’ love and devotion, Jackson is, nonetheless, far from accepting their compliance with gender identities produced by the society’s racial hierarchies. All his “revolutionary” rhetoric and fervor notwithstanding, Jackson makes his mother Georgia complicit in his father’s “inappropriate” enactment of gender identity, displacing the problem from the realm of the systemic to the realm of the domestic, reproducing the stereotype of the Black Matriarch, a powerful emasculating woman who supposedly deprived black men of patriarchal authority in the home. Shifting the burden of responsibility for his father’s masculine performance onto his mother, he pleads with her to be more sensitive to Robert’s attempts to recuperate his masculine self by saying: “imagine how he must feel when his woman won’t even let him run the house” (108), or “respect his wish to be the dominant male” (130). Like many other black nationalist activists of the era, Jackson seems to have been drawn to the antagonizing logic of the official racial discourse on blacks that was gaining currency in the mid-1960s. (The 1965 Moynihan Report was one of the most explosive documents reproducing the gender stereotypes of domineering black “matriarchs” and “castrated” black men. The “reversed roles,” Daniel P. Moynihan believed, were the source of pathology in the black family for they “serve[d] to perpetuate the cycle of poverty and deprivation” [76]).

Jackson shows complicity with hegemonic masculinity by establishing a brotherly/masculine bond with his brother Jon based on the assumption of both men’s heterosexuality, thus situating himself in opposition to homo/sociality and the homosexual practices (the intramale hierarchies of dominance) in the prison. More specifically, Jackson assumes remote control of Jon’s initiation into heterosexual relationships.

17 Black feminists Angela Davis and bell hooks respectively, have written about Jackson’s overt sexism and black female stereotyping. In her 1974 Angela Davis: An Autobiography, Davis, a former political prisoner herself, did point to Jackson’s evolving position on black women and his recognition of his own misjudgment of their role in the nationalist struggle (62). By the 1990s, however, when feminist theory had made forays into American culture, bell hooks adopted a less conciliatory approach, arguing that “a frighteningly fierce misogyny informs Jackson’s rage at Black women” (98-99).

18 Angela Davis recalls meeting George’s brother: “Jonathan only wanted to talk about George. All of his interests, all of his activities were bound up in some way with his brother in Soledad. . . . And the letters. The letters in which they developed the relationship which
arranging a date were not enough, Jackson coaches the younger brother on how to act in the company of women, setting himself up as a masculine role model: “You’re supposed to be representing me, meaning that you are to be strong, intellectual, watchful, serious, unapproachable.” (151, emphasis mine)

This emphasis on Jon “representing” Jackson demonstrates the latter’s determination to vicariously participate in the life outside prison walls and dispel what he perceives as a threat to Jon’s masculinity. This can be illustrated by the prisoner’s insistence that Jon should not be sent to a “Catholic” school, since, among other things, “they make emotional pansies of the boys with that sanctimonious dogma” (93) and “the guys who will be training him there are 90 percent sex deviates (homosexuals, etc.)” (109). This overt preoccupation with Jon’s exposure to normative gender and sexual practices, if anything, serves to validate heterosexuality as inherent in Jackson’s and the Panther’s “revolutionary” masculinity (149).

Yet the homophobic rhetoric of black nationalism, when combined with the Black Power Movement’s affirmation of blackness, produces anything but an oppositional subjectivity. Praising black women’s natural African beauty as well as their complementary, if not subservient role in the domestic sphere, Jackson asserts centrality of male power (the role of protector) to the point of reproducing the dominant culture’s gender hierarchies and ideology of heterosexism: “I am going to fulfill my role as the man, even if it kills me. I will provide the material goods and protect my family with every ounce of energy and resource that I can call up” (139). His vision of anti-colonial, anti-capitalist, anti-racist struggle is flauntingly male-centered. He sees himself as “the original man [who] will soon inherit the earth” with other “men of color” to “rebuild this world and people these lands with civil men” (87), admitting the importance of black women inasmuch as they allow men to assert their sexual agency with their reproductive capacities. All in all, Jackson’s self-writing enables him to “inhabit positions of power” by “legitimat[ing] and reproduc[ing] the social relations that generate [his] dominance” (Carrigan et al. 179) such as gender and sexual hierarchies.

Conclusion

Jackson’s autobiographical self-presentation reproduces the biographical/therapeutic discourse of the prison as well as subverting the objective “criminality” of his masculine subject. Jackson refutes the “criminal” identity of the prison altogether by appropriating the discourse of slavery revived by black nationalists in the context of post-Civil Rights liberation struggle. Fashioning should have been unfolded at home, in the streets, in the gym, on the baseball field” (Angela Davis: An Autobiography 266).
a black masculinity that is autonomous, self-disciplined, cerebral and constituted through the act of writing, he remains in control of his self image by claiming a freedom to define himself in relation to the homosocial/homoerotic environment of the prison, the racial hierarchies of power, as well as the gendered society at large. His contribution to the discursive production of black masculinities in the 1960s America is marked by the naturalization of heterosexuality, homophobic attitudes, and masculinism, which, on the one hand, makes him complicit with hegemonic masculinity and, on the other, severely limits this critiques of the gender status quo.

Soledad Brother offers a counternarrative to outsider depictions of under-class black men as powerless victims of racism and poverty; apathetic, passive, and frustrated; politically ignorant and inactive. In spite of lapses into the dominant discursive representations of blacks as racialized and gendered subjects, Jackson effectively defies his own disempowerment, channeling all his energy into a “revolutionary” struggle against racism, and what he sees as America’s neo-colonial policies in black urban enclaves.

Works Cited


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