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LOCKED IN: MELANCHOLIA
IN THE MODERN AMERICAN PRISON LITERATURE
OF R. DWAYNE BETTS AND JARVIS JAY MASTERS

by

JOHNNA L. SCRABIS

A master's thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Comparative Literature in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, The City University of New York

2016

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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the
Graduate Faculty in Comparative Literature in
satisfaction of the dissertation requirement for the
degree of Master of Arts.

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THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK
2016

Abstract

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Adviser: Charity Scribner

This thesis explores the theme of melancholia in the writing of currently and formerly incarcerated African American men during the late 20th and early 21st century. Melancholia, with its rich history in literature from ancient times to the present, is discernable in the works of many people with prison experience. In their writing, melancholia is expressed primarily as a loss and as a disconnection with time, as well as an empowering creative force. The work of Jarvis Jay Masters and R. Dwayne Betts reflects the paradox of melancholia: just as it shows the depressive element of the condition, it also makes manifest the possibility of finding within melancholia an escape from reality as well as an outlet for cultural despair. In this form, melancholia opens itself up to hope for a redemptive future. This study argues that the community of writers to which Betts and Masters belong knows the mourning that comes as a result of a removal from society due to the United States' "war on drugs". At the same time, life in prison may deepen the sense of loss that is associated with racial identity, as the literary critic Anne Anlin Cheng argues. Cheng's definition of racial melancholia, or the loss inherent in a minority population's relationship with the dominant culture, is a useful tool for analyzing the works of African American prison authors. Nevertheless, this thesis asks about the applicability of Cheng's concept to this literature, given melancholia's underpinnings in classical psychoanalysis. Due in part to this question of applicability, an examination of African American works dating back to the slave narrative is fundamental to this project. I draw on Laura Sarnelli's argument that African American authors have long engaged the productive, resistant power of melancholia in their own writing and I explore her analysis on depictions of the body in conversation with

modern prison authors. One of the first written accounts of the melancholic loss of the body is the removal of personhood through slavery. The slave narrative's common theme of confinement, a melancholic loss of space, is a thread that continues through the written documents of the Civil Rights movement and up to contemporary prison literature. However, it is important to discuss all African American texts, not just those that engage in a way that today many literary historians regard as political and aesthetic resistance. The full scope of African American confinement literature includes not just the slave narrative, but also the writing produced within the conditions of the US prison system. Prison literature needs contextualization within a larger body of work, and a series of essays edited by Tara Green lays the groundwork for this project. As is also explored in the essays that Green edits, in prison literature, melancholia is amplified by time. The carceral system itself creates a feeling of "stopped time", and the incarcerated person's loss of freedom is furthered by the dominant cultural group's desire to keep the incarcerated population segmented and ostracized, so that even after a person leaves prison, he or she remains disconnected and cut off from society. This disconnection is articulated through two central examples of 20th century cultural theory, the work of Michel Foucault and Antonio Gramsci. Foucault conceptualizes the dominant culture as an all seeing, norm-enforcing prison. Gramsci's theory of cultural hegemony serves as the fundamental rationale in regards to why the writings of incarcerated men and women must be heard and valued. This study argues that the marginalization of prison literature all but ensures that large cohorts of the American populous will remain segregated from the mainstream. As literary critics, we must read and publish these authors and enjoin them in our discussion so that a history of violence and silencing might yield to a culture of tolerance and social change.

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Introduction to Melancholia in Confinement

There is a famous engraving by the German Renaissance artist Albrecht Dürer, dated 1514 and titled *Melancholia I*. The focus of the work is a celestial angel, sitting slouched, head in hand, over work incomplete. Her gaze, cast heavenward towards a glimmering sun and sky, suggests that there is the potential for hope, while her tools, including a compass and a scale, sit untouched. The only suggestion of motion in the work is an hourglass positioned just behind the angel that is spilling sand into its lower half: time is passing. The engraving is small, only 24 centimeters by 18 centimeters, and, when reproduced in ink, it is dark and the details are somewhat difficult to decipher. Nonetheless, this compact work has been the subject of more discussion and interpretation than almost any other piece of art in history. The work is a visceral representation of melancholy, something that, even today, is difficult for sufferers and doctors alike to properly diagnose; yet, here, Dürer has put it into expression. Not only is the feeling of melancholia expressed, but it is, in a way, made virtuous. If even one of God's mighty angels could fall victim to melancholic thoughts, then there must be no shame in an ordinary man empathizing with this angel-artist's suffering. The image resonated with viewers and artists in the 16th century when it was unveiled, and it maintains the same power and relatability today. Through the ages, the angel's expression: the sadness, the bitterness, the defiant glare, create a gaze that is timeless and universal.

In whole, the image, a celestial figure stuck between worlds on the earthly plane, counting the hours as they pass, suggests confinement or captivity, and the melancholia that she represents is present in other types of captivity narratives; specifically, it is found in modern American prison literature. These authors are literally suspended in time, serving years of their

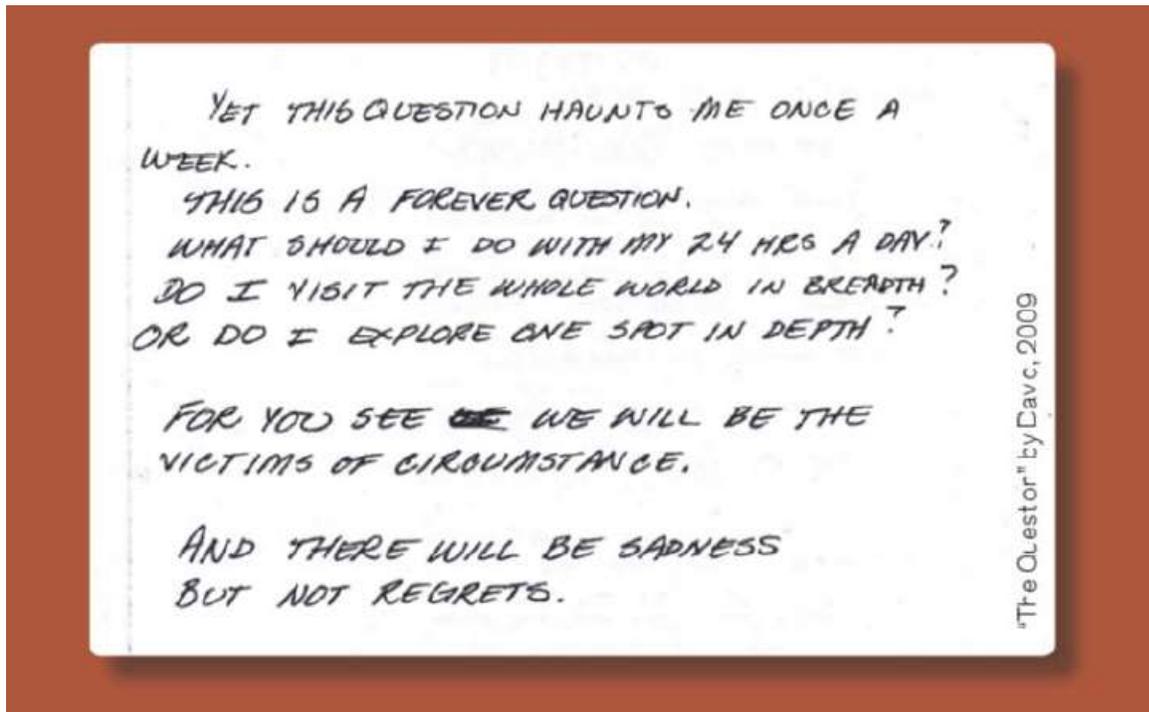
lives away from society as reparations for crimes committed. Here, time is served to the state, taken, like other personal liberties, from the incarcerated persons to whom it once belonged; the mood is desperately melancholic. Prison writing shares particular tropes and images with Dürer's *Melancholia I*, including ambiguity, a sense of malaise, the depiction of stopped time, and heaven-cast, or ceiling-cast, gazes. Looking at this literary subgenre through the lens of melancholia opens up a unique angle on a part of American life that has, for decades, been plagued by a communal and cultural melancholy, as will be evidenced through a critical comparison of key works of recent prison writing.

A good place to begin this comparison is the work *A Question of Freedom* (2010), the memoir of formerly incarcerated person and prison author R. Dwayne Betts. The author devotes an entire subsection of the book to time. In a passage entitled "Time's Heaviness", Betts writes:

After I was sentenced, time was all I thought about... I remember the first time after the sentencing my mother came to see me. The visiting room was still and when I walked in I might as well have been holding a clock with no hands (*A Question of Freedom* 81).

This is resonant of the still hourglass sitting at the feet of Dürer's angel. Although time was constantly on Betts' mind, he writes that, in a prison environment, it was the one subject on which not a word was spoken. "We never talked about time. Never. There was nothing to say about knowing you're going to spend the rest of your good years in here" (*A Question of Freedom* 144). Conversely, much of day to day life outside of a prison environment is actually a conversation about time. Discussions are future thinking and projecting: excitement for an upcoming trip, longing for a weekend break, the time remaining until a retirement, the

countdown to New Year's Eve. An inmate serving a life sentence is on his surface 'free' from the time of the passing days while inwardly consumed by it.



The Questor, *Turned Inside-Out*¹

Like many incarcerated persons, Betts cannot participate in the present, nor can he plan for the future. Consequently, he is at a standstill, trapped on one plane and gazing towards another, a classic representation of the melancholic, and one that is epitomized by *Melancholia I*. Another element of Dürer's engraving that makes the work so captivating is the complexity of

¹ David, "The Questor." *Turned Inside-Out*. Summer 2010. Web. 22 January 2016. <https://honors.uoregon.edu/files/uploads/TurnedInsideOutBook.pdf> The Inside-Out Prison Exchange Program is a national program that brings together college students and incarcerated persons. Inside-Out program rules state that no last names may be used in the classroom, and those rules were applied to the publication as well.

meaning that it expresses. In order to explore all of the layers of melancholia suggested in the work, it is necessary to briefly review the history of melancholia in literature. By titling the work *Melancholia I*, Dürer is likely alluding to Melancholia Imaginativa, or imaginative melancholy, the artist's melancholia. The artistic form of melancholia is the reason that many theorists find that, along with the depressive, mournful side of the melancholic, one also finds a productive, redemptive power to melancholia that could even be assistive to the artistic creation process. David, a person in prison, expresses this redemptive power of melancholia in his short poem "The Questor" from the literary journal *Turned Inside-Out*. As David writes, "...there will be sadness/ But not regrets" (David "The Questor" 9-10). The poet is expressing that there will be no regrets because of the creative dimension of the melancholic, and because the melancholic does not regret his lost love object, but in fact loves it. The angel in Dürer's *Melancholia I* may be suffering from an imaginative block that, should he or she persevere through, will result in a creative reckoning on the other side. As Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa wrote as early as the 16th century in *Three Books of Occult Philosophy*, "[t]herefore we understand a melancholy humor here, to be a naturall, and white choler. For this, when it is stirred up, burns, and stirs up a madness conducing to knowledge, and divination, ... and bestows upon him the knowledge, and passages of future things" (Agrippa 78). This explanation of the redemptive, almost motivational side of melancholia preserves today, and it is one explanation for the reason that so many incarcerated persons find some solace in communicating through creative art, especially through poetry and short stories.

