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“THE MONSTER THEY'VE ENGENDERED IN ME”:
GOTHIC STRATEGIES IN AFRICAN AMERICAN AND LATINA/O PRISON
LITERATURE, 1945-2000

by

JASON BAUMANN

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in English in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York

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“THE MONSTER THEY'VE ENGENDERED IN ME”:
GOTHIC STRATEGIES IN AFRICAN AMERICAN AND LATINA/O PRISON LITERATURE, 1945-2000

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Jason Baumann

This manuscript has been read and accepted by the Graduate Faculty in English in satisfaction of the dissertation requirement for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK
ABSTRACT


by

Jason Baumann

Advisor: Robert Reid-Pharr

Recent scholarship on American prison literature, such as Caleb Smith’s pivotal study The Prison in the American Imagination, has uncovered the power that the terrifying realities of the modern prison have had as an inspiration for the development of Gothic literature, as well as the ways that prison writers have in turn drawn upon these Gothic images. However, these scholars have considered prison writers as passively trapped by Gothic discourses that ultimately objectify them as monsters. In contrast, I will argue that African American and Latina/o prison writers in the post-war period have consciously transformed these Gothic themes in order to critique the prison-industrial complex, as well as call into question conceptions of race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and justice. In my dissertation I will analyze a spectrum of Gothic strategies used by African American and Latina/o prison writers from the late 20th century—including Jimmy Santiago Baca, Miguel Piñero, Iceberg Slim, Billie Holiday, George Jackson, and Sanyika Shakur—and will show how they reconfigure Gothic conceptions of monstrosity in order to challenge their dehumanization by the state and the politics of mass incarceration.
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To my sister for her intelligence, sass, and determination,

To my husband for his patience and kindness,

To my godfather for all his blessings,

And, to my ancestors for their memories.

And lastly, my praises to the orisha Shango for his continual encouragement, inspiration and grace—

“Lightning – with what kind of cloth do you cover your body?  
    With the cloth of death…  
Son of a leopard, who uses blood for bathing.  
The man who died in the market and woke up in the house,  
He is the one I will worship for the sake of my head.  
He takes his neighbor’s roof to cover his own head.  
He lends money and does not ask for it in return.  
The king who knows today and tomorrow,  
The one who knows what the white man speaks in secret.  
The one who turns a bad head into a good one.”

Traditional Yoruba praise song for Shango.  
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Introduction

In her early study *The Coherence of Gothic Conventions*, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick resurrected a litany of notable themes in Gothic narratives, stitched together from a range of critical and creative sources.

These include the priesthood and monastic institutions; sleeplike and deathlike states; subterranean spaces and live burial; doubles; the discovery of obscure family ties; affinities between narrative and pictorial art; possibilities of incest; unnatural echoes or silences, unintelligible writings, and the unspeakable; garrulous retainers; the poisonous effects of guilt and shame; nocturnal landscapes and dreams; apparitions of the past; Faust- and Wandering Jew-like figures; civil insurrections and fires; the charnel house and the madhouse. The chief incidents of a Gothic novel never go far beyond illustrating these few themes, and even the most unified novel includes most of them.¹

One of her aims in that study was to show how these Gothic conventions overflow the confines of the classic Gothic novels proper into the wider language and strategies of 19th century British literature. Given this unsettling spread of the Gothic, it is no surprise that it has influenced many other literary discourses, including prison literature. Sedgwick’s list of Gothic conventions is eerily echoed by a parallel list of actual horrors in the narratives of prisoners: the religious roots of the penitentiary, the legal undeath of incarceration, the entombment of solitary confinement, the strange makeshift kinship of the prison yards, the threat of sexual violence and transformations of sexuality, the eroding madness caused by imprisonment, the fires and violence of prison insurrections, and the struggles with literary language to convey the unraveling of human subjectivity that is inflicted by prison-industrial complex.

This intertextuality between Gothic literature and prison narratives has been noted by scholars such as David Reynolds in *Beneath the American Renaissance*, where he showed the profound influence that the reports of Newgate Prison had on the “sensational” streams of American literature. More recently, Caleb Smith has shown how incarceration has figured as an awful specter haunting American ideologies of freedom and autonomy in his study *The Prison & the American Imagination*. However, little attention has been paid to the rhetorical strategies of prison writers themselves to see how their narratives of resistance have transformed the imagery and conventions of Gothic literature. Within my dissertation, I will argue that prison writers in the United States have appropriated Gothic imagery in order to challenge the horrors to which they have been subjected, to reimagine kinship and sexuality, to critique and reevaluate societal conceptions of monstrosity, and to interrogate the legacies of slavery and its uncanny repetition in the current realities of racial oppression and violence in the United States. I will focus on American prison narratives by African American and Latina/o writers composed post-1945 showing how these texts are deeply indebted to Gothic conventions of the 18th and 19th centuries. I will consider both autobiographical and fictional narratives by authors who were themselves incarcerated. I have focused on the American post-war period since it is the most recent renaissance in prison writing in the 20th century and also the period in which mass-incarceration emerges. I have focused on narratives, both memoirs and novels (with the exception of Miguel Piñero’s plays), as that is where these Gothic resonances are most pronounced. Given the

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tremendous range and history of American prison poetry, a thorough study of these issues in verse is beyond the reaches of this study.

I have focused on the voices of African Americans and Latina/os since they are the most disproportionately affected by mass incarceration. Current American popular culture proves how our society is haunted by the twin narratives of the Gothic and incarceration. Recent media have been dominated by both new resurrections of the Gothic, from *Twilight* to *True Blood*, as well as prison stories from *OZ* to *Orange is the New Black*. These imagined horrors contrast with the actual suffering of incarceration in the U.S. As is shockingly elucidated by Marc Mauer of the Sentencing Project in his study *Race to Incarcerate* (2006), in the past 30 years the prison population has increased 500%, and the United States now has the highest rate of incarceration in the world. This incarcerated population is disproportionately African American and Latino. African Americans make up roughly half of the nation’s incarcerated, while they are only 13% of the United States population. African American men are seven times more likely to be imprisoned than whites; Latina/os are three times more likely to be imprisoned (Mauer 2006).

For instance, in my own family — a nationally resonant mix of Puerto Ricans and African Americans — three among five siblings have been incarcerated for significant parts of our lives. Given the racist underpinnings of the prison-industrial complex and the uncanny repetitions between 19th century slavery and 20th century incarceration, my dissertation will focus on, but not be limited to, African American and Latina/o authors.

Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish* of course presents the classic arguments on this increasing power of incarceration and surveillance in modern society. However, Foucault argued that surveillance and regimentation are not just limited to prisons, but that in fact, these carceral strategies are underpinning modern forms of manufacturing, war, education, medicine, and
subjectivity. We are actually living in a carceral society. If this is true, then the contemporary prison is the uncanny double of civilian life. It presents a frightening and too familiar mirror image of powers of surveillance and regimentation at work in the society at large. I will argue that this uncanny character of the penal system is one more reason why the Gothic is at play in its representation.

I will draw upon the growing body of criticism about prison literature, such as H. Bruce Franklin’s now classic *Prison Literature in America: The Victim as Criminal and Artist*, which argues that there are deep connections between the American slave narratives and prison narratives. I will also consider more recent studies like *Fugitive Thought: Prison Movements, Race, and the Meaning of Justice* by Michael Hames-Garcia and *La Pinta: Chicana/o Prisoner Literature, Culture, and Politics* by B.V. Olguín. Much of this scholarship has deemphasized Gothic and sensational elements in prison literature in favor of more obviously political narratives. I will critique this tendency as both censoring the voices of the incarcerated and subtly reinforcing the ideologies of mass incarceration. I will bring this scholarship together with recent work on Gothic literature, particularly scholarship considering the long tentacled reach of the Gothic and its recurring and unsettling reanimations in contemporary culture, such as Teresa A. Goddu’s *Gothic America: Narrative, History, and Nation*, and Jack Halberstam’s *Skin Shows: Gothic Horror and the Technology of Monsters*.

In the first chapter, “Thesaurus of Horrors: Jimmy Santiago Baca and Jack London on Solitary Confinement,” I will compare Jack London’s underappreciated novel *The Star Rover* with contemporary Chicano writer Jimmy Santiago Baca’s memoir *A Place to Stand*. In *The Star Rover*, London rewrote the then popular prison protest memoir *My Life in Prison* by Donald Lowrie as a story of Gothic confinement and astral time travel. Lowrie’s prison memoir had
fiercely criticized the contemporary practices of straightjacketing and solitary confinement, but seems ultimately unable to describe the agonizing void of these tortures. In order to give voice to this abyss, London fictionalized that experience as a story about a man who teaches himself to astral project while his body is straightjacketed in solitary confinement. The novel jumps back and forth between the prisoner’s brutal reality and his cosmic adventures. I will argue that far from trivializing the prison experience with this fantasy, London uses this fantastic tale as a strategy to render palpable the horrors of confinement through this repeated contrast between his physical torture and spiritual freedom. I will then turn to Baca’s contemporary narrative of solitary confinement and show how he uses a remarkably similar strategy to both portray and survive his experience in solitary. In *A Place to Stand*, Baca describes how in solitary confinement he learned to place himself in a trance wherein he relived each and every one of his life experiences moment by moment. This practice of reminiscence and spiritual travel provided him with freedom beyond the tortures the prison warden could inflict upon him. It allowed him to rewrite his life and become the poet, writer, and teacher that he is today. Building on Elaine Scarry’s work in *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*, I will show how Gothic and fantastic themes are used in prison narratives to make legible the sufferings that would otherwise be inexpressible.

In the second chapter, “That Violent, Gibbering Year will Stomp and Shudder my Mind: *Mama Black Widow*, Transgender Monsters, and the Pullman Porters,” I will take a close look at Iceberg Slim’s comic and unsettling novel *Mama Black Widow*. Most of the scholarly attention that has been paid to American prison literature has focused on politically oriented memoirs such as *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* and Piri Thomas’ *Down These Mean Streets*. Slim’s novel would seem an unlikely subject for this study given its scant direct discussion of incarceration.
Slim’s pulp novel voyeuristically portrays the tragic life, incarceration, and death of a transgender funeral home director through a madcap rewrite of Robert Bloch’s *Psycho*. Although pulp novels might be considered sensationalistic and exploitative, they may actually be more effective in unmasking the injustice of the prison-industrial complex by directly reframing the prison narrative in the horror genre. I will argue that Slim’s novel speaks to the horrors of incarceration by the extreme brevity of its actual direct references, making the unspeakable palpable through that silence. I will compare *Mama Black Widow* to Slim’s other more explicit writings on incarceration, such as *Pimp: The Story of My Life*, paying close attention to what he makes explicit and what he communicates through omission. I will also analyze Slim’s use of monstrous images of transgender people in light of historical precedents in the Gothic such as Marsh’s novel *The Beetle*.

In the third chapter, “Every Form of Refuge has its Price: Vampires, Pedophilia and Disidentification in the Writings of Miguel Piñero,” I will provide a close reading of Gothic themes in the writings of Piñero as well as his contemporary “Capeman” killer Salvador Agron. Miguel Piñero’s play *Short Eyes* is a landmark in both American prison writings and Puerto Rican literature in English. The play depicts a racially mixed and charged jail wherein a convicted child molester is murdered by his fellow prisoners in an act of scapegoating, cleansing the scene of sexual tension and confusion. Although this play has received considerable scholarly attention, it has not been considered within the broader range of Piñero’s work, particularly regarding sexuality. In this chapter, I will read *Short Eyes* in the context of his other plays which deal with intergenerational sex and power dynamics such as “Side Show,” “Playland Blues,” and “Every Form of Refuge has its Price.” Through close reading of these plays and archival sources, I will show that in his work Piñero “framed” himself as both a victim of and pursuer of
intergenerational sexual relationships. In “Playland Blues,” Piñero openly portrayed himself as the pursuer of an underage hustler. Given the ever-escalating paranoia and criminalization of intergenerational sex, I will then explore Short Eyes using recent moves toward “monster theory” in Jack Halberstam’s Skin Shows: Gothic Horror and the Technology of Monsters and Edward Ingbretsen’s At Stake: Monsters and the Rhetoric of Fear in Public Culture. I will demonstrate that Piñero used these themes of monstrosity to critique American conceptions of sexuality, power, and the colonial status of Puerto Rico. I will compare Piñero’s treatment of these themes with Salvador Agron’s discussions of sexuality and politics in his letters. I will show how they both reworked historical images of vampires in order to respond to monstrous representations of Puerto Ricans, as well as concerns about intergenerational sex. Lastly, I will contrast Piñero’s depictions of intergenerational relationships with James Kincaid’s work on child molestation, showing that Piñero has a more complex understanding of the operations of power and violence in these relationships.

In the third chapter, “In my Solitude You Haunt Me: Billie Holiday, Frankenstein, and the Blues Gothic,” I will provide a close reading of Holiday’s memoir Lady Sings the Blues. I will show how it should be read as a prison memoir, as well as showing its roots in the Gothic, slave narratives, and the Blues themselves. The Blues are a uniquely American manifestation of the Gothic impulse. Gothic undertones flow through the haunting lyrics of Bessie Smith’s “Blue Spirit Blues” to the ominous threat of Tampa Red’s “There’s a Dead Cat on the Line” to the desperate sorcery of Screamin’ Jay Hawkins’ “I Put a Spell on You.” This Gothic impulse also manifested itself in prison Blues from “Send Me to the Electric Chair” to “Penitentiary Blues,” as well as in prison work songs like “Old Hannah” and the work of musicians like Lead Belly. This music is testament to the Gothic reality actually lived by African Americans in the 20th
century. In this chapter, I will analyze how this Gothic counterpoint plays out in both the music and memoirs of Billie Holiday. Her life story is thoroughly marked by incarceration from her childhood institutionalization to her handcuffed death in Metropolitan Hospital. I will analyze her memoir *Lady Sings the Blues* and show how it uses conventions of the Gothic heroine which had also been utilized in American slave narratives. Holiday’s memoir will be shown to point to a deep relationship between the Gothic and slave narratives, which both in turn influenced the tradition of prison writings. This will be shown through a close comparison of Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* and Harriet Jacobs’ *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. I will show that Holiday, like the imprisoned Frankenstein’s monster and hiding Jacobs, was trapped looking onto a life of domesticity and intimacy that was denied to her. The longing for home and intimacy will be revealed in Holiday’s original songs, like “Left Alone” and “God Bless the Child.”