As has happened since Agrippa's age, authors writing from prison use the productive power of melancholia to deal with a present of confinement and a future filled with uncertainty. This thesis compares the works of two authors, R. Dwayne Betts and Jarvis Jay Masters, both of

whom have served sentences in US prisons. This analysis focuses on several themes, including melancholia, the influence of cultural hegemony over incarcerated persons, the power of prisons to create a subject, and the necessity of reading the works of silenced and warehoused populations. Another point of focus is racial politics. Both Betts and Masters are of African American descent. As has been documented, African Americans are disproportionately represented in the American prison system, yet little research has been dedicated to their cultural production while incarcerated.² Both Betts and Masters have written short stories and poetry that reflect on criminal justice, and both authors depict life experiences before and after confinement. Betts has published relatively widely; his latest work, *Bastards of the Reagan Era* (2015), has been reviewed by *The New York Times*, and Betts has promoted the book on PBS and NPR. Masters is less widely published, but deserves our critical attention because he is still inside of the prison system and can shed a different light on the prison experience than what Betts offers as a formerly incarcerated person. Masters engages with time in a unique and rare manner, speaking often of the repetitive cyclical nature of his history. Masters also has the unique perspective of writing about time without any promise of leaving his current state.

Both Betts and Masters represent what is culturally and socially relevant to a young, African American man experiencing early adulthood while incarcerated. Active in the late 20th and into the early 21st centuries, the writings of each author span several literary genres, including poetry, prose, and the memoir. Both authors focus closely on temporality, specifically the problem of “doing time” while serving a prison sentence. This is what makes them good

² Bell Chevigny writes, in her introduction to *Doing Time*, that prison literature has risen and fallen mostly in correlation with the positive or negative public perception of prisoners. Chevigny writes: “Under Reagan, the NEA [National Endowment for the Arts] severely cut financial aid...and by 1984, every journal devoted to prison writing had gone under” (xx). In addition, throughout the 1990s, rehabilitation in the form of creative writing became a matter of cost as well as an emotionally-charged debate, and these writings, already part of a fringe group, became further invalidated.

examples for a study of melancholia in contemporary prison literature. Betts, born in 1980, is currently a teacher, a Yale Law School student, and the author of three poetry collections and one memoir. His 2015 book of poetry, *Bastards of the Reagan Era* was called “Fierce, lyrical and unsparing” in an October 2015 review by Michiko Kakutani for *The New York Times*.

Masters, born in 1962, is also a poet and memoirist. Masters has actively published since 1997 and has sat on death row since 1990. Although both men started out on a similar path, Betts was released from prison in 2005 after serving eight years for carjacking. Betts ultimately moved forward to, by all appearances, great personal success, while Masters, meanwhile, continues his writing from inside the system. Interestingly, it is the writing of Betts that contains more fire, tension, and anger, while Masters has the calmer voice; he narrates from a place of self-reflection and watchfulness. In addition to addressing the theme of stopped time, both authors speak to the daily experience of prison life and reflect on past hardships, misdeeds, and a shared cultural history.

Together, these two authors bridge a divide between “mainstream Americans”, defined here as Americans who have never been impacted by the prison system, and the increasingly expanding population of people who have spent time in prison or know someone who has been in the prison system.³ Exploring the works of Betts and Masters deepens our understanding of prison literature. Betts allows the reader access to the lived experience of someone who has spent time in prison and reentered society to great achievement. Masters, in some ways so similar to Betts, tells a different side of the prison writer’s story. His is the story of a young man

³ Multiple sources attest to a disproportionate representation of African Americans in the American prison population. For example, US Bureau of Justice statisticians Lauren E. Glaze and Laura M. Maruschak have demonstrated that one in fifteen African-American have a parent who is incarcerated, whereas only one in 110 white children do. See: Glaze, Lauren E, “Correctional Populations in the United States, 2010”. Washington: The Bureau of Justice Statistic, 2011. Web. 26 January 2016. <http://bjs.gov/content/pub/pdf/cpus10.pdf>; Glaze, Lauren E. and Maruschak, Laura M, “Parents in Prison and their Minor Children”. The Bureau of Justice Statistics: Washington, 2010. Web. 26 January 2016 <http://www.bjs.gov/content/pub/pdf/pptmc.pdf>

incarcerated and sentenced to life in prison, still writing from inside the walls of San Quentin. Without input from this underrepresented population, in this case, Betts and Masters' critically important voices, cultural norms are reinforced over and over and mainstream America begins to write a story that is not its own. Without Betts and Masters, the misunderstanding and divide between both parties grows deeper, and the history of incarcerated African Americans continues to be written, not by those who have experienced it, but by those who watched it happening from the other side of the fence.

A brief review of the literature on prison writing will establish a context for the analysis of Betts and Masters. I consulted the directors and editors of prison writing programs around the country during the course of research on the above authors in the hopes that lesser-known journals, newsletters, and online forums would best give voice to the current, and not too far removed, prison population. Although prison writing is the subject of much study and of analysis, particularly in recent years, the majority of publications on American prison writing are anthologies, many self-published or only available online, of the works themselves. Autobiographies and memoirs, also frequently self-published, are similarly common. In addition, Eastern European prison literature, Syrian prison literature, African prison literature, and political prison writings are prevalent. Long-term overviews on the American penal institution, which often include narratives dating back to the slave state or at least to the early American prison system, are also useful, but do not specifically address the body of work that represents late 20th to early 21st century American prison literature.

Two scholars who have focused on the most recent prison writing are H. Bruce Franklin and Bell Gale Chevigny. Franklin, a cultural historian and a Professor of English and American Studies at Rutgers University, is the editor of 1998's *Prison Writings in 20th Century America*

and 1978's *The Victim as Criminal and Artist: literature from the American prison*. Chevigny (a Professor Emerita of Literature at Purchase College at the State University of New York and a former prison writing teacher) has called Franklin "a leftist with unremitting compassion for the underdog and our leading authority on the US prisoners' writing" (Chevigny "Inside Stories", 235). On Franklin's 1998 edited volume, Chevigny wrote that the work is "an invaluable introduction to the field" (Chevigny "Inside Stories", 235). Even today, *Prison Writings* serves as a comprehensive overview of the penal system and a compilation of diverse voices speaking about prison life that is fundamental to this text. Chevigny, a highly-regarded thinker in the area of prison literature, both edited and analyzed the P.E.N. program's 1999 Anthology *Doing Time: Twenty-Five Years of Prison Writing from the PEN Program*, a compilation that is the foundation of much of the work that has been done in this thesis. Chevigny's work as a prison writing teacher allowed her full access to the processes and final texts of hundreds, if not thousands, of prison writers throughout her career, thus giving her a unique vantage point into the genre. *Doing Time* includes works written inside of prison from women and men, old and young, from every walk of life and with diverse backgrounds and sentences.

Other particularly noteworthy contributions to the field of prison literature include the works of authors Wally T. Lamb, D. Quentin Miller, and Joy James. Lamb, an author and writing teacher, has, since 1999, been the facilitator of a writing program for incarcerated women at the York Correctional Institute, leading to the production of two compilations: 2003's *Couldn't Keep It to Myself: Testimonies from Our Imprisoned Sisters* and 2007's *I'll Fly Away: Further Testimonies from the Women of York Prison*. Lamb's compilations are extremely useful for anyone focusing on women's prison literature, an area of study that has seen an increasing amount of activity in recent years. D. Quentin Miller has also created an interesting compilation:

2005's *Prose and Cons: Essays on prison literature in the United States*. Edited by Miller, *Prose and Cons* is an excellent resource of essays that includes a very broad scope. The text is broken down into digestible subsections that deal with themes including gender, race, and language. Miller, a professor of English at Suffolk University, is, like Chevigny and Lamb, also a prison writing teacher. Lastly, 2006's *The New Abolitionists*, edited by Joy James, a collection of essays, is a significant and important contribution to the field. In *The New Abolitionists*, James draws comparisons between plantation life and prison life, with both institutions being penal sites where a lack of access to proper food, housing, and family created an inhospitable environment for African American persons in an alien space. James is deeply concerned with what she calls the modern anti-slavery movement and includes texts from American prisoners of all races and genders, including imprisoned anti-war activists. A former Professor at Brown University, James is also the author of *Resisting State Violence: Radicalism, Gender, and Race in U.S. Culture*, *States of Confinement: Policing, Detention, and Prisons* and *Imprisoned Intellectuals: America's Political Prisoners Write on Life, Liberation, and Rebellion*.

More recently, scholar Tara T. Green and author Joyce Carol Oates have made contributions to the field. Green's analysis has been instrumental in bringing certain themes within prison literature into conversation with other historically significant works, and Oates' compilation brought a modern collection of prison writing to a more mainstream audience. In 2008, Green, a professor of African American Studies, edited a volume of essays titled *From the Plantation to the Prison: African-American Confinement Literature*. The essays contained within *From the Plantation to the Prison* examine captivity literature in the United States and do a somewhat limited close reading on modern prison writing. In 2014's unfortunately titled *Prison Noir*, Oates compiles a selection of fifteen stories by authors in prison and writes a short

introduction and analysis regarding the public's fascination with crime literature. As the most recent major text that includes not only the stories themselves but also an element of literary analysis, it is unfortunate that such a provocative title was chosen for a collection that includes a wide range of writings, some of which border on voyeuristic. The title *Prison Noir* suggests that the stories contained within are dark and violent, and plays into a public fascination with crime and with the macabre. A title like *Prison Noir* seems designed to attract readers who want a voyeuristic experience and perhaps the thrill of reading a true account of crime from the perspective of the perpetrator. As Betts writes in *Bastards of the Reagan Era*, the public is fascinated by the perceived drama of prison life, but the depictions frequently seen in films and on television are, as Betts writes, "sanitized for entertainment" (*Bastards of the Reagan Era* 45). Oates' collection might not be sanitized, but it does seem to cater to a public, as Betts writes, that is "fascinated by the drama/ Of confined bodies" (*Bastards of the Reagan Era* 45). This drama tends to remove the more slow-burning, human element that hides behind the sanitization. The actual person, the person with, as Betts writes, the hidden, indeterminate sentence, suffers from a melancholia that doesn't make for great television (Betts *Bastards of the Reagan Era*, 45).

Although studies of prison writing in general are increasing,⁴ there remains a conspicuous gap in the scholarship, namely, works that examine modern African American male prison authors. This lack of analysis persists despite the fact that statistics from an intensive 2001 study show that, if the incarceration trends in play at the time that the study was conducted continue, one in three African American men will spend time incarcerated.⁵ This thesis seeks to address

⁴ See examples of confinement literature: Franklin, H. Bruce, *Prison Writing in 20th Century America*. NY: Penguin Books, 1998; Johnson, Paula C., *Inner Lives: Voices of African American Women in Prison*. NY: NYU Press, 2003; Green, Tara. *From the Plantation to the Prison: African-American Confinement Literature*. Macon, GA: Mercer UP, 2008.

⁵ A 2003 Bureau of Justice Statistics Special Report written by Thomas P. Bonczar, a Justice Department statistician, states that "1 in 3 black males, 1 in 6 Hispanic males, and 1 in 17 white males are expected to go to prison during their lifetime, if current incarceration rates remain unchanged." This report is the most recent

this gap, analyzing the literary practice of incarcerated men who identify as African American. My focus is works published in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries in United States correctional facilities and by formerly incarcerated people.

Melancholia and the Limits of Psychoanalysis in African American Prison Literature

In order to begin to understand prison writing and its relationship with melancholia, both concepts must be defined. For the purposes of this thesis, “prison writing” signifies the literary works produced by incarcerated persons while inside prison, as well as those published after the author is released. An analysis of prison literature means that a larger audience is hearing from the prison population, placing value on their words, and mining that work for meaning.

Melancholia, a reaction to loss characterized by an incorporation of the lost object, made worse by time, is a useful lens through which to view the stories and poetry of incarcerated people; through it modern prison literature enters into conversation with a long history of literature.

Melancholia has manifested across all literary genres and periods, from antiquity to the present, although today it registers more in literary contexts than as a clinical diagnosis. In the field of medicine, melancholia is distinguished from depression in that depression correlates more with a disordered mood, while melancholia is more compatible with diminished pleasure. Depression was only formally introduced as a disorder in 1980, in the third revision of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual for Mental Disorders*, while melancholia has a deep history. Looking back, the Greek assignment of melancholia was applied to an individual with an imbalance of the four

comprehensive Justice Department report on the matter. See: Bonczar, Thomas P, “Prevalence of Imprisonment in the U.S. Population, 1974-2001”. Washington: Bureau of Justice, 2003. Web. 26 January 2016.
<http://www.bjs.gov/content/pub/pdf/piusp01.pdf>

humors, with too much black bile resulting in melancholia. In *Aphorisms*, Hippocrates writes, in section six, “If a fright or despondency lasts for a long time, it is a melancholic affection” (Aphorisms, Section VI, 23). Hippocrates is distinguishing melancholia from mourning in that, for the melancholic, the loss suffered lasts longer than the expected bereavement period. Today, while depression is treated as a clinical illness, melancholia is distinctly a mood, separate from depression, and much more firmly entrenched in literary and cultural traditions, while we find that discussions of depression most commonly take place within the fields of psychology and psychiatry.

Melancholia has long been a central subject of psychoanalysis. Sigmund Freud provides the classic definition that is referenced most often. Freud’s melancholic is almost always a mourner who has taken the lost person inside of him or herself and replaced his or her own ego with the lost object. Moreover, both “normal” mourning and “pathological” melancholia may arise, as Freud argues in 1914’s “Mourning and Melancholia”, in “reaction to the loss of a loved person, or to the loss of some abstraction which has taken the place of one, such as one’s country, liberty, and ideal, and so on” (Freud “Mourning and Melancholia”, 243). In a more recent definition of melancholia, the “lost object” may be more abstract. For example, in her 1992 text, *Black Sun*, Julia Kristeva, the psychotherapist and literary critic, writes that this loss may even be a loss of identity. In Kristeva’s construction of the subject, semiotics play a crucial role in identity formation and how one comes to see oneself. A language surrounding one’s own identity is created, and the development is both critical, and impossible, to obtain, resulting in an insidious melancholia. Relating this to the study of prison writing, words like inmate, ex-con, monster, and felon wound the ego of the incarcerated person and reaffirm and rewrite that person’s identity as criminal. In his 2009 memoir, *A Question of Freedom*, Betts provides an

excellent textual example of an insidious melancholia produced by subjectivation. After a childhood that reinforced his status as “gifted”, Betts writes that serving time in prison caused him to lose the sense of himself that he had known; in its place, a new identity was created:

On my lips and in my head was the start of a new language defined by the way words changed meanings, all because I’d decided to make a man a victim. New words like inmate, state number, and juvenile certification had crept into my vocabulary (*A Question of Freedom* 6).

Thus, Betts’ melancholic loss was the perception of himself as an achiever, as someone who one day dreamed of becoming an engineer. Betts feels that, because of his crime and subsequent incarceration, he had lost his opportunity to achieve, to call himself gifted, and to one day become an engineer. Although none of these things are technically part of a prison sentence, it is inherent in the carceral system that the incarcerated person must give up his former identity and consume and internalize it, while outwardly identifying as a criminal. Betts’ melancholic loss is internalized and expressed through his writing as a fascination with words, including the signifiers that he uses for himself in prison, as well as the common language shared by the prisoners.

The melancholic loss, whether it is the loss of family, freedom, identity, or something else entirely, is so deeply ingrained with the ego that it cannot be precisely defined, but it is clear from the writings of incarcerated persons that when one transitions from a community to prison life, a loss of self does occur. Agency is taken away at the prison gate, and a person with a name is transformed into an inmate, a number. Clothing and personal possessions are surrendered for a standard-issue prison uniform. In *Bastards of the Reagan Era*, Betts expresses the loss of his own identity in exchange for a new prison identity. Betts writes about the prison entry process:

“And I strip before this man who knows me by/ A number” (*Bastards of the Reagan Era* 15). Betts is addressing the fact that, although by outward appearances this prison guard may know Betts more intimately than most people, what the prison guard sees is only a superficial representation. The guard knows nothing about who Betts is, not even Betts’ name. As with identity, for the prisoner, home and personal space disappear, and in their place comes a small, shared cell. Betts expresses, again in *Bastards of the Reagan Era*, that, upon entering prison, he and the other prisoners “blended into the gray” (*Bastards of the Reagan Era* 28). Prison life, according to Betts, is no life at all, but rather, he writes, “an imitation of life” (*Bastards of the Reagan Era* 57). Prison, according to Betts, is a shell, a reflection, a shadow of life. The truth of life has been buried and internalized, and in its place is the melancholic imitation.

As Betts expresses, in prison, past lives disappear as incarcerated persons are forced to surrender to new identities that become so deeply ingrained that it may well be impossible to simply leave. According to Freud, sadness and hate are directed at the lost object, freedom, through a process of “identifizierung” or “identification” (Freud “Mourning and Melancholia”, 249). An identification with prison culture and life is seen throughout Betts as well as Masters’ writings. In *Bastards of the Reagan Era*, Betts writes that riding in the prison van, with its scratched vinyl seats and “talk of murder” is “where I’m most at home” (*Bastards of the Reagan Era* 24). Betts begins to identify prison life with a home life. The bars that contain Betts and Masters don’t just hold them in, but they also become, as Betts writes, bars of embracement (*Bastards of the Reagan Era* 45). Prison life becomes a strange alternative to normal, and in a way, it becomes the new normal. A separation with the former norms and desires of the outside world occurs, but rather than letting these losses go, the melancholic internalizes the losses, and an identification is created between the internal world of the melancholic, even the ego of the

melancholic, and the loss. The hatred directed at the lost object then plays out as a form of self-punishment that is seen in a variety of ways in the writings of current and formerly incarcerated persons. Betts writes of this kind of self-hate and self-punishment that develops in *Bastards of the Reagan Era*. Of the shackles that bind his wrists, Betts writes “I embrace the way they cut” (*Bastards of the Reagan Era* 68). The pain, now familiar, reflects an internal pain that exists in the place where the ego, now lost, once stood.

Much of the theorization on melancholia and the melancholic’s self-punishment is based in psychoanalysis. Therefore, before fully delving into the exploration of melancholia in prison literature, especially in a minority population, one must also acknowledge the limits of the applicability of the Eurocentric, bourgeois psychoanalytical theory of melancholia as it applies to African American literature. There is a long history of the application of melancholia to white literature, with Hamlet being one of the most famous sufferers of melancholic depression. Similarly, when Freud speaks of the affect of the melancholic, he is defining it in regards to a straight, white, majority male. The question of how melancholia might apply to black writing is one that this thesis seeks to address. The analytical subject that Freud formulated does not fully account for the lived experience of a minority person. Some critics argue that melancholia studies do not adequately address black lives, either as imagined in literature or as lived in the social and political realities of American late modernity. Claudia Tate writes of this difficulty in “Freud and His “Negro”: Psychoanalysis as Ally and Enemy of African Americans”, a 1996 article for *the Journal for the Psychoanalysis of Culture & Society*. Tate’s article title is based off of a joke recounted by Ernest Jones, Freud’s biographer, in *Life and Work of Sigmund Freud*. Jones writes that, in 1924, Freud rejuvenated a racist joke by referring to a patient as “his negro”. The joke creates a connection between the patient/analyst relationship and the slave/master

relationship and is, Tate writes, an attempt to align psychoanalysis and social privilege. Tate argues that this joke reveals a racial insecurity within Freud, and that his anxiety manifested itself in the ways that Freud, a Jewish analyst, tried to ally with the dominant, Christian culture in anti-Semitic Austria in the early twentieth century.

I disagree with Tate's assessment. Freud's racism and racial anxiety is actually the indicator that psychoanalysis can and should be used by a marginalized population, rather than the argument that it cannot be used by this population. Freud attempted to assimilate and align the psychoanalytical process with the dominant culture, but that does not change the fact that it was dreamt up by a person with a self-worth derived of racial conflict. Freud lived in Austria during a period of growing anti-Semitism in Europe that would ultimately lead to attacks on Jewish people, forced labor, and the mass-murders of the Holocaust. A similar anti-black culture sentiment existed (and persists) in American that informs the writing of Betts. In *Bastards of the Reagan Era*, Betts writes "Rockefeller and Reagan, the NAACP/ All wanted us away from corners, dead/ Or jail but gone" (*Bastards of the Reagan Era* 26). Because of the color of his skin and his circumstance, Betts can never meet the impossible standards that he and the dominant culture have set as "normal" or "right". Similarly, Freud would have wanted to align himself with the dominant culture at the time, but would have found this an impossible task to fully achieve, as he knew himself to be truly part of the minority Jewish culture, despite any outward attempts to assimilate. Yes, Freud's joke is an exploitation of blackness in order to absorb himself in whiteness; however, because he was Jewish, Freud was not really part of the cultural majority at the time that his theory on melancholia and the psyche was published, meaning that Freud himself suffered from a *racial* melancholia. Anne Anlin Cheng, an expert in race studies, describes racial melancholia in *The Melancholy of Race* (2001) as the feeling of loss that a

minority population experiences as a result of the majority culture's idealized representation of race.⁶ The loss can never be overcome because this racial ideal is unattainable to the racial minority. Therefore, while Tate can argue that psychoanalysis is a discourse only to affirm white, masculine heterosexuality, it was actually created by a man for whom race does not disappear but, rather, for whom it is central to his identity.

The racial conflict that informs the identity of a member of the non-dominant cultural group is also present in prison literature. R. Dwayne Betts, in *Bastards of the Reagan Era*, speaks to the power that names hold, writing "We need a name: but we can't call this *Menace/ to the Hood* or *Boys in Society* or no shit like that,/ names already taken & used to make black men/ rich peddling the prophecy of the doomed Negro" (*Bastards of the Reagan Era* 13). Betts is speaking about his identity as a black person and saying that there is power in the language that constructs the subject. For a minority population, some words can be reclaimed by the community and some words reinforce the stereotypes that are in place to keep one culture down so that the other can, in turn, stay safely up. When a convicted person trades in a name for a number and is called a monster, locked away, unfit to interact with other beings because one is a danger, that person has been dehumanized to a degree that he or she is no longer a threat to the cultural majority. Specifically, the elements of his humanity that are lost include the ability to express oneself artistically and the right to freely associate with other men, and this person becomes a non-threat to the norm-enforcing majority. Biologically, we are hard-wired to live, and in biological terms, the survival of one necessities control over "the other". In the United States, the difference between one's own group and "the other" is often and clearly seen in the

⁶ Cheng, Anne Anlin, *The Melancholy of Race*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2001.

racial conflict between white and non-white cultures. The question remains, of course, as to whether this conflict, and the racial melancholia, can be adequately explored in African American literature using psychoanalysis.