In the final chapter, “Zombies, Ogres, Pigs, and Other Devils: Representations of Monstrosity in African American Prison Narratives,” I will analyze a historical range of prison and execution narratives by African Americans—*Sketches of the Life of Joseph Mountain* (1790), Austin Reed’s *The Life and Adventures of a Haunted Convict* (1850s), Chester Himes’ story “To What Red Hell?” (1934), George Jackson *Prison Letters* (1960s), and Sanyika Shakur’s *Monster: The Autobiography of an L.A. Gang Member* (1993)—to consider how the Gothic transforms when the supposed “monster” is the subject rather than the object of the narrative. Analysis of this historical range of writers will show how these writers have increasingly transformed the image of the monster over time, using this image to indict the actual monstrosity of the prison system itself, while insisting upon their humanity in protest. I will consider these writers in the context of the long history of dehumanizing “monstrous” images of criminals, convicts, and of African Americans that have been used to justify systems of
punishment and incarceration. To this end, I will review Foucault’s analyses of monstrosity in modern legal theory in his lectures on the “abnormal,” Colin Dayan’s analyses of the zombification and civil death in *The Law is a White Dog*, Karen Halttunen’s history of the evolution of Gothic images of crime in American narratives from the 17th-19th centuries, and Elizabeth Young’s history of monstrous images of African Americans in *Black Frankenstein*. Reading these prison writers in the context of this history of monstrous images of criminals and of African Americans will enable us to see how these writers have transformed these images for their own ends. This Gothic strategy enables them to challenge their dehumanization and critique systems of incarceration. Religion will be found to be a central theme in this history. There is a historical arc in these texts from the essentially religious execution narratives of the 17th century to the Gothic representations of the late 18th to 20th century texts. Although the 17th century texts end in execution, these religious narratives portrayed criminals as essentially human. The narrators’ crimes were portrayed as proof of a common human fallibility. From the late 18th century onward, Gothic images of criminals emerge that portray them as inhuman monsters to be quarantined and eliminated. I will show how the tradition of African American prison writing engages with this political history and insists that we evolve beyond these Gothic images of crime and the monstrosities of the modern prison.
“Thesaurus of Horrors”: Jimmy Santiago Baca and Jack London on Solitary Confinement

In this chapter I will consider Jimmy Santiago Baca’s memoir *A Place to Stand*, which takes a unique approach to describing the experience of solitary confinement. Baca’s memoir depicts his time “in the hole” as a period of spiritual travel wherein he relives and reframes his life second by second. We will see how Baca’s account disrupts recent attempts to put the literature of solitary confinement in historical perspective by philosopher Lisa Guenther and literary critic Caleb Smith. Guenther and Smith both consider solitary confinement through metaphors of being buried alive in order to bolster their respective phenomenological and historical frameworks. We will see that Baca’s depiction invokes models of prison writing from Jack London’s novel *The Star Rover*, which in turn looked to Poe’s short stories on premature burial for inspiration and models. I will show that Guenther and Smith’s readings of solitary confinement as a metaphoric live burial fail to appreciate the real 19th-century fears of premature burial and the transformations that this Gothic trope undergoes as it is purposefully reappropriated by prison writers. We will see that Baca and London actively transformed popular phobias of being buried alive and the Gothic narratives that were woven from these fears in order to create a language that could describe some measure of the real horrors of solitary confinement, challenging the undoing of language that this torture inflicts.

As Elaine Scarry has so eloquently argued in her classic study *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*, one of the greatest practical political challenges is to articulate the realities of human suffering. This is because human suffering, which is so often
inflicted by structures of domination and exploitation, by its very nature undoes the possibility of communication. Scarry writes:

> The tendency of pain not simply to resist expression but to destroy the capacity for speech is in torture reenacted in in overt, exaggerated form. Even where torturers do not permanently eliminate the voice through mutilation or murder, they mime the work of pain by temporarily breaking off the voice, making it their own, making it speak their words, making it cry out when they want it to cry, be silent when they want its silence, turning it on and off, using its sounds to abuse the one whose voice it is as well as other prisoners.⁴

The problem of the impossibility of representing and communicating pain is not unique in 20th century philosophy, being most prominent in Wittgenstein’s philosophy of language. Scarry’s unique contribution was to link the epistemological and symbolic difficulties of communicating pain with the political problem of articulating that suffering in the public sphere in order to challenge injustice, exploitation, and torture. One important absence in her otherwise tour-de-force study is the structure and importance of psychological forms of torture, as she focusses almost exclusively on the politics of the infliction of physical pain. Forms of psychological torture are just as disruptive to the fabric of subjectivity and representation as the infliction of physical torture, as can be seen in this moving passage from Jack Henry Abbott’s memoirs.

> There are always voices in the hole. It’s a strange thing. I have seen wars take place in the hole. I have seen sexual love take place in the hole. I have seen, as a matter of fact, the most impossible things happen under these conditions. Let us say a kind of movement that is not movement exists there. To illustrate: to walk ten miles in an enclosed space of ten feet is not really movement. There are not ten miles of space, only time. You do not go ten miles. To write about the hole, in other words, I would have to explore such common places.⁵


Abbott, an American inmate and writer who was institutionalized and incarcerated for 46 of his 58 years, spending extensive periods in solitary confinement, deftly illustrates the problem of representing the psychological torture of solitary confinement. How do you narrate a ten-mile journey that can only travel ten feet? How do you narrate a story that only moves in time, but not in space? The true torture of solitary confinement is inexpressible because it is confinement to a dead zone where nothing occurs, a numbness without events which unravels personal narrative. Although there is a deep and engaged tradition of writing by prisoners in the United States since the beginnings of solitary confinement as a form of punishment at Walnut Street Prison in the late 18th century, few texts have been able to truly describe that experience. Most, like Abbott’s memoir, ride the edge of intelligibility, telling the reader of the impossibility of describing this psychological torture—an inexpressible zone that most describe as like being buried alive. Although Abbott hints at the voices, wars, and loves in the hole, he is not able to “explore such common places.”

Jimmy Santiago Baca is prominent contemporary Chicano poet, screenwriter, novelist, and memoirist born in Santa Fe, New Mexico. Baca began writing poetry while in prison in Arizona in the 1970s. In his memoir A Place to Stand, Baca puts his time in prison in the full context of the personal tragedies of his youth. He frames his memoir as an explanation of his life that he intends to pass on to his sons. He was abandoned by his parents as a young child when his mother left the family due to his father’s alcoholism. In search of a better life, she decided to leave her children as well as her husband. She marries a well-off Anglo with whom she had been having an affair and decides to pass for white. Since her children are unpleasant reminders of the poverty and Chicano background that she wants to leave behind, she entrusts them to her parents who hide her secret for her. When her father dies, the grandmother is unable to care for the
children, and they are given to an orphanage. Baca is unable to adjust to his new life and the loss of his family, and runs away, leading to teen years in juvenile detention. Upon maturity he searches for a better life in San Diego, California, finding work in construction and plumbing. There he befriends Marcos, an aimless young white man from Michigan. He later falls in love with Lonnie, a woman he meets on the beach. Inpatient with the struggles to work and save to build the life of their dreams, Baca and Marcos get involved in dealing marijuana. Baca serves his first prison time in California for dealing drugs. After release, Marcos and Baca begin dealing from the food distribution trucks of their community service assignment. With this money they move to Arizona to start a new life. On a trip to Mexico, Marcos pulls them into a major drug dealing ring with a kingpin named Galvan who is part of the gang La Eme. As their drug dealing increases exponentially to keep up with the supply pushed on them by La Eme, their lives spiral out of control. They are finally entrapped by the FBI and apprehended after a gun fight.

In prison, Baca is hungry to finally learn how to read and get an education, something which he has struggled with his entire life. Due to his inability to acclimate to the oppression of prison life, he is denied access to GED classes on grounds of his behavior. He is saved by a dictionary and a pen pal—a disabled Christian teacher who corresponds with him and slowly teaches him to read over the course of their correspondence. This correspondence leads to his slow development as a poet, and eventual correspondence with other poets and the publishing of his work.

Although the details of Baca’s life are of course unique to him, in its major outline his story is reminiscent with that of many Latina/o prison writers, such as Piri Thomas. These themes of troubled families, poverty, complicated racial identity and passing, and dislocation are recurrent in many 20th century prison narratives. What is most distinctive is Baca’s account of
his time in disciplinary solitary confinement, his time in “the hole.” Unlike Jack Henry Abbott’s account of solitary confinement as an undoing of subjectivity, during his time in solitary Baca’s consciousness expands, going beyond the boundaries of space and time. Alone in the darkness, Baca revisits his past, purifying and rebuilding his psyche moment by moment.

What began as an idle reflex became a habit of mind and then something else entirely. As my powers of concentration grew, I would revisit places and people from my past for longer stretches of time. Stretched out flat on my back, arms covering my eyes, I would replay the events over and over again like a sexual fantasy, adding details and names, redrawing faces, until they seemed as real to me as if they were right in front of me. Occasionally I’d be distracted by the sound of a guard’s footsteps or thoughts about the Mexican mafia gunning for me in the prison yard outside. But with nothing else to do but lie there and sweat, I trained my mind to shut out everything and travel back in time.6

While Abbott could only hint at the loves, wars, and journeys that take place in the hole, the ten mile journeys in 10 feet of space, without ever describing those “common” experiences, Baca develops a rich spiritual life, training himself to not only reminisce, but also to relive and revisit his past. More than anything, he spends this time spiritually journeying to relive his childhood in Estancia, recovering the moments of joy before his family disintegrated and reconnecting with the intimacy he had with his grandparents when they cared for him.

In the hole I returned to Estancia time and time again in my mind, living as if I were there, feeling the sun on my skin, watching hawks glide above the village in the sharp blue sky, just as I had as a child. The vivid reality of my reveries made these imaginary excursions so forceful it scared me. It became much more than idly remembering this or that. I’d play a memory like a song, over and over, adding this or subtracting that, changing something in a scene or re-creating a certain episode and enhancing it with additional details. Fearful I might be losing my sanity, sometimes when I came back to the present, I’d call out my name in the cell just to hear it or bang the steel door until my hands hurt. But, whatever was happening, I felt a wholesome fulfillment that delighted me, even in this dark pit. Memories structured my day and filled my cell. It was as if all the sorrow, fear, and regret I’d carried in my bones suddenly was swept away and my heart lifted itself into a realm of innocence before all sadness and tragedy happened. In

my imagination I was safe and joyous again. The darkness of my cell glowed with the bright dawn light of Estancia. 7

Although he at first refers to these reveries as products of active memory and imagination, they develop a depth and power that he in the end refers to them as “journeys.” Although, as we will see, these reveries in solitary confinement are often associated in other memoirs and theories with the deterioration of consciousness, Baca is ultimately refreshed and healed by this intimate contact with his past.

My sleep and waking rhythms were all mixed up, whirling as I was through the gray zone between the cell and the village. I kept time of day and night with meals and shift changes. Whether I was awake or in an altered state or sleeping, Estancia was never far away. In my imagination, the more I visited Estancia, the more there was to see and do. I wanted to know more about it, to get into every person’s heart and know what happened to each of them: what changed them, why things turned out as they did. I wanted to understand both the tragic and joyous sides of their lives. Day and night, half conscious, I was consumed by the other world, always in an altered state, even when I was awake. I couldn’t help but feel wonderful, and I couldn’t stop myself as I went back in into my memories again because of the peace it brought to my body, soul, and mind. I felt an affirmation of who I was; the person I’d almost buried forever became stronger in me. Returning to my cell from my memories, I’d find myself regenerated, despite the lack of sleep…I went on like this for weeks, reliving the fable of my life, rediscovering from my isolation cell the boy I was and the life I’d lived.8

Unlike Abbott, Baca finds healing and regeneration in the work of reminiscence that he undertakes in solitary confinement. Although he is “buried alive” in the hole, he finds someone else buried there beside him in the dark—“the person I’d almost buried forever”—“the boy I was and the life I’d lived.” It is difficult to account for these differences in their experiences of solitary confinement. Both Abbott and Baca, have on the surface, very similar backgrounds. Both of them come from extreme poverty, racial discrimination, and were raised in institutions. However, Baca had some intimacy and happiness with his grandparents. Perhaps this provided

7 Baca, A Place to Stand, 139.
8 Baca, A Place to Stand, 143.
him with some haven of safety and comfort in his mind to which he could return to for healing, a place that Abbott lacked. It is also striking that either in spite of or because of the solitary confinement that is inflicted upon him in prison, Baca is able to relive and make peace with his troubled childhood.

Baca does his five years of straight time, filling his days with his spiritual journeys and self-development as a poet. Although he portrays himself as deeply affected by class and racial oppression throughout his life, while in prison his historical consciousness deepens. In dialogue with other Chicano and Native American inmates, Baca comes to a deeper understanding of the structures and history of oppression in the United States, and to appreciate the beauty, spirituality and political resources of his own culture. This is deepened by his spiritual journeys in which he revisits times with a shaman who was friends with his grandparents and treated him as a child.

Finally, after five years Baca is released. Once free he revisits scenes from his past, trying to reconnect with his sister, brother, and mother. His father had died of alcoholism while he was imprisoned, and he was refused leave to attend the funeral. When he finally visits his mother, she regrets abandoning him as a child and her lifetime of passing for white. She promises to abandon the false life that she has built and re-embrace her children and her Chicano heritage. After he leaves their reunion, Baca learns that her white husband has murdered her and killed himself, unwilling to lose her and let their secrets be revealed. In the wake of these tragedies, Baca’s brother descends into drug abuse and is eventually murdered on the streets. Baca takes off and unites with a woman poet he had corresponded with while in prison and begins building his new life as a writer, still haunted by his past and the tragedies of his family.

The book ends with a supernatural reunion. At the end of the memoir, Baca is visiting Santa Fe and happens upon the Cathedral of Saint Francis where he was baptized. He learns that
there is a mass being performed that is an official reconciliation of the Catholic Church for atrocities committed against Native Americans. He joins the service where there are both whites and Indios participating equally. He sees as if in a vision a young couple with a baby who remind him of his own baptism in that very cathedral.

Then I saw this young couple approach the altar and stand in the center. He looked like my father and she looked just like my mother when they were both young, in their late teens. They were holding a brown baby that looked just like me in the photographs my sister had shown me. They were my parents and I was the baby they were preparing to baptize. I saw them exactly as I must have been here once with my parents, innocent, my whole life ahead of me, they with their dreams still intact….And suddenly I began to forgive them for what they had done or not done. I forgave myself for all I had done to hurt others. I forgave the world for how it had treated us….I felt it was a new beginning. That little baby was me, before my father became a drunk and died in the gutter, before my mother left and was murdered by Richard, before Theresa overdosed, before my brother was murdered. I was innocent and pure. I was that child, free to begin life over and to make my life one they would all bless and be proud of. I was truly free at last.9

Although moved to a moment of transcendence and transformation by this epiphany, Baca doesn’t join the church but leaves the service, walking out into the rain as the Church bells toll. Through this visit to the Cathedral, and this offering of apology, Baca is released from the sufferings of his life and family. Given the suffering that he has endured, Baca’s religious epiphany, while symbolically resonant, is strange, unexpected, and perhaps unconvincing. In fact, given the horrific oppression of solitary confinement that he has endured along with his personal tragedies, the freedom and reconciliation he experiences brings into question the overarching critique of the prison system that the rest of his text appears to be making. One has to question whether his time in solitary confinement is in fact to thank for the spiritual regeneration that he experiences. Did the solitude and reflection of his confinement actually heal

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9 Baca, A Place to Stand, 264.
him, allowing for this eventual epiphany and transformation? Does this epiphany compromise critique of solitary confinement as a form of torture?