Archival research reveals an extended history of African American engagement with psychoanalysis; therefore, the notion that, until recently, African American critics and writers rejected psychoanalysis is simply incorrect. For example, Arlene R. Keizer, an Associate Professor of English at the University of California, argues that psychoanalysis has been employed by and on African American texts for decades. In her essay "African American Literature and Psychoanalysis" (2010), Keizer argues that Ralph Ellison's 1952 novel, *Invisible Man*, "can be read as an African American exploration of the problems and possibilities of Freudian psychoanalytic theory. At least four major allusions to psychoanalysis appear in the novel" (Keizer 410). There are still a number of theorists who argue that psychoanalysis cannot be applied to African American literature, but the number grows smaller and smaller. In "Cultures of Melancholia: Theorizing Desire and the Black Body" (2014), Laura Sarnelli discusses melancholia in African American literature across eras. Sarnelli argues that the black body itself is the 're-memory' of loss, and yet she sees melancholia in the positive side of the duality, as a creative, redemptive force, rather than one solely of mourning. Melancholia, writes Sarnelli, can become part of a healing process. Sarnelli traces a history of racial melancholy in texts by African American authors before concluding that the "ruined" bodies, that is, black bodies that have been mutilated by white cultural norms are, by their very existence, an act of political resistance. Betts writes about this act of control in *Bastards of the Reagan Era*, writing simply that, for him, prison meant "so many folks with control over our bodies" (*Bastards of the Reagan Era* 29). For Sarnelli, the melancholic recognition of oneself as a disfigured, yet

breathing, body, is the proof that the subaltern population lives on to disrupt the cultural majority. Melancholia, the recognition of the loss of the ideal image of one's body, becomes the first step, then, in a resistance process.

The positive side of melancholia is evident in Betts' writing. In *A Question of Freedom*, Betts represents himself in the melancholic image of the dreamer: the melancholic who is trapped on one plane and yearning to reach another, even if another state may be achieved only mentally. Writes Betts: "When I jump the ceiling still hangs just outside my reach. I jump to test my boundaries, reach up and see how much the cell contains me. It contains me fully" (*A Question of Freedom* 18). Betts recognizes that he is physically confined in prison. The ceiling, like the outside world, is visible, almost within grasp, but not within his grasp. The physical space contains him fully, but mentally, he can break free. Betts continues: "But I keep jumping...dreaming on my feet, playacting like I'm still a kid...and all I see is the ceiling just outside my reach" (*A Question of Freedom* 18). This behavior is characteristic of the melancholic. As has been demonstrated in previous scholarship on the figure of the melancholic, he or she is earth-bound with a gaze that reaches far outside of his or her boundaries. Betts, the melancholic, knows that he is stuck within his boundaries physically, but he cannot help but test them just the same through his Melancholia Imaginativa, the productive, creative side of the melancholic. Prison authors themselves incorporate elements of self-reflection in their own works and, additionally, critics like Keizer and Sarnelli show that psychoanalysis is not only hypothetically applicable, but that it has already been used in the analysis of African American literature. Therefore, psychoanalysis' use in African American prison literature is not an exception; rather, it is a continuation of the conversation.

Prison Literature and the Slave Narrative

Together with slave narratives, prison writing belongs to the genre of confinement literature.⁷ Confinement literature is defined as any work, fiction or nonfiction, that deals with human captivity. The melancholic writer is also in many ways a confined author, captive to the melancholic loss that prevents him or her from moving forward. This is perhaps partly why themes of melancholia are prevalent in both prison literature as well as African American prison writing's historical ancestor, the slave narrative. The link between prison literature and the slave narrative is an important one because it is a continuation of the narrative of negative engagement between the US Government and African American communities. History has long been shaped by the victors, and by the majority population. What would the history of African Americans in the United State look like if it were written entirely by African American voices, rather than almost exclusively by non-black authors? The acceptance of modern prison literature is an opportunity to rewrite modern history from the perspectives of all parties. Ask whether, without a self-written record and testament to the evils inflicted by slavery, would the record of history would be even more seriously tilted in the direction of the majority? Is the modern story of the

⁷ A few good examples of primary confinement literature include, in chronological order, William Wells Brown's 1847 slave narrative, the *Narrative of William W. Brown*, Chester Himes' 1952 prison novel, *Cast the First Stone*, Malcolm X's 1965 biography, and poet Etheridge Knight's 1968 poem "The Idea of Ancestry". For further reading on confinement literature, the literary criticism of Kimberly Drake, Paula Garrett and Hollis Robbins, and Sidonie Smith are strong resources, as are the essays collected in Audrey Fisch's *The Cambridge Companion to the African American Slave Narrative*. See: Brown, William Wells, "Narrative of William W. Brown." *Slave Narratives*. New York: Literary Classics of United States Inc.: 2000; Drake, Kimberly, *Subjectivity in the American Protest Novel*. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011; Fisch, Audrey A, *The Cambridge Companion to the African American Slave Narrative*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2007; Himes, Chester B, *Cast the First Stone*. Chatham, NJ: Chatham eller, 1973; Knight, Etheridge, "The Idea of Ancestry." *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*, edited by Henry Louis Gates, Jr., and Nellie Y. McKay, 1867-68. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1997; Smith, Sidonie, *Where I'm Bound: Patterns of Slavery and Freedom in Black American Autobiography*. Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1974; Garrett, Paul and Robbins, Hollis, *The Works of William Wells Brown: Using His 'Strong, Manly Voice'*. London: Oxford University Press, 2006; X, Malcolm, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*. New York: Grove Press, 1965.

US prison industry potentially also presently shaped by only one side of the story? It is worthwhile to compare prison literature with the slave narrative to find the similarities and differences in both fields, and also to compare how slave narratives were received and analyzed at the time in which they were written compared to have they have been received now, a century later.

Like prison literature, both slave narratives and negro spirituals contain language that only someone intimately familiar with the text can fully decipher. This code was used in order to keep the messages contained in the songs, spirituals, and letters secret from slave masters and interpretable only by other slaves. The same can be found in prison literature and letters. For example, in certain prisons, letters between inmates are known as “kites” and are transported between inmates via books in the prison library. The word kite seems like a beautiful euphemism for the solace and glimmer of hope that an incarcerated person could experience in receiving a communication from a friend or a stranger. In his story “Thirty Minutes”, Betts confirms that prison language is a method of connection for him among the other inmates. The term “young”, for example, arose out of “[a] language we shared” (*A Question of Freedom*, 91). Young, referring to a friend, is a signifier of sameness and shared experience between the speaker and the recipient. As it is in prison literature, code language like this in slave narratives is an act of resistance towards the dominant language. Because vocal and physical resistance results in punishment and death, this form of silent resistance, a small message of camaraderie towards another captive, is used frequently. Like Sarnelli’s melancholic black body that resists through its basic existence, the prison population is saying, with their language, their letters, and their small joys: we are here. Kites, composed of a new language that replaces the old language that has been lost, are the glimmer of hope that is integral to melancholic identity. The melancholic’s

dreamer character allows momentary escapes from reality that set the mind free to wander outside of the plane upon which the body is trapped. The productive, imaginative melancholia is the only outlet for the present despair of the melancholic and it is this side of the melancholic that produces the small glimmer of hope for a different future.

Similarly, in prison, the very act of learning to read and write signifies defiance against a system designed to maintain the oppression of poor people and to punish rather than to reform. This same form of silent rebellion could be accredited to any slave who learned to read or to write. Both slave narratives and prison literature also express education as a path towards freedom. In a famous example of a slave narrative, 1845's *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, the author writes that learning to read both broadened his mind as well as opened his eyes to the destitution of his present situation. Learning to read, writes Douglass: "had given me a view of my wretched condition, without the remedy. It opened my eyes to the horrible pit, but to no ladder upon which to get out" (Douglass 47). Many prison authors find themselves in the same situation, wherein further education is a blessing as well as a curse. Betts, in a 2010 *New Yorker* interview with Meredith Blake, said: "I knew I would do nine years and I didn't want to come home with no talent. I thought being a writer was one thing you could do while you were in prison" (Betts *New Yorker*). This glimmer of hope towards a future nine years away is an example of the productive power of melancholy coming into play. Like Douglass, Betts recognizes that what he has before him is time, stretching infinitely on. Like Dürer's angel, the captive recognizes the futility of his situation, stuck in a plane removed from society, and can look into the creative world of literature as a mental escape.

The similarities between the slave biding his time until he can do better for himself and the modern prisoner doing the same are prominent; however, differences between the slave

narrative and the prison narrative also exist. In his essay “On the Outside Looking In: White Readers of Nonwhite Prison Narratives” published in *Prose and Cons*, critic D. Quentin Miller addresses the dissimilarities between slave narratives and prison literature. He writes that, formally, the resemblance of slave narratives and prison narratives is “striking” (Miller 16). At the same time, Miller cautions that, while slave narratives tend to be true narratives of the lives of the authors, recounted chronologically, prison narratives are not often linear. Instead, prison narratives “disrupt the flow of that life, frequently beginning in the middle of it and moving episodically back and forth across time” (Miller 16-17). The difference, Miller points out, is that while slave narratives have one clear purpose: abolish slavery now, prison narratives have less clear-cut goals. The objectives of a work of prison writing are often multiple. They may include but are not limited to: pointing out social injustices, seeking prison reform, seeking redemption, ending incarceration, and promoting understanding. Masters and Betts both published accounts of their lives that include their vision of themselves before prison life, the loss of their identities, and stories from inside of prison, but neither of the memoirs moves entirely chronologically. However, one end goal that both slave narratives and prison narratives serve is to promote greater understanding of a silenced minority.

In the nineteenth century, the majority population was deeply uncomfortable with, and tried to silence, slave narratives. The same is happening today in the field of prison literature. If the ruling majority fails to acknowledge the words coming from oppressed minority populations, then that majority is free to write its own narrative. William Gilmore Simms, a 19th century antebellum author, argued in his text *The Morals of Slavery* (1837) that “there are few people so very well satisfied with their conditions as the negroes, - so happy of mood, so jocund, and so generally healthy and cheerful” (Simms, 217). Simms was far from a fringe-personality, he was a

beloved voice of a generation of Americans and actually represents a long-standing legacy of silencing and undervaluing of the works of African American authors. As the works of prison authors are examined, a new narrative emerges. In *A Question of Freedom*, Betts turns the tables and writes about what it is like to experience a white majority as “other”. Writes Betts: “...it wasn't just that there were no white people in my community, it was that as a kid we always saw the white people around us as intruders or people looking to have power” (Betts, *A Question of Freedom* 5). Here, Betts explains that the cultural minority has reason to fear the majority, as they are the counter to the cultural group with which Betts identifies. This is, for Betts, also an expression of the racial melancholia that Cheng identifies in 2001's *The Melancholy of Race*. Betts identifies as a member of the cultural minority and thus views the majority controlling class as a group looking to take even more power from an already marginalized racial group. This speaks as much to the economic and cultural divide between black and white in Betts's neighborhood as it does to his own racial melancholia integral in his perception of his self.

The cultural majority, conversely, has unconscious reason to fear the voice of the minority population. Michel Foucault writes about the authority of the cultural majority in *Discipline and Punish* (1975) and in *Society Must Be Defended* (1975) and the steps that the ruling power must take in order to maintain its norm-enforcing control. In *Society Must Be Defended*, Foucault's concern in the series of lectures is the concept of war as a controlling power. He addresses not just with the history of war as a power structure that contributes to hegemony, but he also asks how it has come to be that war is an entity that exerts power on a society. Racism, according to Foucault, provides a key to that understanding. He writes that racism and war are actually “quite compatible with the exercise of biopower” (Foucault *Society Must be Defended*, 255). Racism presents us with a way to look at war not as a simple exercise in

killing the enemy because of a confrontation, but rather as a natural move from a “biological” perspective. Biologically, the success of one race of people and the demise or control over another race of people leads not to the destruction of oneself, but to the death of the other. Slave owners, penal institutions, and Americans outside of the prison system all have an investment, either consciously or unconsciously, in maintaining the health and wellness of their own demographic; historically, this has always been achieved at the expense of “the other”. The continuation of Betts’ quote from *A Question of Freedom* speaks to the biological fear of the other: “...as a kid we always saw the white people around us as intruders or people looking to have power... And we had walked in looking for someone to make a victim” (Betts, *A Question of Freedom* 5). Betts is connecting with Antonio Gramsci’s idea of the problem of cultural hegemony as outlined in Gramsci’s 1935 series *Prison Notebooks*. Gramsci defines cultural hegemony as the means through which the ruling class establishes and maintains its control, through the enforcement of cultural norms that reflect the ruling class’ value system. The minority may seize power by taking control of the means of administration, but also must take control of the social consciousness. Cultural hegemony is silent, and yet it is everywhere. It is in every custom, every norm, every symbol of wealth. It is in the divide between what is called good and what is considered evil. If Betts could successfully turn the power dynamic upside down in his own neighborhood, then the culture of loss, fear, and resentment that his minority community lives through would be turned and instead forced on the cultural majority.

Betts is addressing the cultural group that is the ruling power in his neighborhood, the white people looking to have (even more) power. Betts identifies this dynamic, and recognizes himself within society through this lens because he realizes that if white means powerful, then because of the binary system, black must mean powerless. Betts also recognizes that this makes

him the acted-*upon*, rather than the actor *of*, his own circumstance, and is attempting to upend this norm by tilting the playing field in his favor. If Betts and his friends are able to victimize a white person, then the power balance shifts, and Betts becomes the actor, the one holding the power, the victimizer, rather than the victimized. This activity aligns with Gramsci's idea of counter-hegemony. Ultimately, Betts achieved this upending of the power balance, and his victimization of another person then linked Betts with a long history of African American men in confinement. Betts' experience as an African American is a reinforcement of the cultural norm of powerlessness and confinement experienced by his American ancestors and part of what links modern prison literature with early American slave literature. Returning again to the most widely-read example of early American confinement literature, Douglass' *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, it is evident that the text emerged as a response to the violence between the master and the slave. Today's confinement literature, which critic Joy James refers to as (neo)slave narratives, could include any punitive incarceration and detainment of any peoples of the United States or its territories. James argues in her introduction to *The New Abolitionists: (Neo)Slave Narratives and Contemporary Prison Writings*, that (neo)slave narratives are a response to the combat between the master state and the subaltern population and thus makes slave narratives even more applicable to modern prison literature (James *The New Abolitionists*, xxii) This combat is also a strong contributor to the racial melancholia experienced by African American men today in the prison system.

First-person written works are historically necessary in order to shed lights on the truths held by incarcerated persons. Those who would not otherwise be exposed to these words can recognize the authors as people. In *Precarious Life* (2004), Judith Butler writes that one must acknowledge vulnerability in a person in order to see that figure as a human with rights. If a

person is not recognized as human, he or she loses his or her connection with society. Betts speaks to this concept in a 2009 article for *The Atlantic* entitled “From Prisoner to Poet”. Writes Betts: “For people in segregation and solitary confinement, rec was in a cage that looked like a man-sized dog kennel...It made us into animals, so I stopped going outside.”⁸ The inability of the prison system to recognize Betts as something more valuable than an animal in a cage in turn created in Betts a melancholic loss - the loss of his identity as human. Consequently, already feeling like an animal removed from society, Betts further isolates himself. This loss of humanity comes up in Betts’ memoir, as well. In *A Question of Freedom*, he writes: “People screamed day and night just to be heard, thinking that the hearing made them human” (Betts *A Question of Freedom*, 17). Betts speaks to the idea that simply being heard and being part of a community makes one human, and in this case he means it very literally. It is important that the general population hears the words of incarcerated persons in order to make these persons real and human.

The dehumanization of incarcerated persons is only part of the difficulty that comes in bringing a prison author’s words to a mainstream audience. It is also important to address that the dominant culture suppresses minority writing not just in limiting the scope of its publication, but also in its subsequent interpretation of the field of literature. Theorist Kimberly Drake argues in her 2008 essay, “Doing Time in/as ‘The Monster’: Abject Identity” that, when writing about racial identity in texts, one must look not only at the control of content that the dominant culture enforces. Drake argues that one must also look to the dominant culture’s reception of a work because a cultural control exists in the ways in which subsequent readers and thinkers interpret the works of African American authors (Drake “Doing Time”, 123). Drake uses Chester Himes’

⁸ Betts, R. Dwayne, “From Prisoner to Poet” *The Atlantic*. August 2009: Web. <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2009/08/from-prisoner-to-poet/307639/>

1952 novel *Cast the First Stone*, a work about Himes' prison experience, as an example of how the intentions of an African American author are misinterpreted. Himes' novel is not, despite his 1972 publisher's interpretation, a work about a young black man's agonizing discovery of his own emotions for the first time. Inherent in this interpretation is the assumption that an emotional evaluation is a foreign concept to an African American protagonist. Theorist Arlene Keizer's "African American Literature and Psychoanalysis" and Laura Sarnelli's "Cultures of Melancholia: Theorizing Desire and the Black Body" prove that, actually, quite the opposite is true: African Americans have engaged in self-assessment and psychoanalysis since the 19th century. In reality, Himes' work does deal with emotions, but more specifically with feelings of racial melancholia, just as we see in the texts of Betts and Masters. In addition to the problem of misinterpretation, what Drake's essay also tells us is that African American prison authors must, then, consider their audience in a way that a mainstream writer may not. A prison author must be one step ahead of his readers in asking how a work will be perceived, a process that requires empathy for a culturally different group than his own, something that a white author must consider more rarely, as the culturally dominant target audience is more likely to be his or her cultural group.

Close Reading of Melancholia in Prison Literature

A close look at time and loss in the stories and poetry of Masters and Betts is critical in bringing their literature into the larger cultural conversation, as melancholia is applicable to a long list of historical texts. Betts' and Masters' work should be more accessible, and an analysis of their writings through the lens of melancholia puts the field of prison literature in conversation

with the other historical literature, including slave narratives. This tool also opens up a comparison between the themes in Betts and Masters' works and the melancholic black bodies found in Sarnelli's "Cultures of Melancholia: Theorizing Desire and the Black Body". Both Masters and Betts have experienced loss, as is indicated in the following personal histories of each author. The losses that each author has incurred are relevant only to each author's potential experience with racial melancholia as outlined by Anne Cheng, and therefore is interesting as supplemental material to their authored texts.

Jarvis Jay Master is currently on death row. In June, 1985, Masters, a member of the Black Guerrilla Family prison gang, was accused of stabbing Sergeant Howell Burchfield, a 38-year old prison guard, with a homemade knife. Masters was sentenced to death in 1990 for his crime and currently resides on death row at San Quentin State Prison in Marin County, California. His story, however, is more complicated than that one label – inmate – can supply. In a 2013 interview with Chris Grosso for a website titled *The Indie Spiritualist*, Masters speaks candidly about his life and his childhood experiences. When asked when, if ever, he imagined himself released from prison, Masters replied: "I swear I thought it was yesterday... but they don't know how to let people go" (Grosso "Finding Freedom"). Masters also talks about his inner life and the melancholia brought on in his confinement that lurks below his surface, boiling to break out. Masters continues in the same interview: "There's a place inside me where there's so many things going on that I could go crazy" (Grosso "Finding Freedom"⁹). Since his conviction, Masters has spent his time writing about his life and imprisonment through the lens of Buddhism. He has published two books and dozens of articles and short stories. His first

⁹ "Finding Freedom." Interview by Chris Grosso. *The Indie Spiritualist*. N.p., 29 Jan. 2013. Web. 23 Jan. 2016. <<http://theindiespiritualist.com/2013/01/29/finding-freedom-an-interview-with-author-buddhist-and-san-quentin-death-row-inmate-jarvis-jay-masters/>>.

compilation, *Finding Freedom*, was published in 1997. His latest book, *That Bird Has My Wings: Autobiography of an Innocent Man*, a memoir of Masters' violence-filled childhood raised by parents addicted to heroin, and the subsequent years that he spent in various institutions, and later, prison, was published in 2009. The neglect that Master experienced in his childhood was informed by a cultural history of losses, victimization, and marginalization of the poor, African American community in which he lived. The history of African American engagement with the penal institution is a history of melancholic loss, and thus Masters' own childhood can add to and inform criticism of his texts.

Like Masters, Betts has also spent a large portion of his life incarcerated. In Betts' *A Question of Freedom*, a text defined by E. Ethelbert Miller, director of the African American Resource Center at Howard University, as a lesson on living. "How", Miller writes, "does one become a man after being in a cell?" Betts, by all accounts, successfully achieved just that. In 2012, President Obama appointed Betts to serve on the Federal Coordinating Council on Juvenile Justice (FCCJJ) for a three year term.¹⁰ In December, 1996, however, Betts, 16 years old, carjacked a sleeping man in the parking lot of his neighborhood's Springfield Mall. He was arrested, charged as an adult, and earned six felonies. As Betts recounts in a 2010 interview with Meredith Blake in *The New Yorker*, the judge that doled out the sentence told Betts: "I don't have any illusions that the penitentiary is going to help you."¹¹ Betts said that he left prison with a chip on his shoulder and something to prove, and he believes that society needs to understand that there are complexities to the criminal justice system. These complexities, interestingly,

¹⁰ According to an April 26, 2012, press release from the White House, President Obama nominated Betts, along with four additional appointees, and said: "These dedicated and accomplished individuals will be valued additions to my Administration as we tackle the important challenges facing America. I look forward to working with them in the months and years ahead."

¹¹ Meredith Blake, "The Exchange: R. Dwayne Betts on Prison, Poetry, and Justice." *The New Yorker*. 30 November 2010: Web. 23 January 2016. <http://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/the-exchange-r-dwayne-betts-on-prison-poetry-and-justice>

emerge in Betts' writing; he slips prison lingo and slang in among terminology that is only familiar to those with intimate understanding of the justice system, much like the coded language that is prevalent in slave narratives.