If we look at two recent notable readings of the existential and historical predicament of solitary confinement such as Lisa Guenther’s *Solitary Confinement: Social Death and its Afterlives* and Caleb Smith’s *The Prison and the American Imagination*, they would suggest that Baca’s epiphany is ideologically aligned with the architects of solitary confinement. Using these texts to read the personal transformations in Baca’s memoir would suggest that his narrative actually reinforces the ideologies of the American prison, justifying incarceration and torture. Both of these studies look back to the emergence of solitary confinement in the United States in the early 19th century at Walnut Street Prison and Eastern State Penitentiary in Philadelphia. In this “Pennsylvania Model,” prisoners were put in total isolation for life, spending their sentences alone in their cells with a bible and eventually simple craft labor to fill their days. This form of incarceration was intended as a gentler alternative to the violence of corporal punishment and execution, as well as the dangers and corrupting influence of collective incarceration. Alone in their cells, inmates were supposed to find moral rebirth based on a model of monastic penance and transformation. However, it quickly became apparent that this gentler form of punishment was in fact far worse than simple loss of liberty and even corporal punishment. Visitors to Eastern State, most famously Charles Dickens, noted the madness and despair that destroyed the inmates. Most other American prisons adopted the rival Auburn Prison model, which enforced collective labor and carefully monitored and controlled inmates’ communication. Since total isolation of inmates was prohibitively expensive to maintain, economics were probably a far more important factor in this history than the preservation of inmates’ psyches. Both Guenther and Smith take the Pennsylvania model as paradigmatic of the form and problem of solitary
confine in the United States and trace its subsequent history and cultural impact from this moment.

Guenther’s study is primarily concerned to interpret solitary confinement through critical phenomenology. Guenther sees the oft reported deterioration of subjectivity in victims of solitary confinement as proof of the intersubjective character of consciousness. Guenther uses the narratives of the collapse of subjectivity experienced by those imprisoned in solitary confinement as confirmation of critical phenomenology’s overturning of Husserl’s version of the transcendental subject. It shows that we are not self-sufficient monads of consciousness, but that instead, the intelligibility of the world is radically dependent on the presence of others. This is confirmation of the intersubjective character of consciousness as theorized by Merleau-Ponty, as well as the idea of the primacy of the Other in the work of Emanuel Levinas.

Guenther’s study closely considers the ideologies of the rise of solitary confinement in the American context, the Walnut Street experiment and Eastern State Penitentiary, to show how these early experiments in solitary confinement were undertaken to enforce a death and rebirth in the prisoners. Considering Eastern State penitentiary, Guenther writes:

Prisoners would work, eat, and sleep in their cells, knowing that there were others all around them in exactly the same situation but permanently separated from them by thick stone walls. Once a year, they might receive a visitor; at the most once a year, they might receive a letter. All contact with the outside, including news, would be severely limited so that, after time was served, they could emerge as new persons, unconnected to their old community or way of life. This was the gift of the penitentiary: the privilege of becoming a tabula rasa, a blank slate from which to begin again as a newly made republican machine, an individual without a past and with nothing but a clear, bright, productive future ahead.10

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Using Guenther’s lens Baca’s experience of inner transformation easily follows this model. One could argue that through his period of isolation he makes peace with his childhood and crimes, and he is able to reemerge a tabula rasa for a new life. However, Baca’s experience of spirit journeying doesn’t quite fit Guenther’s model of the death and rebirth, as well as mental disintegration experienced in solitary. Guenther quotes many firsthand accounts by survivors of solitary confinement. The survivors talk of their experience as being “unhinged,” and a kind of living death.

Many prisoners speak of their experience in supermax prison as a form of living death. On the one hand, their bodies still live and breathe, eat and defecate, wake and sleep (often with difficulty). On the other hand, a meaningful sense of living embodiment has for the most part drained out of their lives; they’ve become unhinged from the world, confined to a place in which all they can do is turn around or pace back and forth, blocked from open-ended perception of the world as a space of mutual belonging and interaction with others. José Rubio, an inmate at Marion Penitentiary during the 1972 protests, described his experience of the control unit as “death on installment plan.”

Although, his travels in space and time might seem to fit this model of being “unhinged,” Baca finds tremendous solace and personal transformation through his spiritual journeys. They provide an escape from his confinement and a reconciliation with life. In fact, he finds the time in solitary confinement in some ways preferable to the dangers, anxieties, and hassles of social interaction out on the yard with other inmates. Baca’s craving for solitude and healing escape through memory challenge Guenther’s critical phenomenology that would insist that radical solitude can only be detrimental to subjectivity given the intersubjective nature of consciousness. But, Guenther does admit that not all inmates fall apart under solitary confinement. These inmates are often referred to by themselves and other inmates as “monsters,” labeled as inhuman not for the crimes they have committed, but for their lack of need for the company of other

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people. Baca’s aversion for human company and withdrawal into the past are also at odds with Guenther’s presentation of the negotiation of time as a vital necessity for prisoners in solitary confinement.

…A prisoner named Q says, “I don’t dwell on the sentence because it can overwhelm you—you can actually go insane. You get caught up in this time zone.” Charles Baxter agrees: “You can get tripping, Doc.” Gary Huffman adds, “It’s where your mind jumps time.”…To “jump” time is also to be jumped by it, to feel the doom of a situation where the possibility of release is a source not of comfort or hope but of impatience, frustration, rage or depression. Q explains, “To me, time is like a dragon I have to slay. If I can master the present, I will have used time to redeem time.”

The inmate experiences that Guenther cites stress the importance of creating a structured present, without letting the anticipation of time left to serve and the hope for release disintegrate the given moment. You can’t “jump time.” She gives examples of schedules that inmates in solitary produce for themselves, charting a day that would otherwise have no movement, meaning, or structure. Thus the adage “Do the time, don’t let the time do you.” In contrast, Baca purposefully jumps time, living in the past, retracing all of his steps, in order to heal his psyche and escape from the grasp of solitary confinement.

If we look to Caleb Smith, he takes a very similar tack on the ideology of the penitentiary as an enforced death and rebirth, but finds a further Gothic dimension in this theme:

In the language of reformers, inmates, and literary artists at large, the prison was represented as the dark house of ghosts and monsters. Dehumanization, then is no excess or exception; it is the essence of the American prison. The inmate in the penitentiary is not only a subject in the making; he is also a figure of exclusion and decay, inspiring both pity and terror. To sentimental reformers, a virtual death was the first step toward the citizen-subject’s glorious rebirth. To prisoners and others more suspicious of the penitentiary’s designs, however, the Gothic monstrosities of its interiors have sometimes seemed to destabilize the very foundations of sentimental humanity. The living dead threaten to rise. “This monster they’ve engendered in me,” Jackson promised from his cell, “will return to torment its maker.”

12 Guenther, Solitary Confinement, 218.
Smith’s study sets out to show the tremendous impact that the growth of the modern penitentiary had on 19th century American writers, such as Melville, Dickinson, Thoreau, and Emerson. He shows how the shadow of the penitentiary can be seen in the themes of isolation and constraint in these American Renaissance writers. Smith names the frightening shadow casts on American literature the “carceral Gothic.” Although Smith delves deeply into 19th century penological theory and classic American literature, his engagement with the Gothic and with the writings of the incarcerated are surprisingly cursory. Although he repeatedly invokes the carceral Gothic, his actual engagement with the Gothic is limited to selected quotes that describe incarceration as being “buried alive” and a brief consideration of the purposefully Gothic cast of 19th century prison architecture. He makes no effort to seriously relate actual Gothic texts to the prison texts that he considers. Similarly, actual engagement with the writings of prisoners is continually deflected by his study and method. Less than a handful of prison writers, such as 19th century poet Harry Hawser and Jimmy Santiago Baca, are given any serious consideration in The Prison & the American Imagination, and they are never granted the kind of close reading he reserves for 19th century masters like Melville. This can be seen in his very selective and pointed quotation of writers like George Jackson. Although Jackson may have one line threatening to embody the “monster” that society has branded him as through incarceration, the major thrust of his writing was actually to fight against his dehumanization. Smith also portrays Baca’s spiritual journeys as his embracing the monstrous. This is ironic, since throughout his memoir Baca recounts his struggle to resist his dehumanization, to resist being made into a “zombie,” by the forces of the prison system.

Baca’s story resonates with a number of other twentieth-century narratives in which prisoners are reborn into politicized minority identities. George Jackson’s letters from Soledad and San Quentin, for instance, describe his transformation from a petty criminal into a militant in the cause of Marxist Pan-
Africanism…Similarly, in The Autobiography of Malcolm X, the young derelict previously known as “Satan” acquires discipline, education, and a new dignity in the Nation of Islam. “In fact,” he claims, “up to then, I had never been so truly free in my life.” In some ways these stories of personal transformation seem oddly to conform to the ideals of the reformers who built the great penitentiaries of the nineteenth century: in the prison interior, the convict learns to govern his body, acquires redemptive faith, and is accepted into a community. At the same time, of course, such prison-authors insist that their community, the collective into which the reborn self is adopted, is not the dominant society that builds prisons…Chicano identity, allows Baca to insist that his narrative, though it may appear to reproduce the logic of the logic of penitentiary discipline, actually subverts that logic, pushing it to unintended consequences.\textsuperscript{13}

Smith collapses Baca’s memoir with those of Malcolm X and George Jackson as narratives of racial rebirth, that through the imposed death of imprisonment they are reborn as racial subjects. Smith is able to pull this off because he purposefully avoids any close reading of these texts and consideration of their narrative arcs. He ignores their actual stories and instead quotes only selected lines that confirm his theories. There is no doubt that Baca, Jackson, and Malcolm X had racial identities prior to their imprisonment. Throughout his memoir, Baca recounts the racial oppression he suffered as a Chicano and Native American in his youth, and the awareness he had even as a child of racial and economic injustice. The actual rebirth that Baca experiences in his memoir is his rebirth from someone barely literate to a professional writer. This is not produced by the living death of his incarceration, but by his acquisition of literacy despite the oppressive forces of the prison administration which sought to deny him access to education. This acquisition of literacy enables his coming to consciousness as a historical subject. Similar themes are prominent in the writings of Malcolm X, George Jackson, and many other prison writers in the 20\textsuperscript{th} century. In this way, many 20\textsuperscript{th} century prison memoirs harken back to American slave narratives, in which the acquisition of literacy is so often depicted as a definitive act of rebellion and self-fashioning. This kinship between 20th century American prison

narratives and American slave narratives was one of the major points of H. Bruce Franklin’s *Prison Literature in America: The Victim as Criminal and Artist*, which was the pivotal study of American prison literature.\(^{14}\) Baca is able to insist that his rebirth is something that he won against the oppressive forces of the penitentiary, because in fact it was. It was his literacy and historical consciousness, which in turn lead to a deeper appreciation of his Chicano heritage. Smith is able to misread this struggle as a reinforcement of the ideologies justifying the American prison system because of his refusal to engage with Baca’s narrative and its actual historical precedents.

In fact, Smith explicitly argues against reading American prison narratives in relationship to one another and instead insists on reading them in light of penological theories. He argues against canons of prison literature because the “category of prison literature rests on a premise of authenticity, on the belief that prisoners’ real experiences give them a unique identity and point of view.”\(^{15}\) Instead, Smith privileges the theoretical frameworks of their captors, insisting that prisoners’ narrative strategies to challenge their incarceration are simply reiterations of the ideologies imprisoning them. Smith’s refusal to grant that prisoners might have an authentically unique perspective on their suffering and its political structure is most closely tied with his usage of the Gothic. For Smith the Gothic is only and always a discourse of the Other.

…the carceral Gothic mediates not only between the free self and the captive other but also between antebellum America’s two great figures of captivity, the prisoner and the slave. In the end, however, the connection cannot be the sentimental bond of common “humanity”; at its most potent, the carceral Gothic is a reckoning with the imprisoned other that disturbs the very foundations of humanity on which the self depends.\(^{16}\)

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\(^{14}\) H. Bruce Franklin, *Prison Literature in America: The Victim as Criminal and Artist* (Oxford University Press, 1982).

\(^{15}\) Smith, *The Prison & the American Imagination*, 197.

What is most striking in Smith’s formulation of the carceral Gothic is its denial of subjectivity to the captive, prisoner, and slave. Smith can only conceive of them as objects troubling a free white consciousness. He never stops to consider the perspective of the prisoner or slave as subjects and how this might transform the meaning of the Gothic. There has been a great deal of analysis of both British and American Gothic writing and the ways that racial alterity, colonialism, and enslavement have been portrayed and justified in Gothic literature, such as Patrick Brantlinger’s *Rule of Darkness: British Literature and Imperialism, 1830–1914*, among many others. But there is also a growing body of criticism elucidating the ways that Gothic tropes have been appropriated and reinterpreted by these “Others” in ways much more complex and useful than naively and uncritically assuming the position of “monster.” Teresa Goddu’s *Gothic America: Narrative, History, and Nation* is exemplary in this regard. After surveying the importance of Gothic themes and tropes in American 19th century literature, Goddu turns to their prominence in African American literature in the 20th century. Goddu argues that there is an essential difference in African American appropriations of the Gothic as they are using Gothic tropes in the struggle to describe the real horrors of slavery and racial oppression in the United States.

In the hands of African American authors the Gothic transcends being a discourse sublimating alterity, and instead becomes a strategy to portray and critique actual horrors. A strategy which she calls “haunting back.” Haunting back is not simply donning the mantle of monstrosity, but instead digging up the real corpses hidden under Gothic metaphors, tracing back Gothic tropes to actual horrors. Goddu accomplishes this through a comparison of the Gothic elements in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and Harriet Jacobs’ *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*.17

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In what follows I will argue that there is a similar strategy of haunting back at work in Baca’s memoir, which emerges clearly if we relate it to earlier precedents, such as Jack London’s novel *The Star Rover*. Reading Baca in this context will show how he is further developing Gothic strategies in American prison literature. These strategies have been deployed by prison writers in order to overcome the inherent challenges of conveying human suffering. This will involve digging up precedents for Baca’s strategies, as well as the prevalent fears behind being “buried alive.”