The melancholic loss that Betts experienced in prison was greater than an individualized loss of identity. As Betts writes, it is not just the freedom that one loses, it is “the class trips, the homecomings, the prom and all the other things I’d miss while in prison” (Betts *A Question of Freedom*, 110). In *Doing Time*, Chevigny writes that, when it comes to serving time, new prisoners learn “a series of harsh lessons” and “cling emotionally to lost realities” (Chevigny, *Doing Time*, 47). Of course, many also experience loss in a more tangible, practical sense. Relationships transform, and years locked away means missed anniversaries, births, and deaths. The incarcerated person is like a space traveler, frozen in sleep and unaffected by external events while the world spins on without him. There is a sense of unreality to losses that an incarcerated person cannot physically experience or witness firsthand. Jarvis Jay Masters lost his mother while incarcerated. Masters writes in *Finding Freedom* that his mother passed away before he could ever spend much time with her, depriving him of the ability to give her, as he writes in *Finding Freedom*, “the greatest moment I could have given her... to tell her that, through it all, I loved her” (Masters *Finding Freedom*, 77). A sense of finality and closure can be gained from attending a funeral and having a chance to make peace and say goodbyes. How opposite the experience is to only know that a loved one has died in passing, over the phone or in a letter. What kind of mourner can one be behind bars? What kind of parent? What kind of partner? What this disconnection can lead to is, ultimately, a complete dissociation with family and with the outside world, which in turn creates melancholia.

Melancholia in prison writing is accessible through its earliest definition as mourning taken inward, as first defined by Freud. In “Mourning and Melancholia”, Freud writes that melancholia presents as “profoundly painful dejection, cessation of interest in the outside world, loss of the capacity to love, [and] inhibition of all activity” (“Mourning and Melancholia” 244). According to Freud, melancholy is distinguished as a unique reaction to loss, separate from the shorter mourning period that occurs when a love-object has been lost. Rather than pushing the lost object away and mourning its loss, the melancholic takes the lost object inward; in a sense, he consumes the object, creating an anti-reality in which the lost object still thrives inwardly. The melancholic then establishes, according to Freud, “an identification of the ego with the abandoned object.” He describes: “thus the shadow of the object fell upon the ego” (Freud “Mourning and Melancholia”, 249). Freud would call this a nurturing consumption, but in some cases this consumption is parasitic in nature. The lost object has now, in a sense, consumed the ego, creating a loss felt deep in the psyche that is strongly incorporated into the subject’s very notion of self. As Freud writes: “In mourning it is the world which has become poor and empty; in melancholia it is the ego itself” (Freud “Mourning and Melancholia”, 246). This same phenomenon is true of the prison writer. The ego, the sense of self that the author has used to complete him or herself for the previous span of his life had been emptied of all its own signifiers and replaced with the loss of the world.

Masters addresses this phenomenon of the poor and empty ego in *Finding Freedom*, writing at times about his inability to recognize the man whom he has become. Master writes: “For a long time I have been my own stranger” (Masters *Finding Freedom*, 32). Masters is speaking of his struggle to rectify the person that he once saw himself as with the man recognized as a criminal by society. His loss was so engrained in his subconscious that his very

self became an unrecognizable stranger. This is typical of the melancholic. In the mourning process, the mourner recognizes that a loss has occurred external to the mourner. In the melancholic process, the loss is no longer consciously recognized as an external loss. The loss, taken inward, is now personal. To those outside of prison, the incarcerated person has been removed from society, but for an incarcerated person, the world has been taken away. As both Betts and Masters write, it is not the space of prison itself that is so painful, it is everything else that will be missed. The proms, the weddings, everything that makes up a life. Prison space, like prison time, exists outside of the world. In the carceral state, one has been removed from all of the signifiers that identify one as a human functioning in the world. It is a removal from humanity. Time, conversely, is felt more fully and with more weight in the works of the prison authors studied here. It is as though in the prison space, time, stretching infinitely, replaces the significance and meaning that one normally finds in daily life. Reflecting on life before prison, Betts writes in *Bastards of the Reagan Era*, “All the currency I ever had was time” (*Bastards of the Reagan Era* 17). Betts is expressing that it wasn’t until after he was locked up that he realized that his most precious and valuable commodity is one that becomes devoid of meaning in prison.

The melancholic loss of, and subsequent fixation on, control over time comes from the removal of society. In Betts’ case, the loss occurred in the form of his mother. Betts describes a close relationship with his mother that began in infancy. She was, he writes, “the first voice sounding in my head when I started to turn the wrong corners” (*A Question of Freedom*, 231). His mother is the person that he both wanted, and expected, to be proud of him. Yet, after his conviction, their relationship changed, and “what was left was her silence” (*A Question of Freedom*, 231). Betts also experienced another kind of loss, one that occurred prior to his

incarceration. In *A Question of Freedom*, he writes: “The men in my family had disappeared before I was old enough to know they were missing, and if the wrong person speaks he will cite that as the reason why I went to prison” (*A Question of Freedom*, 9). Later, he continues: “The time behind bars connected me to the lives of black men, to their stories and their silences. I found my father’s life somewhere behind bars.” (*A Question of Freedom*, 11). Here, Betts is considering the idea that the reason that he ended up in prison is because it is the traditional path for black men in his community. Paradoxically, Betts both uses this path in a way as an explanation and at the same time adamantly refutes that one of the losses that he suffered, the missing presence in his life of his father, is a cause. Yet, here behind bars he found his father in the history of the lives that led each man to the same state that Betts found himself. Masters also expresses finding his heritage and parents inside of prison walls. In *Finding Freedom*, he writes, “The histories of all of us in San Quentin were so similar it was as if we had the same parents” (Masters *Finding Freedom*, 68). Masters is speaking to a repetition of scars and violence that he notices on body after body in the prison yard.

Masters and Betts make a strong argument for melancholia as a racial and ethnic construction of identity in their allusions to a long cultural history of confinement, and to seeing their ancestors in the faces of other prisoners. In *The Melancholy of Race* Cheng writes that, in America, racialization operates “through the institutional process of producing a dominant, standard, white national ideal, which is sustained by the exclusion yet retention of racialized others” (Cheng 10). Cheng argues that the cultural minority become “phantoms”: victims of the process of being consumed by the American majority. Cheng determines that the exclusion of the other is necessary to understand America’s violent response to the other, for example: the violent and intense response of incarceration. This occasionally violent response, often expressed

in writing with imagery of death and suffering, is invoked often in Betts' poetry. Betts addresses the losses, both of his freedom and the literal deaths of friends, that he experienced in prison and also addresses the idea of Cheng's ghostly presence. In *Bastards of the Reagan Era*, Betts writes of what it meant to him to be black: "When we heard about Black,/ silence stole our voices" (Betts *Bastards of the Reagan Era*, 11). Betts is expressing that when he understood, in the larger narrative, what the signifier of Black meant for him, his ability to make himself heard disappeared. His voice, as an African American, was silenced by the majority. The loss of voice becomes another loss in the melancholic ego's long history of losses.

Betts' writing seems to attest to a belief that the color of his skin was more important than anything else about him, and Cheng argues that this preoccupation with race is typical of a person who identifies as part of a minority population. To be American, surmises Cheng, is to be haunted by the other race. Racial melancholia, according to Cheng, factors not only into one's identity, in her case as an Asian-American, but is also responsible for conflict between races and in the construction of the identity of the racialized subject. The desire of the minority culture to attain a culturally enforced 'ideal' of whiteness while never fully achieving that standard is epitomized when Betts describes his sentencing process. Betts writes that mother told him that he needed to wear something nice to his sentencing hearing, but that his clothing made no difference to his attorney. "Nothing," he said, "[that] I wore mattered" Betts writes, because no suit or haircut could cover up the color of his skin (Betts *A Question of Freedom*, 6). Betts expresses that, in the eyes of the majority, his skin color is his identity and he presents first and foremost as a black person. Long lists of signifiers go along with the label of black person that are far stronger than those attached to Betts' clothing.

After the melancholic loss of identity that an incarcerated person experiences, a new, deviant persona is created in prison. However, unlike the experience of going in, the label of Betts after his incarceration as “deviant” cannot be removed even after the prison term is completed. Stigmatization and invisibility, seemingly contrary markers, follow these formerly incarcerated persons. Warehousing, creating a victim/criminal binary, and labeling offenders as “monsters” only deepens this disconnection. In order to exit the space of prison, the incarcerated person must sever attachment and recreate himself to survive in a new state. This process, according to Kimberly Drake in “Doing Time in/as 'The Monster': Abject Identity in African-American Prison Literature”, is not an effect, but actually an intention, of the prison complex. To describe the loss of identity that a person in prison experiences, Drake uses the phrase “abjectified”. The abjectification process describes the experience that an inmate has upon entering prison and literally being cast off from society. Drake argues that this “submersion in the zone of non-agency” is actually the goal of the prison system (Drake “Doing Time”, 131). The prison process is a melancholic process, with the prison system itself set and determined to replace the prison author’s identity with non-agency as a force of punishment and control. The consequence of this process, intended or not, is that the prisoner, upon leaving prison, leaves without agency, with a melancholic ego that no longer represents the person that he once believed himself to be. This loss of agency creates a social divide.

In addition to this social divide, prison creates a very literal division between the incarcerated and the free. Indeed, the very definition of incarceration is isolation, a segmenting off from the ‘general population’ for the protection of communities, as a method of punishment and therefore deterrence to other potential offenders, and as, hypothetically, a means of rehabilitation. Similarly, melancholia defines itself in isolation. Comparably to the isolated

prison population, melancholics are said to be not of this plane, almost beyond-human.

According to Julia Kristeva in *Black Sun*, in melancholia, “‘I’ isolate myself from the word, ‘I’ withdraw into my sadness.” Kristeva writes that it is the melancholic’s attempt to cut him or herself off from the world that ultimately distances the melancholic from his or her own self (Kristeva 47). Masters places his disconnection with the world at the forefront of his writing. In *Finding Freedom*, he writes: “I used to feel I could hide ... that I could simply sit and contemplate the raging anger of a place like this, seeking inner peace ... But now I believe love and compassion are things to extend to others” (*Finding Freedom* 158). Masters is addressing the isolation of the melancholic as expressed by Kristeva. While the world spins on around him, the isolated prisoner lives in a dimension of stopped time, devoid of the meaningful connections that, moment by moment, make an individual into a citizen of his community; this isolation forces the melancholic’s loss to rise to the center of his consciousness and become the central and preeminent force in his life.

The diction that Masters incorporates in another of his works, his poem “Recipe for Prison Pruno”, also speaks to the melancholic feeling of isolation. “Pruno” is a short poem in *Doing Time* about the process of making prison pruno, or prison wine, an alcoholic beverage made from heating fruit and storing the mixture, which allows it to ferment. Masters’ diction creates a sterile mood that matches the rigid, structured environment of a cell and expresses isolation from the community. By virtue of the poem literally being a recipe, feelings of home and home cooking are solicited in the reader, but the bizarre contrast of the barren nature of the jail makes the feeling of following a recipe feel just slightly off. For example, Masters addresses the reader of the poem and asks him to go to his sink, a sink, something that feels familiar and home. However, it is one sink, “your” sink, and there is no mistaking it as the prison sink, and

therefore unrecognizably apart from “home”. “Place the bag into your sink” (Masters “Pruno”, 11). In addition, within the recipe, Masters uses the verbiage “stash” twice, a turn of phrase not commonly read in recipe books or in the context of family recipes. “Stash the bag in your cell undisturbed for 48 hours”, he writes, and again the bizarre, so deeply known and speaking to the process of following a cherished recipe is set akimbo, off, slightly, rewritten to cater to the confines of a cell and the incarcerated men who will follow it (Masters “Pruno”, 17). Here, Masters is creating his own language and code, as was often seen in the slave narrative.

Masters’ narrator in “Recipe for Prison Pruno” slowly and deliberately describes the process of making the wine while at the same time interjecting, without comment or sentiment, cold legal language that amounts to a death sentence for the narrator. With the author’s use of diction, structure, and time, the poem becomes a comment on how time is spent in prison and how everything happens all at once, and simultaneously not at all, when one is doing time. In addition, the cold, unsentimental way in which the author’s sentence is recounted, interspersed with the detailed, carefully calculated recipe, contrast in a way that is emotionally affecting. The disparity of the lighthearted nature of the recipe clashes with the seriousness of the sentence; yet, at the same time, both are cleanly, accurately presented in a straightforward way that suggests little external emotion or reaction, but a storm of conflicting feelings raging just below the surface, characteristic of the melancholic.

As is common in melancholic literature, time in “Pruno” feels overly important, and yet, slow, as though the narrator has, at the same time, both too much time on his hands and not nearly enough. Chevigny writes on the concept of time and how it is manipulated and passed by prisoners. “Many prisoners”, writes Chevigny, “write as if their lives depend on it. Quite often they do.” For prisoners, Chevigny writes, the act of writing allows the author to experience the

feeling of doing, rather than the feeling of “being done” that is prominent in all other aspects of prison life” (Chevigny *Doing Time*, xxiv). Chevigny is expressing that, for many prisoners, there is a necessity to keep work going in order to have some sense of control over the passage of time, or else one loses one’s own feelings of humanity and of control. When Chevigny expresses that the stakes are higher and that lives depend on it, she is not exaggerating for effect. In this way, prison authors can take control of time, and in some sense, may also take control of their own lives. If control is completely surrendered, the person left after the experience of prison has no ability to reenter the outside world.

For a person not affected by melancholia, time can be a healing force. With time, the pain of loss can lessen. For the melancholic, however, time is punishment. Rather than being an agent of hope, change, and the continuation of life, time in prison is a continuing sentence and a reminder of what has been lost. The exact calculations of time in Masters’ story are carefully measured and it is apparent that Masters is very aware of his manipulation of pacing. In addition, the kind of dedication and care that must go into creating the recipe for the pruno, the simple humanity of it, feels small compared the weight of the court’s judgment. There is a sense of futility at the conclusion of the poem, as though nothing has been accomplished. So much work and energy and time that went into the prison pruno, and for what? With the “date later to be fixed by the Court in warrant of execution”, what does the publication of this recipe bring and, in the end, is all the work required to make two 18 ounce cups worth the energy (Masters “Pruno”, 22)? The futility of the pruno process connects with the feeling of the melancholic who is stuck in place and unable to break free. There is desperation in the melancholic who would go through this painstaking labor in order to connect with a feeling from the outside world, in order to connect with a taste from a former life.

There is a melancholic binary, a hope intermingled with hopelessness, inherent in Masters' recipe as well. The simple, straightforward nature of the recipe is, in contrast, interspersed every other line by the proclamation by the court that Masters has received the death penalty. One can picture Masters, perhaps halfway through the brew of a pruno, learning of his sentence, or perhaps it plays out in his mind as he works. "Take ten peeled oranges – Jarvis Masters, it is the judgment of this court" (Masters "Pruno", 1-2). Masters squeezes the oranges "that the charged information was true" (Masters "Pruno", 4). The simple nature of the recipe contrasts painfully with the language of the court. The recipe is simple, humanizing, and humble, and the startlingly elevated, cold language of the court registers with brutal force, overpowering the small recipe for pruno: "with a spoon, skim off the mash,/ and I have caused the seal of this Court to be affixed thereto./ pour the remaining portion into two 18 oz. cups./ May God have mercy on your soul" (Masters "Pruno", 38-39). There is nothing more ordinary than two cheap plastic cups, and nothing more startlingly powerful than the possibility that one will suffer not just in this life, but in the next. The melancholic embraces the current suffering and sets aside a part of him or herself that holds on to the belief that there is hope for the future.

While Masters often chooses to use stark language and paint reality as it is, metaphor and symbolism is prevalent in Betts' work. In this way, Betts is more typical of the melancholic author, choosing to represent certain aspects of his daily life in a slightly skewed light. In melancholic literature, symbols and signifiers can be found that betray that narrator's fixation on time, entrapment, or human connection. Similar to Masters' interests, a fascination with time is a central topic in Betts' poetry and books. Betts chooses to symbolize time as a variety of objects, two of which have connotations associated with slavery and lynching. "But the years," writes Betts, were "like a noose around my neck" (Betts *A Question of Freedom*, 152). Prior to that

depiction, Betts writes that he carried time on his back while it pushed him to the ground. Betts also argues that no one but someone who has served time could understand the impact of a life sentence. Although Betts himself had a nine-year sentence, he learned from his involvement in the legal process that a life sentence in Virginia was the equivalent of six hundred years. “That it meant you live and die ten times before you can be a free man” (Betts *A Question of Freedom*, 85). In some ways, this disconnect with time and the way a sentence so extreme takes away real value from the years of one’s life plays with the very realness of death. The message of the state, that ten full lifetimes away from society is right for some offenders, is dehumanizing and destabilizes identity. This lost identity is the lost object that the melancholic internalizes and consumes. The melancholic’s original identity and ego are replaced, as we saw in the case of Betts and his mother’s voice. Once Betts committed a crime and internalized his identity as criminal, he wrote that his mother’s once omni-present voice disappeared.

A lot changes in a person’s world following incarceration, and one of the most prominent changes is the prisoner’s new perception of time and the discovery that time is experienced differently outside and inside of a prison environment. In *A Question of Freedom*, Betts writes about the surreal experience of being engrossed by a subject about which one could not speak. Betts writes that he heard “crazy things” within the prison walls, that the time does itself, that all one had to do was “show up and leave.” In contrast, Betts writes that he himself experienced time slowly and painfully from inside of prison. He writes: “I felt every second...I felt it in the names that I would go months and months without saying” (Betts *A Question of Freedom*, 185-186). Betts appears to have internalized the loss of the important people in his life, the “names that I would go months ... without saying”. Betts has swallowed down the names of his losses, refusing to utter them verbally, refusing to literally produce them, but holding on to the names

nonetheless, waiting for a time when he can speak them again. Although Betts has served his time in prison and been released, his losses are just as real, and just as permanent, as Masters', who is still serving time and will likely be doing so for the rest of his life. Time stretches long for Masters, as it traditionally does for the melancholic.

Nights, for the melancholic, are particularly long. Nights are a time when the world stops moving and tools lie unused, full of potential energy, as in Dürer's depiction of the melancholic angel. In his poem "Red Onion State Prison" from *Shahid Reads His Own Palm*, Betts suggests that nights stretch particularly long in a prison environment. Writes Betts:

...stretches night
longer than a sinner's
prayer in Red Onion's small
ruined cells where ten thousand
years of sentences
beckon over heads & hearts,
silent, a promise, like mistletoe (15-21).

Betts suggests a long history of racial melancholy where damages have been produced and reproduced in black communities outside of prison and inside of prison. The combined sentences of every man and woman in Red Onion stretch for ten thousand years, an impossible to comprehend, impossible to 'serve' stretch of time. These sentences have been internalized and taken in, hanging over heads and weighing on hearts. Betts' use of mistletoe is an interesting metaphor. Mistletoe, like melancholia, is parasitic. It is also a signifier for the holidays, one of the losses that an incarcerated person experiences. Love is suggested in Betts' poem, both familial and romantic, and Betts reminds us that the promise of serving time is a guarantee, it is

undisputed and commonly recognized, especially for a person of color with a one in three chance of serving time in prison. Prison systems have become a site for the reproduction and deepening of socioeconomic, gender, and ethnic inequality. Damages are produced and reproduced in the criminal justice system. As Betts elaborates: “Sometimes there’s a story that’s been written again and again, sometimes a person finds himself with a story he thinks will be in vogue forever” (Betts *A Question of Freedom*, 4). Like the melancholic, the incarcerated person has suffered a loss, and this loss is repeated over and over again in a cycle of mourning. Freud defines this phenomenon as the “repetition compulsion”, first published in 1914 in “Remembering, Repeating and Working-Through’”. He describes that the “patient does not remember anything of what he has forgotten and repressed, he acts it out, without, of course, knowing that he is repeating it....” (Freud 150). This repetition compulsion is found in Betts’ “story that’s been written again and again” (Betts *A Question of Freedom*, 4). In one sense, he recognizes that he is repeating a long history of African American men who have found themselves incarcerated. He is following a history of enslavement that has had long term effects that continue to resonate in African American communities today. Betts is aware of this long history of abuses, however, in another sense, this repetition compulsion is, as Betts wrote in *Shahid Reads His Own Palm*, “silent, a promise, like mistletoe”. The promise of serving time hangs above Betts unnoticed, but those who live under it are bound to its convention. This compulsion to repeat and to hang on to the past is characteristic of the melancholic. The promise of, not a kiss at the end of the evening, not a bright future, but of a loss that one will never recover from, of a loss that will never disappear, hangs over the incarcerated population. It is a melancholic promise, one that includes the repetition of a long history of losses and one that refuses to relent, even with passage of time. The melancholic promise is a compulsion, not a joyful expectation.

Conclusion

The works of authors from inside the prison system present, among other themes, elements of the classic picture of the melancholic. Like Dürer's *Melancholia I*, the prisoner sits, sometimes made to feel less than human, an animal in solitary confinement, marking the days as dashes on a wall. Time is fundamental to the life of this person, and yet never spoken about aloud. The melancholic subject has experienced a loss of society and, ego empty, is unable to find a signifier for him or herself. It is impossible for the incarcerated person identify with the "mainstream" population, defined in this text as those not inside the prison system. It is equally impossible for the prison author to truly mourn his loss of freedom, as the exigencies of incarceration demand that an individual must immediately put on a brave face in prison and make alliances. A period of mourning would be viewed as weakness, and so the losses that the person in prison suffers, of freedom, of family, of companionship, are swallowed as the prison incorporates the new norms of the prison society. In a prison society where one is unable to truly mourn losses inside or outside of prison, melancholia becomes a powerful, dual force that, on one side, depresses the melancholic writer. The melancholic person does not suffer the loss of freedom, family, and society in a moment, but relives the experience of these losses on a daily basis, moment by moment. On the other hand, melancholia's inverse power is that it can be taken up as a tool and turned on the cultural majority as a paradigm-shifting weapon. Melancholia's imaginary representations act as a force to overcome the cultural majority's suppression of the non-dominant group's values. This "dreamer" mentality is not only a mental escape, but it can also lead to tangible change in the way of a shift in culturally acceptable ideals. The creative power of melancholia allows survival, and agency and subjectivity are attained through the

retelling of the story through the eyes of the marginalized subject. As is seen in the work of Betts and Masters, writing is a survival mechanism for the melancholic losses suffered in prison.