Although Caleb Smith argues against seeing prison literature as a tradition within itself in American literature and instead argues for reading the texts of prison writers through the lens of theorists of the penal system, we will see that there are remarkable linkages between Baca’s text and those of earlier writers. While there are important linkages between the literary strategies of prison writers and the penal theorists who sought to reform, punish, and torture them, in the end Smith’s refusal of generation relationships among prison writers is deeply unsettling. One wonders how this argument would work when made about other oppressed discourses. Would Smith argue that American slave narratives should only be read in the light of the theorists of slavery and not in relationship to one another? Is it not valid to investigate how this genre of critical writing developed historically as these writers read one another and built on generations of cultural protest and critique? Over the course of Smith’s study he colludes with the theorists of the modern prison to silence and entomb the voices of prisoners in the United States. While he carefully and voluminously explicates the ideas of penal theorists and shows the influence they had on major American writers such as Melville and Dickinson, he only reads a scant three prison writers Harry Hawser, George Jackson, and Baca. And, these are quoted quite pointedly and summarily, ignoring aspects that contradict his theoretical strategies. Smith is ultimately in
collusion with the systems of punishment that he explicates to bury the writings of prisoners. Similarly, Guenther, although deeply sympathetic to the sufferings of the inmates she writes about, quotes their experiences selectively to bolster her ultimate concern with critical phenomenology. Although she engages extensively with the history of penal theory, her engagement with prison writing is ultimately superficial, privileging the accounts of a handful of writers, particularly Abbott, whose statements bolster her theoretical concerns.

If we instead link imprisoned writers to a larger history of prison narratives, as well as other literary discourses, we can see the development of literary strategies to critique the modern prison. One of the most important precedents for Baca’s memoir is Jack London’s fantastic prison novel *The Star Rover*. London is of course better known for novels such as *The Call of the Wild* and is not usually remembered as a prison writer. However, London was a hobo in his youth and was arrested for vagrancy and served time in prison in Buffalo in 1894. London wrote about these experiences for magazines, which were later included in his memoir of hobo life *The Road*. In 1915 London published his prison novel *The Star Rover*. The novel was inspired in part by Donald Lowrie’s memoir *My Life in Prison*, as well as by interviews with two of Lowrie’s fellow prisoners in San Quentin prison in the early 20th century, Ed Morrell and Jacob Oppenheimer. Lowrie’s memoir made him famous in prison reform circles and lead to his advising reformer Thomas Mott Osborne on the management of Sing Sing correctional facility. Unfortunately, Lowrie fell back into a life of crime and died shortly after release from prison in Arizona in 1925. Oppenheimer and Morrell were robbers made famous by an attempted prison break in 1899, after which they were subjected to solitary confinement along with other conspirators. Oppenheimer served 14 years in solitary until his execution in 1908. Morrell served

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five years in solitary and was pardoned in 1908. He later became involved in prison reform and published his own memoirs in response to London’s novel. It is notable that they were subjected to solitary confinement, because some prison theorists write as if solitary confinement was not used as a punishment in the late 19th and early 20th century. For instance, Lisa Guenther identifies three major eras of solitary confinement in the early 19th century, the 1970s, and the 1990s to the present. She in fact laments that we don’t have more narratives of solitary confinement from other eras. Although in the late 19th century and early 20th century forced labor, in either factories in the north or chain gangs in the south, is more commonly reported in prison narratives. It is clear from this constellation of narratives from the early 20th century that solitary confinement was also used as disciplinary measure for “incorrigibles” like Morrell and Oppenheimer. Deeper investigation of the plentiful memoirs of the prison experience in the late 19th and early to mid-20th centuries is obviously in order for Lisa Guenther.

Building on the conversations with Morrell and Donald Lowrie’s memoir of San Quentin, London created the story of Darrell Standing, an agricultural scientist in prison for a crime of passion, murdering a rival in a rage. In prison Standing is implicated as a conspirator in a prison break by a dishonest snitch trying to buy a pardon with false information. When Standing refuses to divulge any information about the supposed conspiracy, he is subjected to solitary confinement and extensive “jacketing” to torture the information out of him. “Jacketing” was a form of torture in which victims were laced unbearably tightly into straightjackets and left to suffer immobilized for days at a time. “Jacketing” was devised as a means of torture for prisoners in lieu of forms of corporal punishment, such as whipping, which actively brutalized the victim. Of course, this more humane form of torture caused paralysis and permanent nerve

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In solitary Standing encounters Morrell and Oppenheimer. Although they are rigidly separated and refused human contact, Morrell and Oppenheimer communicate through an elaborate code of tapping. In his hours of boredom, Standing cracks the code and enters into communication with them. As the bouts of jacketing increase in severity and length, Standing fears for his life. Morrell teaches him an escape. By psychically killing off his body step by step, he can actually escape his suffering body and travel mentally, thus surviving the torture of the jacket. In his next bout in the jacket, Standing is sure he is about to die and takes Morrell’s advice. He wills himself to die piece by piece starting with his toes. When he finally silences his own heart and brain he finds that his consciousness expands beyond the boundaries of his corpse and that he journeys through time and space. Morrell tells Standing that he only travelled in the present during his journeys, visiting favorite locales around San Francisco. But Standing travels through the past, unhinged from time. While Baca’s spiritual journeys were to his childhood, London has Standing relive all of his past lives. The narrative of the book then moves in multiple directions, jumping continually from Standing’s experience in solitary confinement to recovered past lives when he is in the jacket. Standing recalls lives as a Viking, a cast away sailor, a lost European at a royal court in Korea, and a centurion at the time of Jesus’ crucifixion.

Like Baca’s narrative, Standing finds solace and escape from the brutality of his captivity in the memories of his past. More importantly, like Baca, the stories of Standing’s other lives fill the narrative gap caused by the indescribable torture of the jacket. The contrast of his fantastic adventures in ancient Rome and medieval Korea create the imaginative leap to hint at the real suffering that he experiences. It is as if the rich fantastic detail of his spiritual adventures highlights the deadly blankness of his suffering through its complete contrast. This can be seen if

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we compare London’s imaginative reworkings with the accounts of his sources. In “Softening the Heart of a Convict,” Oppenheimer’s written protest left on the eve of his execution, he provides a litany of medieval tortures that don’t compare to the horror of the jacket:

I have read in the course of the past four years, in various histories, of many modes of torture, such as breaking men’s bones on the wheel, stretching on the racks, crushing their bones with heavy irons, placing heavy rocks on their chests, tearing their finger and toenails out with pincers, burning them with red-hot irons, flogging them with whips on the ends of which were tacks, cutting pieces of their flesh from them, and pouring salt and vinegar on their wounds, covering their bodies with syrup and placing ants thereon to bite them, covering their hair with oil and setting fire to it, roasting their feet, roasting their hands, placing a barrel of water over their heads and letting it drop, drop by drop thereon, placing a rat inside an iron basin, tying it on the victim and letting the rat eat its way through the unfortunate’s body, impaling him on sharp-pointed sticks, crucifying him, burning him at the stake, dragging him to death, smothering him in an air-tight compartment, pot-heading him, tying him to limbs of trees to be pulled apart, burying him alive, stinging him to death, boiling him in oil, frightening him to death with horrible groans and demonic magic-lantern pictures, sawing him in half between two boards, feeding him alive to sharks, throwing the tomahawk at his head and making him run the gauntlet, pricking him with needles, confining him with poisonous reptiles, ducking him, starving him to death, all of which is very terrible indeed. But no conceivable torture could be worse than the 110 hours’ continuous compression in that canvas constrictor that I suffered.21

I have respected the integrity of Oppenheimer’s expression here, quoting at length, as they are the words of a condemned man protesting his torture in the face of his execution. Oppenheimer’s rhetorical strategy here is remarkable. He hints at the indescribable horror of the jacket by recounting the full range of historical tortures inflicted upon prisoners, insisting that none of them can compare to the horror that he has experienced. The pain that he has experienced opens like a void that this litany cannot even begin to fill or describe. Donald Lowrie recounts attending to Ed Morrell when he was released from solitary confinement and extensive torture by jacketing.

What are the scars on your back? I asked as he sank onto his knees in the water.

“Scars,” he laughed sardonically. “Scars?” Those ain’t scars. They’re only the marks where the devil prodded me. I was in the jacket, cinched up so that I was breathing from my throat when he came and tried to make me ‘come through,’ and when I sneered at him he kicked me over the kidneys. I don’t know how many times he kicked; the first kick took my breath away and I saw black, but after they took me out of the sack I couldn’t get up, and I had running sores down here for months afterwards. I ain’t right down there now; I’ve got a bad rupture, and sometimes it feels as if there was a knife being twisted around inside of me. It wouldn’t be so bad if they’d got me right, but to give a man a deal like that dead wrong is hell, let me tell you….22

In Lowrie’s telling, Morrell is unable to directly communicate his experience of jacketing and solitary confinement, but instead fills the narrative void of that torture with a story of an encounter with the devil. The insidious constricting violence of the jacket and solitary confinement are reframed as if he had wrestled with the devil himself. It is as if the sense of the coherence of his own body has been permanently unraveled. “I ain’t right down there now….it feels as if there was a knife twisting around inside me.” At the end of the chapter, Lowrie describes Morrell as a Christ-like figure in his suffering, and so his wrestle with the devil takes on Biblical resonances of Jesus’ forty days in the desert being tempted by Satan. But it is also a Gothic resonance, as a struggle with a satanic spirit and madness. He has spun a supernatural story to fill the gap where there are no words to describe the suffering he has endured.

Although it is easy to spot the Gothic tone in Lowrie’s account of Ed Morrell, it may be harder to sense the Gothic sensibility at work in London’s narrative. His accounts of astral travel and alternate lives may instead suggest early science fiction, rather than the Gothic. But it is actually his pseudo-scientific discourse to describe his spiritual journeys that proves the most Gothic undercurrent of his narrative. London has his scientist hero Standing describe his spiritual journeys as a form of suspended animation, or “catalepsy.”

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22 Donald Lowrie, My Life in Prison, 175.
Suspended animation is nothing new, not alone in the vegetable world and in the lower forms of animal life, but in the highly evolved, complex organism of man himself. A cataleptic trance is a cataleptic trance, no matter how induced. From time immemorial the fakir of India has been able voluntarily to induce such states in himself. It is an old trick of the fakirs to have themselves buried alive. Other men, in similar trances, have misled the physicians, who pronounced them dead and gave the orders that put them alive under the ground.\footnote{Jack London, \textit{The Star Rover} (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1915), 251.}

This medical discourse of cataleptic trance is derived from a popular and scientific narrative of live burial that was active throughout the 19\textsuperscript{th} century in both England and the United States. Stories of live burial were numerous in the American and British magazines reviewed by writers like Edgar Allan Poe. These stories were collected in popular anthologies like John Snart’s \textit{Thesaurus of Horror; or, The Charnel-House Explored!} published in London 1817 to Franz Hartmann’s \textit{Buried Alive: An Examination into the Occult Causes of Apparent Death, Trance and Catalepsy} published in Boston in 1895. Although critics like Caleb Smith who have paired the Gothic associations of 19\textsuperscript{th} century prisons with fears of burial have framed this as in terms of passive silence and solitude, in fact, the state of live burial was framed as full of unnatural activity:

The Victorians employed an opulent if unstable vocabulary to designate bodily conditions that hovered between the fully animate and the irrevocably dead. Trance, coma, syncope, catalepsy, insensibility, suspended animation, human hibernation, and anesthesia were only the most common labels for what appeared to be corporal frontiers. Like mesmerism, these liminal categories were far from fixed; their ambiguity, indeed, both reflected and reinforced the enormous expansion of mental power that many Victorians associated with altered states of consciousness.\footnote{George K. Belmer, “Victorian medicine, Moral Panic, and the Signs of Death,” \textit{Journal of British Studies} 42 (April 2003): 208.}

Although Belmer frames this fear of premature burial and discourse of trance and catalepsy as a Victorian phobia, it was common since the beginning of the 19\textsuperscript{th} century and is coterminous with Gothic literature. John Snart’s 1812 anthology \textit{Thesaurus of Horrors} is rife with historical
accounts of trance and syncope-induced premature burials. He actively links burial, trance, and
the Gothic at every point in the book, from its’ sensationalist frontispiece to his tales of women
disinterred with their hands and fingers ground away from clawing at their coffins in desperate
and impossible desire to escape.

These stories in both British and American periodicals fed Edgar Allan Poe’s numerous
stories concerned with the fear of being buried alive, most obviously “Premature Burial,” but
also “The Cask of Amontillado,” “The Black Cat,” and even “Some Words with a Mummy.” As
J. Gerald Kennedy put it in his review of premature internment narratives in early 19th century
magazines and their influence on Poe:

It indicates the broad appeal of sentiment and melancholy and the persistence of
groundyard sensibility made fashionable by English poets like Young, Blair, and
Gray. It mirrors a general romantic interest in life-in-death motif and the folklore
of ghosts, vampires, and other undead creatures. And in a sociological sense, the
burial tale represents a literary protests against slipshod medical practices and
funeral customs.25

Poe’s most obvious and developed satire on this theme is “The Premature Burial.” The story’s
unnamed narrator is subject to “trances,” fits of “catalepsy,” in which he experiences vivid
hallucinations and spiritual journeys, much like both London’s Standing and Jimmy Santiago
Baca. These trances put the narrator into a perpetual state of terror from the possibility of his
being buried alive when given up for dead during one of his cataleptic fits. Poe’s narrator
recounts one particularly vivid episode where his dreams and trances converged in a journey out
of his body with a fiendish spirit.

Methought I was immersed in a cataleptic trance of more than usual duration and
profundity. Suddenly came an icy hand upon my forehead, and an impatient,
gibbering voice whispered the word “Arise!” within my ear. I sat erect…I looked;
and the unseen figure, which still grasped me by the wrist, had caused to be

25 J. Gerald Kennedy, “Poe and Magazine Writing on Premature Burial,” Studies in the American Renaissance
thrown open the graves of all mankind; and from each issued the faint phosphoric radiance of decay; so that I could see into the innermost recesses, and there view the shrouded bodies in their sad and solemn slumbers with the worm. But alas! The real sleepers were fewer, by many millions, than those that slumbered not at all; and there was a feeble struggling; and there was a general and sad unrest; and from out of the depths of countless pits there came a melancholy rustling from the garments of the buried. And of those who seemed tranquilly to repose, I saw that a vast number had changed, in a greater or less degree, the rigid and uneasy position in which they had originally been entombed.26

The narrator’s vision confronts him with the widespread dangers of premature burial with so many supposed dead struggling in their graves and rustling their burial garments. The experience of premature burial is portrayed as an active form of terror rather than any passive state of repose. Poe’s narrator falls to his worst nightmares and finds himself prematurely interred during a long state of catalepsy. However, Poe pulls the rug out from under the narrator and the reader when he realizes that he has simply fallen asleep in the berth of a small ship and awakened disoriented. The comedy of the situation cures him of his cataleptic trances and reading any more magazine articles about premature burial. Most of Poe’s stories of premature burial though do not end so comically.

  London evokes this archive of stories of premature burial by his description of Standing’s astral travels through the framework of cataleptic trance, but there is also good reason to believe that he was very familiar with Poe’s writings in this vein. Poe was one of London’s favorite authors in whom he saw an important predecessor as an underappreciated magazine writer, as well as a shared interest in science, adventure, and the “terrible” discredited literature of horror.27 The influence of Poe can also be seen in odd intertextualities between The Star Rover and


Poe’s short stories on premature burial. For instance, Standing describes his process of willing his “jacketed” body dead piece by piece with the careful work of a mason.

I knew nothing save that I was making my body die. All that was I was devoted to that sole task. I performed the work as thoroughly as any mason laying bricks, and I regarded the work as just about as commonplace as would a brick-mason regard his work. At the end of an hour my body was dead to the hips, and from the hips up, joint by joint, I continued to will the ascending death.28

This passage is strangely reminiscent of Poe’s description in “The Cask of Amontillado” of the entombing of Fortunato by the narrator. As the narrator lures his victim into the catacombs with the promised cask of Amontillado, Fortunato tests the narrator to see if he is a “Mason,” and he responds by revealing his trowel. After finally tricking and chaining his nemesis to a granite wall at the end of a long catacomb, he proceeds to entomb him behind a wall of masonry that he slowly build stone by stone, and tier by tier.

I had scarcely laid the first tier of the masonry when I discovered that the intoxication of Fortunato had in a great measure worn off. The earliest indication I had of this was a low moaning cry from the depth of the recess. It was not the cry of a drunken man. There was then a long and obstinate silence. I laid the second tier, and the third, and the fourth; and then I heard the furious vibrations of the chain. The noise lasted for several minutes, during which, that I might hearken to it with the more satisfaction, I ceased my labours and sat down upon the bones. When at last the clanking subsided, I resumed the trowel, and finished without interruption the fifth, the sixth, and the seventh tier. The wall was now nearly upon a level with my breast. I again paused, and holding the flambeaux over the mason-work, threw a few feeble rays upon the figure within. 29

London’s portrayal of Standing’s process of killing his body off piece by piece echoes this narrative of entombment in Poe’s story which proceeds stone by stone, tier by tier. We can then read Standing as both literally and spiritually buried alive through this reference to Poe. His metaphorical burial in prison is doubled by this narrative death and entombment. What’s notable

about this story is the way that Poe attempts to open a window onto the tomb. Throughout the process, the narrator stops to peer into the darkness and try to catch sight of his victim, as in this passage wherein he pauses to try to cast a few feeble rays upon him. At the end he calls for his victim to respond to no avail.

I grew impatient. I called aloud --
"Fortunato!"
No answer. I called again --
"Fortunato!"
No answer still. I thrust a torch through the remaining aperture and let it fall within. There came forth in return only a jingling of the bells.30

Poe’s story expands beyond a simple tale of revenge into an epistemological register, attempting to look into the tomb, demanding that the victim of premature burial speak to the horror of their experience. But there is no answer. This epistemological demand, this desire to peer into the tomb of live burial echoes the epistemological obsessions that circulated in 19th century popular and scientific accounts of premature burial. The problem and fear of premature burial rests first on anxieties over medical science’s ability to define and diagnose death. This was a problem of both scientific and popular contention throughout the 19th century. These fears grew in the 19th century as people ceased to keep their dead at home and began to entrust them to public health officials and physicians. The traditional period of mourning and retaining the corpse at home for the wake, was countered by public health concerns to dispose of bodies as quickly as possible in fear of disease. However, putrefaction was the only certain proof of death. This lead to extensive debates about the nature and scientifically verifiable symptoms of death. This was a debate that was lively across the Atlantic between Britain and the United States. 31

But this debate reveals another epistemological problem—how do you know if someone has been buried alive? Stories of premature burial throughout the 19th century look for clues to prove that the victim had been buried alive. This ranges from noises from the grave, corpses turned round in their coffins, fallen off the platform of their mausoleum, and often disinterred bodies where the fingers have been ground down from the desperate attempt to escape. Here is one of hundreds of examples from *Premature Burial, and How It May Be Prevented, With Special Reference to Trance Catalepsy, And Other Forms of Suspended Animation*:

In or about the year 1851, Virginia Macdonald who up to that time had lived with her father in Catherine Street, in the City of New York, apparently died, and was buried in Greenwood Cemetery, Brooklyn, N.Y. ...After the burial her mother declared her belief that her daughter was not dead when buried, and persistently asserted her belief. The family tried in various ways to assure the mother of the death of her daughter, and even resorted to ridicule for that purpose; but the mother insisted so long and so strenuously that her daughter was buried alive, that finally the family consented to have the body taken up, when, to their horror, they discovered the body lying on the side, the hands badly bitten, and every indication of a premature burial.

Poe’s story dramatizes this cultural desire to look into the grave. The 19th century epistemological problem with looking into the tomb, this fundamental ambiguity of death and the secrets of the grave, brings us full circle back to Elaine Scarry’s problematic of the difficulty of expressing torture. London and Baca use the image of premature burial to figure the torture of solitary confinement because this state also exceeds the limits of knowledge and communication. It is a similarly liminal and indescribable horror. But more importantly from this passage, the sign and proof of premature burial is always resistance. We know that someone was buried alive by the rattling and knocking in their coffin, or by the tragic signs of their desperate struggle to escape when their bodies are disinterred. Although Caleb Smith reads the metaphor of premature burial...
burial in prison theory as a figuration of passivity and solitude, the actual narratives of premature burial are stories of a life-or-death fight for survival. In this way the Gothic trope of live burial takes on different resonance in the writings of prison writers themselves. London and Baca use this horrific image as a symbol of the prisoners’ desperate desire to survive.

Similarly, the figure of cataleptic trance is not just a trope for immobility, but also a metaphor for travel beyond the confines of the body. As George K. Behlmer shows in his study of Victorian era concerns with premature burial, the cataleptic state was closely associated with other popular forms of trance, such as mediumship, mesmerism, spiritualism, astral travel, and the amazing feats of Indian yogis and fakirs. These forms of trance were associated with spiritual power and cosmic forms of communication. Thus, the cataleptic state was both a feared cause of premature burial, but also a sign of the unnatural vitality and supernatural mobility of the entombed. London and Baca take up this theme in their accounts of spiritual journeys while in solitary confinement. Although Guenther’s phenomenological description of solitary confinement would portray it only as the undoing of subjectivity, London and Baca both find a window of escape in forms of trance and spirituality. This is not a simple capitulation to 19th century ideologies of solitary confinement as a necessary death and rebirth, but instead a final form of resistance. They are ultimately “haunting back.” The Gothic tropes of premature burial are deployed to figure a primal level of resistance at which the limits of the body are abandoned in order to escape confinement. The horror of premature burial is used to reveal and express the real horrors of solitary confinement and torture.

Unlike ideologies of prison as a death and rebirth, in London and Baca no rebirth is promised. London’s time traveling hero Standing is hanged in the end, and we have no way of

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knowing whether he is able then to escape into his infinity of alternate lives. Although Baca’s memoir ends with a religious epiphany of reconciliation, this ending is more ambiguous than it at first appeared. Returning to the scene we considered earlier of his epiphany in the church in Santa Fe, its symbolism and narrative are quite equivocal. Baca enters the church as a stranger, and although he joins the mass, he does not stay for the entire ceremony. He witnesses the baptism taking place and sees the young brown boy as a double of himself, as if it were his reincarnation. Witnessing this innocence and reconciliation gives him the power to forgive and let go of the suffering of his childhood and incarceration. However, if this baby is him, doesn’t that mean that he himself is dead, a ghost? Baca leaves the service at the end walking out into the rain and a ringing of bells. Although there is a new life, a new hope, it is not for him, but for a new generation that has not suffered what he has suffered. Baca remains like a revenant, inassimilable to the world of the living. He remains “haunting back,” a ghost with the journeys of his memories and the power to dream. This ghostly self-portrayal is his final critique of his incarceration. That although he can be released from solitary confinement, he can never truly be resurrected, at least not as himself. Despite ideological accounts of incarceration and solitary confinement as a death and rebirth, things look very different from inside the coffin.
Chapter 2

“That Violent, Gibbering Year will Stomp and Shudder my Mind”:

*Mama Black Widow, Transgender Monsters, and the Pullman Porters*

*Mama Black Widow*—Iceberg Slim’s campy, erotic Gothic novel about a maternally-obsessed, crossdressing, gay, African American mortician growing up in poverty in Chicago against the backdrop of the civil rights movement—might seem like an odd choice for a focus in this study of 20th century prison literature. Although Slim served many stints in prison and is well known for his other best-selling, semi-autobiographical novels dealing with crime, race, and incarceration, *Mama Black Widow* would seem to be an odd exception in his oeuvre and a bit of a sidetrack in this study. The novel only devotes a few scant pages to the anti-hero Otis’ time in jail awaiting sentencing and then only one laconic line to the year he subsequently spends in the Chicago House of Correction. He writes—“I served out my sentence in the laundry at the House, and the time passed quickly and without events.”34 Otis, our cross-dressing mortician narrator claims he was “lucky” to have received this sentence as he could have been sentenced to the state prison or county jail. However, we must read this understated line with the awareness that this is an odd transformation of Iceberg Slim’s own personal experience, as he, in an uncanny resemblance to his character Otis, also served a year in the Chicago House of Correction. Describing his own experience there in his memoir *The Naked Soul of Iceberg Slim*, he is far less understated:

Within the moldering walls of Chicago’s House of Correction, in one of its ancient cell houses, is a row of steel punishment cubicles where rule-breaking inmates spend at most several days. In 1960, I was locked in one of the steel boxes for ten months. I owed the joint an unserved part of a sentence from which

34 Iceberg Slim, *Mama Black Widow* (Cash Money Content, 2013), 240.
I had vanished thirteen years before like a wisp of smoke and without the usual damage to joint fixtures or guards’ skulls. And apparently, the sweet joker who ordered me stuffed into the steel box to commit suicide and go mad (when I was returned to the joint on escape charges) felt he owed vengeance on me for his long-ago clique of torturers and grafters who must have suffered a shit storm of consternation when a nigger like me bypassed their booming instant release service and hadn’t bought out, but thought out. But that second mob of debonair demons sure butchered off a hunk of my mental ass. For even now, a new life and a decade later, I will lay odds that until the grave the images and sounds of that violent, gibbering year will stomp and shudder my mind…

Slim goes on to recount the tortures he experienced in the House of Correction in stark contrast to the brevity with which he treats his character Otis’ experience in *Mama Black Widow*. This odd contrast echoes the problem of representation that we saw in the first chapter with the struggles of prison writers to effectively describe the experience of solitary confinement. While the previous chapter turned on the problem of describing the physical and psychological agony of incarceration and the turn to the Gothic to bridge that chasm in representation, this chapter will turn on a slightly different problem: the limits of societal representation. The experience of incarceration is not only inherently difficult to describe due to its disruption of subjectivity, but also because it contradicts all the norms of our supposedly rational and just society. Prison experience is “unspeakable,” to use the framework of writer and critic Samuel Delany (as well as Eve Kosofsky Sedgewick, as we will see later in this chapter), within the confines of polite society and the novel. Of the unspeakable Delany writes:

> The unspeakable is, of course, not a boundary dividing a positive area of allowability from a complete and totalized negativity, a boundary located at least one step beyond the forbidden (and the forbidden, by definition—no?—must be speakable if its proscriptive power is to function). If we pursue the boundary as such, it will recede before us as a limit of mists and vapors. Certainly it is not a line drawn in any absolute way across speech and writing. It is not a fixed and locable point of transgression that glows hotter and brighter as we approach it till, as we cross it, its searing heat burns away all possibility of further articulation. Rather it is a set of positive conventions governing what can be spoken of (or written about) in general; in particular, it comprises the endlessly specialized

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tropes… required to speak or write about various topics at various anomalous places in our complex social geography—places where such topics are specifically not usually (or ever) spoken of: What is speakable between client and accountant is unspeakable between newly introduced acquaintances at a formal dinner party…. What is speakable between client and prostitute in the balcony of a 42nd Street porn theater is unspeakable between man and wife of thirty years. 36

Thus the unspeakable in Delany’s view is not a question of inherent limits of representation, but of social contexts and power relationships that construct what can and cannot be communicated. This boundary is shifting and shiftable, but not without constraints. I suggest that we read the extreme brevity of Slim’s treatment of Otis’ incarceration in light of Delany’s ideas about the unspeakable. In this chapter I will argue that in Mama Black Widow, Iceberg Slim flips the script on what is speakable and unspeakable in the 20th century prison narrative, in effect, turning the prison novel inside out. As we saw in the first chapter, the Gothic will also enter here as a kind of bridge, what Delany will call a “rhetorical flourish,” that allows the shift of the unspeakable into the speakable.

This chapter will also provide the opportunity to consider both the possibilities and constraints of the Gothic in greater detail. In the first chapter we have seen two prominent examples of how prison writers in the 20th century draw on the motifs from the Gothic in order to describe and critique the horrors to which they were subjected. However, this turn to the Gothic is not simply liberatory, but also complicated by the obscuring shadows of Gothic literature which simultaneously reveal sublimated historical tragedies, but also serve to reinscribe societal prejudices in the unsettlingly familiar form of monsters. In this chapter we will look at Iceberg Slim’s use of the “urban Gothic” and see how it uses the Gothic both to critique the oppression and violence in American society, but also re-inscribes gender, sexual and racial anxieties that have been at play since the classic Gothic texts. I will show Mama Black Widow’s indebtedness

36 Samuel R. Delany, Shorter Views Queer Thoughts & the Politics of the Paraliterary (Wesleyan, 1999).
to traditions of Gothic and monstrous depictions of transgender characters, such as Robert Bloch’s *Psycho*, as well as its uncanny resemblance to the late imperial Gothic novel Richard Marsh’s *The Beetle* with which it shares unsettling patterns of insect symbolism, anxieties over homosexuality and transgender transformations, and racial complexes. Lastly, I will consider the possibly conservative gender, racial, and sexual politics of *Mama Black Widow* in light of the odd orgy that Otis’ sister and her friend Sally have with Pullman Porters. This passage will be shown to be a kind of window in the text, pointing to utopian possibilities that the novel’s anti-hero tragically cannot imagine.