This thesis raises the question as to whether psychoanalytic theories of melancholia are useful in the analysis of contemporary prison literature written by African Americans. The examples analyzed here suggest that this theoretical apparatus is useful. Current theory even suggests that psychoanalysis, as a tool, is particularly strong among black feminist theorists. In "African American Literature and Psychoanalysis", Arlene Keizer writes that "[l]ocating a political dimension to melancholia is a way of thinking hopefully about an otherwise paralyzing problem, one not often addressed in political terms. What all of these re-articulations of melancholia share is the idea that identifying this condition within a group can lead to collective action."¹² Keizer argues that there is still a long way to go to make this a fully useful tool:

The more we know about the history of African American involvement with psychoanalytic theory, the more accurate our literary and cultural interpretations will be and the more powerful our theories linking these two bodies of knowledge (Keizer 412).

Keizer argues the point that there is still a somewhat limited body of criticism that engages African American texts and psychoanalysis. An interesting topic for further study and exploration could be the engagement of African American prison authors with psychoanalysis within their own writings. A great number of prison texts are introspective, true accounts that reflect on the circumstances that led to the author's imprisonment, yet few critical comparisons have engaged these works with psychoanalysis. Drew Leder's 2001 *The Soul Knows No Bars: Inmates Reflect on Life, Death, and Hope*, a philosophical conversation about power dynamics,

¹² Keizer, Arlene R, "African American Literature and Psychoanalysis." *A Companion to African American Literature*. U.K.: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010.

identity, regret, and hope, co-written by incarcerated persons at the Maryland State Penitentiary, would be an excellent jumping off point.

More comparative work is necessary in order for critics to fully employ modern prison literature in comparative studies with other early 21st century texts. This thesis makes the argument that the critical theories of Antonio Gramsci and Michel Foucault are particularly useful when analyzing prison writing and exploring its theoretical implications. I further argue that reading prison literature and engaging the racial and cultural melancholia present in the works is a useful application of Gramsci's idea of counter hegemony. Together, Gramsci and Foucault define the concepts and social norms that align to create the prison culture that is present in the United States today. Foucault's cultural Panopticon, the all-seeing and yet unseen force that controls, works in conjunction with Anne Cheng's argument for an insidious racial melancholia that is expressed in the community of writers to which Betts and Masters belong. Cultural norms, created and enforced by a dominant social and racial group, are in many ways invisible, and yet these norms are, as Betts and Masters express in their writing, evident even to young members of a minority culture. Foucault's explanation, together with Gramsci's expression of hegemony and counter hegemony, point to a dominant, cultural majority's control over a minority, in this case prison, population. From there, one can use Anne Cheng's conception of racial melancholia to understand how, through over a century of enforcement of a black/white binary that oppressed and jailed African Americans, the prison industry today is identified as a normal part of the African American community. Centuries of repeated and reiterated losses have been taken in and consumed by the African American community, creating a communal, cultural melancholy that is then represented in the writings of imprisoned African American authors.

Without the words and voices of African American men who have served time in prison, the culturally dominant group's authority is reinforced by the narrative that it is allowed to tell. The injustices inherent in the prison system exist unquestioned and the prison population remains in a dehumanized state. When a convicted person trades in a name for a number and is called a monster, locked away, unfit to interact with other beings because one is a danger, that person has been dehumanized. The human essence of this person becomes another loss in a long list of losses represented in the writings of prison authors. Specifically, the elements of his humanity that are lost include the ability to express oneself artistically and the right to freely associate with other men. A man is confirmed as a man through his interactions with others, which then creates a circle which is what we call society. To remove the voice of any part of that chain is to create an incomplete circle. When this confirmation of man's humanity is taken away, society itself becomes a less truthful representation of itself; in the same way, prison is an imitation of life, prison space is an empty caricature of space, devoid of the experiences that make a life, and time becomes an endless and meaningless loop. As Betts expressed, in prison time literally loses meaning as sentences are doled out that indicate that the prisoner could "live and die ten times before you can be a free man" (Betts *A Question of Freedom*, 85). As demonstrated in the selections of Masters and Betts, it is the ability to live that is stripped away from persons who enter the prison system; inmates are made to feel that they are apart from and do not count towards the norms in the general population, and therefore a kind of loss is evident for these individuals, including a displacement from society and the inability to express oneself in that society. The freedom to write and to create art is important, but just as importantly, one's community must *recognize* that voice and expression as meaningful or society is just an

abstraction. It is this very disconnect that becomes the predominant melancholic loss that is reflected in the writings of many incarcerated authors.

This one-sided conversation creates a lack of empathy between the cultural majority and the minority group. The current body of literature and analysis devoted specifically to African American male prison authors is limited, and African American prison authors deserve greater attention in the national conversation that is happening concerning the injustices inherent in the prison system and in national race relations.¹³ As Martin Luther King Jr. wrote in 1963 while incarcerated in the Birmingham City Jail in Birmingham, Alabama: “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere”.¹⁴ The most basic way to shed light on the injustices in the prison system is through the words of the prison writers themselves, a task that is far from easy. In order to write about his life, the modern prison author must transcend many obstacles, some self-imposed, and some imposed by the circumstance of incarceration, such as the author’s inability to own a pen. Overcoming difficulties in order to tell one’s own story, in order to give voice to what is happening internally, is one parallel with the slave narrative.

The usefulness of the prison narrative as a light shining on social inequality is a second connection with the slave narrative. Prison literature, like the slave narrative, also contains coded language and thus may be construed as a form of social resistance, an example of Gramsci’s counter-hegemony. The rebellious power that reading and writing hold for the prison author is

¹³ Even among this collection of prison writings, it was difficult to find pieces written by African American authors, a fact that does not correspond to the higher population of black men incarcerated in the United States than any other race. Philip Christman, an editor of the Prison Creative Arts Project (PCAP), one of the most prolific prison writing programs takes place in Michigan, offered an explanation as to the disparity between white and non-white published prison authors. Christman wrote that many contributors to PCAP have not published much elsewhere and, of the few who have, most are white. This disparity between African American and white prison writers is a reflection of America. As Christman wrote in an email, “Our society's unequal distribution of literary resources and opportunities persists in prison.” This unequal distribution extends also to outlets that publish and review the works of prison authors.

¹⁴ King, Martin Luther, Jr., “Letter from Birmingham Jail.” *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*. Ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Nellie Y. McKay. New York: Norton, 1997. 1854-66.

the counter to the lost ego of the melancholic. Reading and writing is an act of rebellion because, generally, an enforcement of the standard cultural binary dictates that the majority population write history while African American voices stay silent. As is true of slave narratives and other African American confinement literature, particularly works published about the Civil Rights movement, African American writers and thinkers create a voice in the political and governmental system through verbal expression. The opportunity that reading provides to African American thinkers to recognize their circumstances and respond critically, to jump in to the cultural values machine, to engage norm-enforcing writers in a conversation, and to enter into the mainstream is a rebellion against cultural hegemony. Melancholia, with the plaguing loss that rests with the writer and repeats itself in an endless loop, unlocks the mental escape that allows African American prison authors to see beyond their immediate circumstance. As Betts writes regarding testing his prison cell's boundaries in *A Question of Freedom*, although he knows that he is physically trapped in his cell, he jumps up to touch the ceiling nonetheless. Betts writes: "...I keep jumping, I'm a trapped animal measuring my confinement as if effort will bring down these walls", fantasizing, dreaming on his feet, the divide between what is real and what is imagined growing blurry (Betts *A Question of Freedom*, 18). Betts writes that his jumping, his quest to reach the ceiling is futile, and yet, it is the very action of measuring his confinement that is important. This measurement of Betts' circumstance is the rebellion. Betts is telling his story, Betts is measuring his own confinement, Betts is, not literally, but culturally, lowering a wall that exists between his experience and an outside reader's experience. Betts' addition of his own voice to the cultural pool of melancholic works is the disruptive element that is so the other half of melancholic writing. This spark of hope is the exact inverse of the depressive melancholic; it is the empowering, the creative, the redemptive force of the "Melancholia Imaginativa".

Melancholia is an essential aspect of the human experience. As Betts and Masters demonstrate in their works, melancholia is also fundamental to the way that life is experienced in confinement. Prison authors write as a resistance to the effects of the power of the prison system and as a testament to art and its power to change and redeem. As Betts said in a November 2010 *New Yorker* interview with Meredith Blake: “[B]ooks [are] a way for many of us to try on different narratives, even if it [is] just momentary flights of fantasy.”¹⁵ The works of prison authors, however, are equally valuable and necessary as reading for the cultural majority. Gramsci contends that cultural hegemony is used as a means to control the population. In other words, the dominant, ruling class controls and determines the culture that the majority population consumes, and places great value on the art, literature, and societal values represented by the ruling class while silencing and minimizing the art created by the cultural minority. This hegemonic control is undermined through the publication and reading of first-hand accounts of the cultural life and philosophy of incarcerated men and women and the communities that informed those points of view. If melancholia can be read in the literature of incarcerated persons, then those authors’ voices can confer power back onto the minority by giving the political power and allowing the majority to empathize with and come closer to the experiences of the prison population. The closer that these two groups come to understanding one another and the greater the majority’s access to all voices, and not just the most mainstream of authors, the more cultural and political power the population of repressed voices will have. Ultimately, applying the critical theories of Cheng, Sarnelli, Keizer, and Gramsci to the primary works in this thesis, Betts and Masters’ writings, could create a reformation in the types of literature that is

¹⁵ Blake, Meredith, “The Exchange: R. Dwayne Betts on Prison, Poetry, and Justice.” *The New Yorker*. 30 November 2010: Web. <http://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/the-exchange-r-dwayne-betts-on-prison-poetry-and-justice>

studied comparatively, particularly in classrooms. Ideally, Betts should be part of the comparison when an analysis of melancholia in modern poetry is explored. Masters should be part of the conversation when it comes to melancholia in the contemporary memoirs of African American men. The writings of Betts and Masters are indispensable when it comes to an overview of modern prison literature and are also valuable as texts independent of their value as examples of confinement literature.

The inability for mainstream thinkers to recognize the value in prison writing is unfortunately prevalent.¹⁶ However, as Bell Chevigny argues: “We do not condone crime, but [...] a person is more than the worst thing he has ever done.” (Chevigny xxx). The sum of a life is more than one moment, and through an exploration of the works of convicted persons, those who have never served time in prison can gain an understanding of the perspective of those who would otherwise be silenced. Persons convicted of a crime are not by law removed from society forever. Most incarcerated men and women serve a sentence that, one day, ends, and what follows is a reentry into society. Valuing the words that these men and women write is an important bridge to understanding and a welcome-back as a critical member of a community that is made up of everyone’s voices, not just one dominant culture’s norms.

¹⁶ In a 2000 review of Chevigny’s *Doing Time* that was published in *Corrections Today*, Robert Homant writes the following: “I do not see *Doing Time* as a reader for English classes unless one had a specific interest in offender-written literature. While it might make an interesting adjunct to a corrections course, one would have to be extremely careful to compensate for the bias in the writing. Perhaps its best market is former inmates and prison employees who like remembering that they were once insiders in a unique culture.” Every piece of writing has an innate bias, what makes prison writing so dangerous? This mindset is something that must be replaced and this thesis is one step towards that goal.

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