*Mama Black Widow* tells the tragic story of the life and death of Otis Tilson, undertaker and cross-dressing homosexual. The novel is framed as the result of an interview of Otis by Iceberg Slim who records Otis recanting his terrible tale for his tape recorder so the whole world can know the dark truth of his destruction in racist America. This frame is meant to give the novel a veneer of veracity. This frame also invokes the palimpsests of the Gothic novel, with its

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endless lost and found texts. The novel opens with Otis desperately trying to achieve sexual intercourse with his female lover Dorcas from whom he has hidden the terrible secret of his homosexuality and crossdressing. After he manages to satisfy her by fantasizing about some man that had broken his heart, he leaves her sleeping to go work on a corpse awaiting him in the funeral home below. On his way to work on the corpse, he is disturbed by a phone call from his stereotypically dominating mother who begs him to leave Dorcas and come home to Mama. But Otis, or “Sweet Pea” as his mother calls him, is on a mission to desecrate the body of Deacon Davis.

Davis had molested Otis when he was nine years old, plying him with toys and promising that all his wishes would come true if he would kiss and make the Deacon’s “magic wand” “cry tears of joy.” Otis dreams of violating the body as he prepares it for burial, but ultimately chickens out—a loss of nerve that will repeat throughout the novel. Slim repeatedly compares Otis to his avowed hero Martin Luther King, Jr., whose views of non-violence Otis takes to heart despite their dire consequences for his wellbeing.

Feeling guilty about hanging up on his mother’s pleas to return home, Otis goes to visit her. Not only is she a guilt-tripping mother with an imagined heart condition, she is also a witch, Madame Miracle, vending spiritual communications, hoodoo secrets, and destruction powder to the desperate seekers of Chicago. Letting himself into his mother’s apartment, at first Otis is unable to find her, but then we get our first view of the novel’s main monster.

I shivered. Mama had made enemies with her witchcraft. I wondered if she was dead and the murderer was still in the apartment. I stopped and stood uneasily at Mama’s bedroom door, listening to the wild pumping of my heart. I shouted, “Mama, are you here?” No answer. The feeling that something ghastly had happened to her. I almost knew something was behind the door. Perhaps the murderer was crimson with Mama’s blood, panting, trapped, waiting for me with a butcher knife or hatchet in the dark in the other side of that door. I decided to go back to the car. I turned and walked quickly back toward the front door. Then I
glanced at the murky mirror on the wall next to the front door. I froze. My legs wouldn’t move anymore. There was a kind of wavering shifting movement in the blackness behind me near Mama’s bedroom. I almost tinkled on myself as I stared in the mirror and saw a mass of the blackness split off and glide toward me. I spun around and faced the thing. I opened my mouth to scream, but nothing came out. The thing came closer and giggled. Then I saw a slash of white in a familiar black face. It was Mama in a long black robe smiling at me. I started crying in relief.\textsuperscript{38}

Throughout the novel, Otis’ mother is portrayed as a dominating monstrous force, like a dark mass of “spidery arms,” the black widow spider of the title. Slim portrays their relationship as a Freudian caricature of the castrating mother and the submissive son who has been turned homosexual by her abusive possessive parenting.

I felt a tremor of rage, not toward Mama really, but just for those spidery arms grabbing out for me. In my anger I got the weirdest thoughts standing there. A lot like the terrible thoughts I used to get when I helped Mama with the dishes. I’d have to lock my trembling hands together so I couldn’t obey the terrifying impulse to stab a kitchen knife into her. It was awful because I love Mama, and always will. But standing there in that hallway I thought how funny Mama would look without those arms. And what if I had found her not dead but with those clutching creatures chopped off cleanly with no pain, no blood, just open-mouth surprise to see herself without them.\textsuperscript{39}

Shaken by the pressures of hiding his homosexual desires from Dorcas, his mother’s demands that he leave Dorcas and return home, and the memories resurfaced by preparing the corpse of the hypocritical deacon that molested him and “turned” him gay, Otis goes out for a night on the town. And we are introduced to the novel’s second monster, “Sally.” Otis visits his old drag pal Lucy. Drinking, dropping some pills, and hearing that his ex-boyfriend Mike has rolled back into town, Otis is helpless to prevent transforming into his alter ego “Sally.”

“Sally” goes out to a party hoping to run into her ex Mike who had robbed, abused, and set her up to take a fall for his drug dealing. Instead of Mike, Sally goes home with a homely and

\textsuperscript{38} Iceberg Slim, \textit{Mama Black Widow} (Cash Money Content, 2013), Chapter 1.
\textsuperscript{39} Iceberg Slim, \textit{Mama Black Widow} (Cash Money Content, 2013), Chapter 1.
powerfully-built Lovell. Lovell is portrayed by Slim as an ugly “ape” of a man, exploiting every racist stereotype of sexually dangerous and voracious black men. At the party he cries and pledges his love for her, but he takes her home to a flop house where he beats and rapes her all night. Sally escapes with her life when he passes out drunk. Recovering his senses, Otis returns to the funeral home to find his lover Dorcas angrily handling Deacon Davis’ funeral alone. Dorcas confronts Otis, convinced that he is cheating on her with another woman. Otis unable to sustain the charade any longer admits his terrible double life and leaves Dorcas hoping she will find a ‘normal” man. Otis intends to head for a hotel to tend his wounded anus and sort out his life, when the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. is suddenly reported on the radio news. He rushes home to his wheelchair-bound mother to tend to her in case there is rioting in wake of the assassination. On his way to his mother’s, Otis witnesses a riot scene in which a white police officer is basically shredded to death by the hands of an angry black mob lead by a giant of a man.

The cop just stood there with that awed look of fear on his face. Then the black giant in a deft rapid stroke snaked the cop’s gun from its holster. He palmed it in his massive right hand. He twisted his wrist to a backhand and brought his muscular arm back and slammed the blue steel against the side of the cop’s head. The vicious blow landed with a hollow crushing sound. A splatter of scarlet dotted the giant’s shirtfront. The cop’s legs gave way, and he slipped to the asphalt. Black fingers clawed at the blue cloth and shredded it. The white figure moaned as the mob kicked at it. Finally, they moved away from the insensible heap lying in the glare of the cruiser’s headlights. The silver badge, a worthless charm, glittered inches away from a ghost white hand.\(^{40}\)

In this passage the black mob crowd is depicted almost like a mass of zombies dismembering a body. Slim’s novel is filled with monstrous representations of women, homosexuals, but also of African Americans. This melodramatic series of escapades is just the opening two chapters of the novel. It is obvious from this summary that Slim is operating in the

\(^{40}\) Iceberg Slim, *Mama Black Widow* (Cash Money Content, 2013), Chapter 3.
realm of the Gothic. The novel presents us with a whole range of motifs and characters from the Gothic, including the desecration of corpses, secret identities, monstrous mothers, insanity, gender confusion, witchcraft, murder, zombie-like mobs, and a haunted and uncanny maternal home. It was these kinds of motifs that lead D. B. Graham, the first critic to write about Slim’s work in the 1970s, to frame his novels as an example of the new “urban Gothic.” Although these Gothic themes and images appear in much of Slim’s work, it should not surprise us that they are concentrated so strongly here in the story of Otis Tilson’s homosexual and crossdressing escapades. As Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick has shown in *Between Men* there has always been a strong kinship between depictions of Gothic horror and homosexuality.

One of the most distinctive of Gothic tropes, the “unspeakable,” had a symptomatic role…Sexuality between men had, throughout the Judeo-Christian tradition, been famous among those who knew about it at all precisely for having no name—“unspeakable,” “unmentionable,” “not to be named among Christian men.”…Of course its very secrecy, was a form of social control. Many critics of the Gothic mention, and I have discussed elsewhere, the defining pervasiveness in Gothic novels of the language about the unspeakable. In the paranoiac novel *Melmoth*, for instance, when Melmoth the persecutor finally wears down his victims into something like receptiveness he then tells them what he wants from them; but this information is never clearly communicated to the reader. The manuscripts crumble at this point or are “wholly illegible,” the speaker is strangled by the unutterable word, or the proposition is preterited as “one so full of horror and impiety, that, even to listen to it, is scarce less a crime than to comply with it.”

After introducing us to this convoluted Gothic plot, Slim then moves back in time to tell the awful story of the Tilson family, their migration to Chicago, and the unravelling of their lives and their tragic deaths through an extended flashback. The Tilson family—Otis, Papa, Mama, brother Frank and sisters Carol and Bessie—came north from Mississippi to join the mother’s ailing cousin in Chicago. But things were far from idyllic back in their shack in Mississippi. As a

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young boy, Frank stole $400 dollars from Papa’s employer. Rather than try to hide the theft, Papa handed his son over to his white employer at the “punishment spot” to learn a lesson, a decision that rends all trust from their family. Mama loses trust and respect for her husband and burns with desire to escape the confines and dangers of white power in the South for a chance at a new life in the north. In Slim’s hands the narrative reads like a stark negative of familiar narratives of the Great Migration.

In Chicago, the family is pulled apart by economic forces. Papa is continually unable to find work and so Mama goes to work as a domestic in the suburbs. Still not forgiving his betrayal of their son and infatuated with a minister in a local charismatic church, Mama begins to wear the pants in the family. Her economic control and infidelity, are portrayed as robbing her husband of his masculinity and wellbeing in a classic rehashing of every stereotype of emasculating black women ever imagined. However, Slim’s narrative goes much further and stranger. The Tilson children are enveloped not only in the tangled web of their mother’s machinations, but also in the seductive snares of the city itself, from its endless infesting roaches and rats to much more dangerous vermin—pimps, gangsters, homosexuals and child molesters. Bessie and her friend Sally are quickly infatuated with an old local pimp called “Grampy Dick” who promises them unlimited wealth and love. Frank falls into the life of a small-time gangster seduced by promises of easy money and violence. Carol falls in love with the white portly son of German bakers at her job. And, Otis is seduced by the molester down the hall Deacon Davis. As his family falls apart, Papa slowly descends into alcoholism.

These seductions of the city begin to strangle the family. Bessie takes up wild sex orgies with Sally and the bisexual Pullman porters living in the apartment upstairs. Mama promises Carol’s hand in marriage to a dangerous pimp named Lockjaw in exchange for promises of
financial security, not knowing that Carol is pregnant from her portly German lover. When Carol’s secret affair is discovered Mama beats her pregnancy to death in the womb and forcibly aborts the fetus with a razor blade on the bathroom floor. Carol bleeds to death after searching for the aborted fetus in the garbage, dying with the fetus corpse in her arms like a doll. The remaining children are driven quite mad by their mother’s vicious and controlling behavior. Bessie runs away from home to embrace a life of prostitution and is hacked to pieces by a deranged john. Frank kidnaps her friend Sally who has also become a prostitute and forces her to bring him to Bessie’s hacked body and bring him to their pimp whom he assassinates in front of young Otis. Otis later internalizes the betraying prostitute as his voracious man-hungry feminine alter-ego “Sally.”

Otis then narrates the stereotypically sad life of a crossdressing homosexual, a series of failed love affairs with abusive men culminating with Mike, a handsome drug dealer who sets Otis up to take the fall for his own drug dealing. While in jail awaiting trial, Otis is brutally raped after being revealed as queer by an old trick. But his time in the House of Correction is figured as strangely peaceful—as we have seen in the introduction—meriting only one quiet line—“I served out my prison in the laundry at the House, and the time passed quickly and without unusual events.”43 It is difficult to know what to make of this line given the gruesome and Gothic tale of crossdressing, orgies, prostitution, molestation, vermin, forced abortion, torture, mutilation, incest, and murder that has preceded it. What given the arc of the narrative to this point would constitute an “unusual event?” There is an interesting narrative strategy taking place within the novel whereby all of the horrors that one might expect within a prison narrative have instead been figured in the outside world, so that prison appears as a kind of vanishing point, a

43 Iceberg Slim, Mama Black Widow (Cash Money Content, 2013).
degree zero. Do we as readers believe Otis that a crossdressing queer with his bad luck would have an easy time in prison? Or, does this mean that the text has passed the point of legibility, a queer sublime, in line with Kosofsky Sedgwick’s analyses of the unspeakable horrors of homosexuality and Gothic fictions? Is his time in prison so awful and transgressive that it cannot even be described?

This confluence of the Gothic, homosexuality, and the unspeakable, has its own long history in American prison literature. In her landmark study of homosexuality in American prisons, Regina Kunzel notes how various tropes were used to discuss the unspeakable vice of homosexuality in 19th and 20th century American prison writings. Echoing Kosofsky Sedgwick, Kunzel shows how Oscar Wilde’s case and references to his writing became a kind of shorthand for discussion of homosexuality. This is a trope that ironically both declared and undeclared itself.

Oscar Wilde’s well-publicized fate—his trials, conviction, and incarceration—ensured that, at this formative moment in the public recognition of this new sexual type, “the homosexual” would become ineradicably affiliated with criminality and the prison. That confluence produced a new symbolic language with which to represent something formerly unrepresentable. Writers had long employed a representational code of noisy silence—acts and vices declared “unnamable,” “unmentionable,” and “unutterable”—to designate same-sex sexual practices. Those references were so ubiquitous in nineteenth-century representations of same-sex sex as to constitute less a failure of language or a demonstration of its limits than a denotative language unto itself. After the publicity surrounding Wilde’s trials and conviction in 1895, prison writers could invoke Oscar Wilde’s name or quote from his published writing, often unattributed but presumably so recognizable to readers that it needed no citation, to specify sex between men…This act of naming, through reference to a literal name or, one step removed, through the use of Wilde’s verse, worked at once to denote homosexuality and ironically to multiply the layers of elision that surrounded same-sex sexual practices. 44

Kunzel shows that Wilde’s “love that dare not speak its name” became a trope that marked the boundaries between the speakable and unspeakable of sexuality in early 20th century prison writings. She goes on to show how that discourse shifted and the truth of sexual perversion in prisons became an open fixation in penological discourses in the 20th century. More importantly for our purposes here, Kunzel’s analysis points to the importance and telling power of silences in prison writings. That Iceberg Slim figures Otis as silent about his year spent in the House of Correction cannot be passed over quickly. That silence is figurative and productive. It points to an abyss like a wound in the text. In a text where every conceivable horror is described with narrative gusto, what could possibly be unspeakable? It is possible that here the text is merely capitulating to the conventions of earlier prison writings and that the sexual experiences of Otis in prison are beyond the pale of description. But, something deeper may be at stake. Perhaps it is incarceration itself that is being figured as unspeakable by Iceberg Slim in this novel. It is as if the entire novel is a kind of pornographic bluster covering over the chasm where the narrator cannot tread. In this case it is not because that experience is indescribable, like the experience of solitary confinement, but that it is unspeakable, unmentionable, like turn-of-the-century homosexuality, violating the social contracts of written and spoken communication. In this way Mama Black Widow can be read as a kind of conceptual critique both of incarceration and of the prison novel itself. While many prison novels may set out to describe the abuses of the prison system in order to critique and challenge them, Slim’s strategy in Mama Black Widow suggests the possibility of the refusal to describe the experience of incarceration as itself an alternate form of critique.

Ultimately, the secrets of what transpired in the Chicago House of Correction die with Otis in the novel. Slim is only able to record Otis’ story up to his escape from the clutches of his
mother. Although Otis gathers the courage to leave his dominating Mama (who attempts to murder him with a pair of scissors as he leaves), in the epilogue Slim informs us that Otis hanged himself in a seedy New York flop house. This then leaves us to explore the ambiguities of the Gothic strategies in this novel. We have seen how they can function as a form of critique, but do they also in ways reinscribe a range of societal prejudices and oppression?

It is easy to read this story as a clichéd and over the top regurgitation of Freudian ideas of dominating mothers causing homosexuality and of castrating black women robbing their men of masculinity. Justin Gifford takes this basic tack on Iceberg Slim’s fiction in his study *Pimping Fictions: African American Crime Literature and the Untold Story of Black Pulp Publishing*, that despite his street appeal Slim’s work is unforgivably misogynist. And, in truth, this is not necessarily a bad reading of the novel. Particularly, given the way that the story uses an extended flashback to a family history of maternal abuse to explain the degradation experienced by Otis in his present life. This possible reading is reinforced by the character Soldier, Papa’s best friend, who gives voice in the novel to a kind of unrestrained black macho perspective. He lectures the Tilson family:

I have also learned the bitter truth that great numbers of black women today stomp on the manhood and dreams of trapped black men just as their arrogant and ignorant sisters, drunk with freedom, did at the end of slavery. Like them, certain misguided black women still ruthlessly and criminally help the white man to deball and destroy black men…This is happening on a mass scale, and so long as it continues, the lowly masses of black men must go on blundering and hobbling about in the white man’s complex world mentally maimed and crippled by white haters and unthinking black women. The positive black woman uses her glory and strength and power to inspire her man toward self-improvement and leadership so that her children might have a strong pattern image.

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46 *Mama Black Widow*, 110.
However, the novel also contains a counter voice of Mama’s own story, of what leads her to such a manipulative and ruthless way with her family. Mama has her own Gothic backstory. As a child her father was murdered by a Klansman who was having an affair with her mother. After her father’s death, her mother moves in with his murderer as a both his domestic and his lover. When her mother dies, the Klansman forces her to be his maid and sexual slave. She escapes from him only to be thrust into a series of foster homes where she is tortured and abused. This abandonment, betrayal, and torture are figured as the source of her terrible possessive love for her children and her unquenchable desire for stability.

There is also a kind of caricatured intensity to *Mama Black Widow* that undercuts its sexism, as if it were actually a parody of these ideas, perhaps despite Slim’s own intentions. With its exaggerated femininity, violence, and clichéd characters and dialogue *Mama Black Widow* appears to operate as a kind of “dark camp,” both lampooning and stirring the pot of racial and sexual tensions, as theorized by Kathryn Bond Stockton. She glosses Sontag’s camp criteria in consideration of some 20th century American Gothic cultural productions in search of “dark camp.”


Slims’ narrative in *Mama Black Widow* embodies all of these criteria, particularly relishing in bad taste, decorative flourish, exaggerated sexuality and characters, irresponsible fantasy,

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melodramatic absurdities, and the passionate failure of the novel aesthetically. The sexist and racist caricatures in the novel may function as a kind of ironic camp, in ways similar to the cut paper caricatures of contemporary artist Kara Walker, who has also been called out for the monstrosity of her depictions.

*Mama Black Widow* might be seen as relishing in classic psychoanalytic explanations of homosexuality, but the content and structure of the novel belie such easy conclusions. Although the novel moves through an extended flashback of Otis’ horrific childhood as an explanation of his current depravity and his mother’s madness, the actual story presented defies psychoanalytic descriptions. Rather than opening onto the contained and Oedipal anxieties of a bourgeois nuclear family, Slim’s narrative instead opens onto a terrible and fantastic tale of erotic violence and economic materialism. It is as if in Otis’ childhood tale the psychoanalytic worldview has been turned inside out and all of the repressed dream content has been made horribly visible. Instead of a psychoanalytic explanation of the psyche that would insist that erotic violence is an imagined and unfulfilled longing of the child’s imagination, Slim’s narrative takes erotic and economic violence for granted as the reality of certain lives. Rather than referring to timeless psychic contents, the familial erotic violence of Slim’s narrative always relates to concrete economic and societal forces—the lure of easy money in a constrained economy and the constant threat of racial violence. Slim’s narrative is similar to Deleuze and Guattari’s critique of the psychoanalytic family in *Anti-Oedipus*, where the perversity of psychic life is explained by the infinite connectability of “desiring machines” that are world historical rather than private and familial48 This tendency of the Gothic to invert and transcend psychoanalytic explanations has been theorized by Jack Halberstam in his study of monsters and horror.

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It is curious, in fact, that critics have so often used psychoanalytic models to study Gothic tales of fear, monstrosity, and desire. As my analysis of nineteenth century Gothic novels has shown, Gothic narrative technologies deploy otherness as a multilayered body marked by race, class, gender, and sexuality. Only a psychoanalytic model of interpretation insists upon the essential link between psychosexual pathology and monstrosity; the Gothic narrative itself sees monstrosity as infinitely more complex and dense…49

Thus Halberstam encourages us not to read the Gothic in terms of psychoanalytic clichés, but in terms of the historical forces at play and in dialogue with the text. Instead of looking for psychic explanations of horror, we can instead ask how monstrosity is constructed, sustained, and experienced culturally, including the monsters of psychoanalysis.

This inversion of psychoanalytic strategies may be seen the way the “uncanny” operates in Slim’s text. Within the classic Freudian explanation of the uncanny, that frightening feeling of what is both most familiar and most alien, the feeling of horror’s ultimate referent is disavowed psychic and sexual content from childhood. The place most familiar and alien being the maternal body itself:

Dismembered limbs, a severed head, a hand cut off at the wrist, feet which dance by themselves—all these have something peculiarly uncanny about them, especially when, as in the last instance, they prove able to move of themselves in addition. As we already know, this kind of uncanniness springs from its association with the castration-complex. To many people the idea of being buried alive while appearing to be dead is the most uncanny thing of all. And yet psychoanalysis has taught us that this terrifying phantasy is only a transformation of another phantasy which had originally nothing terrifying about it at all, but was filled with a certain lustful pleasure—the phantasy, I mean, of intra-uterine existence.50

Given the feelings of dread that are occasioned by Otis’ visits to his mother’s apartment and the horrific events that have taken place there, Slim’s narrative turns the psychoanalytic uncanny

inside out. It is not the fear of the maternal body giving Otis dread, but the actual horrors, murders, and violence that took place in his mother’s home that make him tremble. It is not the imagined childhood sex that produces the feeling of the uncanny, but instead the dimly acknowledged resonance of real horrors. Looking back to the previous chapter and fears of being buried alive, these fears do not require repressed memories of the intra-uterine existence for explanation, when we can look to the real dangers of premature burial in the 19th century and the societal reminders modern solitary confinement.

This revised notion of the uncanny is similar to Goddu’s idea of “haunting back” invoked in the previous chapter. However, the element of resemblance and memory within the uncanny will serve as an operating principle for my project as a whole. How else to explain the strange continuities between Gothic fiction and so many prison narratives? They are uncanny resemblances. This revised and historical concept of the uncanny would suggest that moments of horror and monstrosity in Gothic fictions inspire unease because they remind us of real violence that cannot be adequately communicated or reconciled. This historical uncanny can also link these texts despite the fact that no concrete evidence of literary influence can be found.

For instance, Iceberg Slim’s *Mama Black Widow* bears an uncanny resemblance to Richard Marsh’s imperial Gothic novel *The Beetle*. When it was published in 1897 it was one of the most successful Gothic novels of its time, far outselling the now more famous novel *Dracula.* The *Beetle* centers on a sexually ambiguous Egyptian foreigner, who seems to shift from male to female as needed, as well as transforming into a giant Egyptian scarab beetle. This dangerous transgender insect foreigner is hell-bent on destroying rising British politician Paul

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Lessingham. As the narrative unfolds it is revealed that in his youth Paul had spent some years in Egypt, where he was seduced by a cabal of inhuman hermaphroditic priestesses of the goddess Isis, devoted to sacrificing women to their fiendish bloodthirsty goddess and buggering defenseless European men. Paul had escaped their lair and desecrated their temple, almost killing “the Beetle” who had been sodomizing him. The Beetle tracks him to London and uses their powers of mind control to destroy Paul and seduce and ruin his fiancé Marjorie Lindon. With the help of a brilliant weapons scientist who is his rival for her hand, Paul is saved from the fiendish plot of the Beetle. As they chase the Beetle who has kidnapped and violated Marjorie, forcing her to dress as a young man, their train miraculously crashes killing the Beetle and freeing Marjorie. They live, but not happily ever after, as they are forever haunted by the memory of their violations at the mercy of the Beetle.

Obviously, besides its absurdity and melodrama The Beetle’s plot bears little resemblance to Iceberg Slim’s Mama Black Widow. But there is a constellation of motifs and sub-plots that strangely connect these two novels. Why this constellation of crossdressing, anxieties of racial and gender crossing, and castrating maternal figures with monstrous insects? The Beetle approaches and dominates their prey much like Mama from Slim’s novel. At the opening of the story a homeless man sneaks into the Beetle’s lair, an abandoned cottage outside London, and experiences a horror strangely similar to what Otis experienced upon entering his mother’s house at the beginning of Mama Black Widow.

Slowly the eyes came on, with a strange slowness, and as they came they moved from side to side as if their owner walked unevenly. Nothing could have exceeded the horror with which I awaited their approach,—except my incapacity to escape them. Not for an instant did my glance pass from them,—I could not have shut my eyes for all the gold the world contains!—so that as they came closer I had to look right down to what seemed to be almost the level of my feet. And, at last, they reached my feet. They never paused. On a sudden I felt something on my boot, and, with a sense of shrinking, horror, nausea, rendering me momentarily
more helpless, I realized that the creature was beginning to ascend my legs, to
climb my body. Even then what it was I could not tell,—it mounted me,
apparently, with as much ease as if I had been horizontal instead of perpendicular.
It was as though it were some gigantic spider,—a spider of the nightmares; a
monstrous conception of some dreadful vision. It pressed lightly against my
clothing with what might, for all the world, have been spider's legs. There was an
amazing host of them,—I felt the pressure of each separate one. They embraced
me softly, stickily, as if the creature glued and unglued them, each time it moved.
Higher and higher! It had gained my loins. It was moving towards the pit of my
stomach….It was at my chest. I became more and more conscious of an
uncomfortable wobbling motion, as if each time it breathed its body heaved. Its
forelegs touched the bare skin about the base of my neck; they stuck to it,—shall I
ever forget the feeling? I have it often in my dreams. While it hung on with those
in front it seemed to draw its other legs up after it. It crawled up my neck, with
hideous slowness, a quarter of an inch at a time, its weight compelling me to
brace the muscles of my back. It reached my chin, it touched my lips,—and I
stood still and bore it all, while it enveloped my face with its huge, slimy, evil-
smelling body, and embraced me with its myriad legs. The horror of it made me
mad.  
Throughout *Mama Black Widow*, Mama Tilson is presented in almost exactly the same way, as a
dark object of horror, a mass of clinging and deadly spidery arms. This uncanny entrance into the
spider’s lair is just one of the resonances between the two novels. The Beetle him or herself is
presented as a monster both in terms of their sexual and their racial ambiguity. The Beetle is
described again and again as having a yellow countenance echoing the “high yellow”
complexion of Otis/Sally in Slim’s novel. Sally can be seen as consuming, dominating, and
destroying Otis in a very parallel way to the Beetle’s vendetta against Pail Lessingham. Otis’s
“manly” lover Dorcas is reminiscent of the liberated “new woman” character of Marjorie, who is
also scarred by Sally in her way. Both the Beetle and Sally are destroyed “offstage” as it were at
the end of each novel, saving polite and civilized society from their depravity.

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http://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/5164/pg5164.html
Again, despite these and other resonances I cannot prove that Iceberg Slim was familiar with Marsh’s *The Beetle*. We do not know what lurid terrible books were available in American prison libraries in the 1950s and 1960s (although this is an interesting avenue for further research) and his other writings give no clue as to his reading habits. Similar to our first chapter, we do not know how fond Jimmy Santiago Baca may be of Jack London and Edgar Allan Poe. And yet, they seem to draw on similar recesses of horror for their descriptions. Within a psychoanalytic framework this might be explained by recourse to the Oedipal complex, the Death Drive, or some sublime form of jouissance. But perhaps the common source of their Gothic themes is a shared reality of historical terrors, of sexual, racial, and colonial violence.

This might be seen in the actual stories of Mama and the Beetle themselves. When confronted by her children over the savage abortion she inflicted upon her daughter Carol, Mama defends her actions given her own story of racial and sexual trauma. Mama explains that her deep-seated hatred of whites is born from that violence, and rage that she inflicted on her own daughter’s body, furious that she would bear a white man’s child. The Beetle is also a victim of colonization and violence by the English, Paul is merely a young and naïve representative of that colonial power. The Beetle and their cohorts did not ask Paul to join them in the brothel that fateful day. They did not ask him or the British to disturb their lair or occupy their country for 70 years. They did not ask Paul to squash their sisters like a bug. The depictions of both Mama in Slim’s novel and the Beetle in Marsh’s are obviously racist and sexist demonizations, monstrous representations of fears of blackness and women. However each story also points to and reveals larger historical horrors that inform the fright that each character represents.

*Mama Black Widow* does not just harken back to Gothic novels of the 19th century, but also to their descendants—the pulp novels of the 1950s and 60s—with which Slim must have
been familiar. In her study *Queer Pulp: Perverted Passions from the Golden Age of the Paperback*, Susan Stryker shows the enormous popularity of transgender themes in the lurid popular literature of that era. Inspired by the publishing of prominent memoirs of transgender figures (from Lili Elbe to Christine Jorgensen), these pulp novels were often narratively framed as mock autobiographies. These novels were also predominantly tragic tales of murder, exploitation, and suicide as demonstrated by classic titles like *Killer in Drag* and *Death of a Transvestite*. Transgender characters in the pulps were portrayed only as psychotic murders or as tragic victims, or as a combination of the two.54 All of these trends—mock autobiography, mental illness, criminality, violence, and suicide—are similarly at play in Slim’s depiction of his cross-dressing anti-hero Otis in *Mama Black Widow*.

Strangely, despite the tremendous homosexual content of *Mama Black Widow*, as well as the extensive lesbian and crossdressing scenes in his other works such as *Pimp*, Iceberg Slim’s work has not been considered in the context of the queer pulps. Rather than being seen as the culmination of the pulp novel, Slim’s work has been considered as a starting point for contemporary urban Street Lit and of so much Hip Hop culture. His writings’ own obvious roots in queer pulps—stories of prostitution, drug use, crossdressing, and perversion—have not really been fully explored. In fact, Slim’s major achievement may have been to transform the pulp novel into a genre written by and for an African American audience. This omission may be due to a deep-seated anxiety in the Hip Hop communities that have embraced him over the trans and queer themes in Iceberg Slim’s work. For instance, although *Mama Black Widow* is dramatically about the creation, trials, and tragic death of a sexually-insatiable crossdressing homosexual, the production company claiming to be developing a movie version of the book, to star Mos Def,

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frames it as the “real story of a migration from the Mississippi fields in the segregated south to the ghettos of Chicago during the gangster-ridden 1930s,” not as the horror and lust-driven tale of a tragic drag queen and the abusive mother that destroys him and his family.55

The most prominent parallel in the pulp novels with Mama Black Widow, as well as the most Gothic, is Robert Bloch’s classic novel Psycho, which inspired Hitchcock’s famous film. The story portrays its crossdressing villain, Norman Bates, the quiet but odd proprietor of a roadside motel whose insane mother murders a young woman on the run from the law after she spurns and mocks Mrs. Bates’ socially awkward son. In the end, as we all know, it is revealed that the mother had been murdered, exhumed, and mummified by Norman years before and that he lives a schizoid double life both as himself and impersonating his terrorizing, abusive, dead mother. There are numerous parallels between Mama Black Widow and Psycho. Both novels feature murderous, monstrous mothers lying in wait. At the end of Mama Black Widow, Otis quits his mother for good to escape her dominating grasp. He barely escapes with his life.

I leaned over to kiss her good-bye. I had my lips pressed against her cheek when I heard the faintest, most dulcet metallic scrape and caught the most infinitesimal glimmer of ominous steel in the corner of my eye. I leaped back and a streaking dazzle went past my throat. Mama’s face was a replica of the mask of madness she wore the night she punched Carol’s baby from her belly. Mama gripped the scissors like a dagger and glared hatred at me.56

This passage echoes the encounters of the victims in Psycho with the murderous mother “Mrs. Bates.” Mary Crane, who is murdered at the beginning of the story, depicts Mrs. Bates in eerily similar terms.

That’s why she didn’t hear the door open, or note the sound of footsteps, And at first, when the shower curtains parted, the steam obscured the face. Then she did see it there—just a face, peering through the curtains, hanging in the air like a mask. A head-scarf concealed the hair and the glassy eyes stared inhumanly, but it

56 Iceberg Slim, Mama Black Widow (Cash Money Content, 2013), 244.
wasn’t a mask, it couldn’t be. The skin had been powdered dead-white and two hectic spots of rouge centered on the cheekbones. It wasn’t a mask. It was the face of a crazy old woman. Mary started to scream, and then the curtains parted further and a hand appeared, holding a butcher’s knife. It was the knife that, a moment later, cut off her scream.57

In addition to their monstrous depictions of mothers, both of these novels also share similar rationales and depictions of transgender women as victims of an internalized alter ego. At the end of Psycho, it is revealed that the killer Mrs. Bates is really Norman in disguise and that he is the victim of multiple personality disorder dramatically acting out the identity of his mother whom he had murdered years earlier. Discussing Mary’s death at the end of the novel, her sister and her fiancé sort out the identities of Norma and Norman Bates.

“Until Mary came along. And something happened, and he killed her.” “Mother killed her,” Sam said. “Norma killed your sister. There’s no way of finding out the actual situation, but Dr. Steiner is sure that whenever a crisis arose, Norma became the dominant personality. Bates would start drinking, then black out while she took over. During the blackout, of course he’d dressed up in her clothing. Afterwards he’d hide her image away, because in his mind she was the real murderer and had to be protected.58

In Mama Black Widow, Otis is portrayed as similarly enslaved by the internalized alter ego Sally, the best friend of his sister Bessie, who is implicated in Bessie’s gruesome murder. He similarly becomes possessed by this personality when under the influence of alcohol and drugs. Otis tells us:

I couldn’t make the words come out. The pill and the alcohol and that bitch, Sally, were too powerful to resist. Incredibly, I vibrated at the prospect that I might see Mike again. Thirty minutes later I had put on a padded bra and dressed. I stood wide-eyed and thrilled before the full-length mirror on the closet door. I was dazzling in the shimmery white silk microdress and blue-black wig that hung to my shoulders in Grecian curls. My size six feet were elegant in white satin squared-toe pumps with rhinestone buckles.59

59 Iceberg Slim, Mama Black Widow (Cash Money Content, 2013,) 244.
This portrayal of transgender characters as trapped in the grip of a parasitic dual personality should not surprise us given the long history of monstrous representations of transgender experiences. As we have seen in representations from *The Beetle* to *Psycho*, transgender characters have been portrayed as murderous monsters. The authors of *Queer (In)Justice: The Criminalization of LGBT People in the United States* sum up this trend in representations of trans people, as the archetype of the “lethal gender bender,” an archetype that is used to criminalize and incarcerate transgender people.

Mild-Mannered Norman Bates, the hotel owner in Alfred Hitchcock’s *Psycho* and “transsexual” serial killer Jame “Buffalo Bill” Gumb in the film *Silence of the Lambs* are terrifying representations of men in the grips of pathological gender confusion who go to murderous lengths to become women. For Bates, his mother is still at hand, in both an ossified sense and through his ability to dress up in her clothing while he kills. Buffalo Bill kidnaps and murders women, then removes sections of their skin to create an outfit that he will wear as he constructs his new, female self. Both Norman Bates and Buffalo Bill are emblematic of the archetype of the lethal gender bender, which emphasizes male gender anguish, deception, disguise, and the homicidal destruction of normal others as essential to twisted gender transgression.

And, this is strangely where *Mama Black Widow* actually takes a turn away from so many other representations of trans people. The most distinguishing characteristic of Otis in the novel, other than his crossdressing, is his pacifism. Unlike so many of his family and neighbors, Otis is completely nonviolent. Moreover, he repeatedly saves the lives of those who have abused him. As we saw earlier in the mob scene in the novel after the death of Martin Luther King, Jr., Otis saves the life of a white policeman. He also saves the life of his family’s white landlady—who has been abusing and robbing her black tenants throughout the novel—by anonymously calling her doctor after she has a stroke and is trapped in her apartment. And, while he continually fantasizes about it, he never actually murders his Mama. Otis ascribes this pacifism to his

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idolization of Martin Luther King. For instance, after he is raped and robbed by Lovell and awakes to find Lovell passed out unconscious, Otis collects himself to escape and attempts to kill Lovell in retaliation. But, he can’t.

I had searched his pockets and found my wad of money and my keys and his switchblade knife. I had gone back to the side of the bed and stood there above him with the deadly point of the blade almost touching the leapy heart pulse in his chest. I sobbed and shook. I had wanted so much to drive the knife into his rotten heart. I really had. But then I remembered that Reverend Martin Luther King had said, “Black folks have got to stop killing each other,” and I just couldn’t do it.61

Otis’ combined pacifism, masochism, and attachment to Martin Luther King, may be read as a kind of metacritique of pacifist civil rights rhetoric on the part of Iceberg Slim. This, combined with the demonization of black women in the narrative, could lead to a reading of the novel as an argument for a kind of extreme masculinist black nationalism. I will return to this question in my conclusion.

Before that, we should attend to the most uncanny literary resemblance in *Mama Black Widow*, which is to Slim’s better known and street-celebrated autobiographical novel *Pimp*. *Pimp* is a more standard kind of prison memoir, recounting Slim’s coming of age as a procurer of prostitutes, his drug addiction, affairs, prison sentence, and self-reformation to reconcile with his dying mother. *Pimp* has been held up as a role model by Hip Hop figures from Ice-T to Jay Z. The novel has been received as an extended meditation on masculine self-articulation and methods of manipulating women, a pimp’s playbook. The macho anti-hero Iceberg Slim in *Pimp* would seem to exist in a different world than mincing cross dresser Otis/Sally. However, Slim insists that the real secret of pimping is that the pimp is the ultimate whore. Struggling to control his stable of prostitutes, Slim remembers the advice that his mentor Baby Jones had taught him.

> When at long last I was driving toward my hotel I remembered what Baby Jones, the master pimp who turned me out, had said about whores… “Slim, a pimp is

61 Iceberg Slim, *Mama Black Widow* (Cash Money Content, 2013), 244.
really a whore who has reversed the game on whores. So Slim, be as sweet as the scratch, no sweeter, and always stick a whore for a bundle before you sex her. A whore ain’t nothing but a trick to a pimp. Don’t let ‘em Georgia you. Always get you money in front just like a whore.  

Critic Justin Gifford, who has written most extensively on Slim, reads this reversal of pimp and whore as symbolic of Slim’s situation as pulp writer for Holloway publishing, which made millions off his novels while paying him minimal royalties. He also sees this as emblematic of the ways that Slim pimps out himself and African American woman, capitalizing on racist and sexist desires of a salacious reading public in order to make a buck. Transforming writing into a subtler art of pimping.

The pimp of Iceberg Slim’s autobiography, then, can best be understood as a figure who self-consciously extends the structures of white power, economic exploitation, and gender violence in order to achieve his own radically individualized form of liberty from spaces of containment…Disillusioned by the lack of possibility for the political freedom of African American people more broadly, the pimp instead sees that only radically personal achievements of independence are possible, achievements that are purchased by adopting the very apparatuses of white oppression that helped create systematic black inequality in the first place.  

While this reading of Slim is quite accurate, it strangely avoids the more obvious sexual and gender ambiguities that the pimp as whore paradigm suggests. This foreclosure of queer and trans possibilities in the narrative can be seen in Gifford’s reading of the most explicitly queer and trans scenes in Pimp. In the seventh chapter “Melody Off Key,” Slim goes home with an apparently wealthy white woman thinking to possibly play the hustler and live off her, or at least walk away with a c note. He is shocked and humiliated when he discovers that she is really a man in drag who has in fact been conning him all along. Frightened by her “entasis” popping up

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62 Iceberg Slim, Pimp: the Story of my Life (Cash Money Content, 2011), Foreword.
a “foot long and as thick as the head of a cobra” out from under her “custom flesh-colored jock belt,” Slim leaves her tied to the bed and steals her piggy bank in revenge. 64 Gifford reads this as emblematic of the necessary and ultimate failure of the pimp to master his women and his economic situation given the power structures of racist America.

Slim undercuts the pimp’s power by consistently illustrating the pimp’s failure to achieve domination over these figures. In most every chapter, Slim’s prostitutes argue with him, stab him, and repeatedly send him to jail. More than any other chapter of the novel, the “Melody” chapter dramatizes that while pimping may provide a fantasy of mobility, it is inadequate to the entrenched forms of white power and spatialized containment. Stories of spectacular failure constitute the bulk of Pimp, and collectively they serve to highlight the need for a more politicized stance than the pimp cool provides.65

While Pimp is indeed a long chronicle of errors, this is an odd reading of this chapter since in this episode we are witnessing Slim’s failure as a prostitute himself, and not as a pimp. Slim is the one selling himself in this chapter. The text itself later undercuts Slim’s claim that he ran away from her foot-long “entasis” in fear. At the end of the chapter, Slim showers to “scrub the sissy taste out” of his “jib.” He relaxes in bed and splits a joint with one of his women.

I could feel my skull go into a dreamy float…Gangster sure was a whore’s high. That reefer confusion was no good for a pimp’s skull. That beautiful sissy had buried a hot seed in my guts. The wild flower blossomed. I rolled sleepily out of the warm churning tunnel. I wouldn’t need a yellow tonight.66

We can only imagine what hot seed that sissy had planted in his guts and how his wild flower had blossomed. She doth protest too much, as the old saying goes. And this is just one of many homoerotic and gender bending moments in the memoir. Slim portrays his maintenance of his stable as rooted in group lesbian sex with his women, and they have extensive homoerotic

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64 Iceberg Slim, Pimp: the Story of my Life (Cash Money Content, 2011), Chapter 7.
relationships alongside his manipulation of them. In chapter 13 where he finally assembles his first “stable,” their new family is inaugurated with an orgy. There is also extensive homoerotic tension between Slim and the older pimps that mentor him, with endless exclamations of ersatz father-son love sexually mediated through the bodies of the prostitutes that they manipulate. This daddy-boy love in the novel seems to overflow from an erotic attachment that Slim portrays himself feeling for his step-father. As his mother abandons his religious stepfather for another wealthier man (much like *Mama Black Widow*), Slim shares a tearful and strangely erotic moment with his stepfather, Slim’s face pressed into his step-father’s crotch.

I turned toward him and looked up into his face tense and strained in the pale light from the street lamp. I was confused and shaken when he put his massive hands on my shoulders and drew me to him very tightly just holding me in this strange desperate way. My head was pressed against his belt buckle. I could barely hear his low, rapid flow of pitiful words…His stomach muscles were cording, jerking against my cheek…I said as I squeezed my arms around his waist, “Yes, Daddy, yes, Daddy. We love you too, Daddy. We always will, Daddy…what a sight we must have been, the six-foot-six black giant and the frail little boy holding on to each other for dear life, crying there in the darkness.67

My suggestion of eroticism in this scene might be lurid over-reading if it were not for his step-father’s uncanny resemblance to the many “ugly” “giants” that serve as Otis/Sally’s erotic fixation and tormenters in *Mama Black Widow*. It is as if Otis internalizing Sally, his becoming prostitute and queer, strangely echoes Slim’s own process of becoming a pimp by becoming a whore and the masculine erotic fixations—as well as queerness—that entails. *Mama Black Widow* serves as a kind of uncanny double of Slim’s memoir, exploring the becoming-pimp, becoming-prostitute from the other side of the mirror. The monstrosity of Otis/Sally and Mama allowing for more elaborate exploration of the perversity hinted at in Slim’s memoir.

This is not to say that Slim is Otis/Sally or that Slim’s mother is Madame Miracle. But there is an uncanny resemblance, one that is troubling and productive. Perhaps with *Mama Black Widow* the language of the Gothic provided Slim with a realm within which to discuss matters too frightening to include in his autobiographical prison and crime writings. Gothic matters that are erotically unspeakable in Kosofsky Sedgwick and Delany’s sense, as well as ugly familial affects that are too desperate to fit the cool masculine self-representation of a good pimp. It’s as if *Mama Black Widow* produces a Gothic inverse of his prison and crime writings, a kind of Frankenstein monster stitched together from everything he had cut out.

But there is one last monster, or perhaps an alien creature, lurking in the pages of *Mama Black Widow*—the Pullman porters living upstairs. Otis reminisces about them in his youth.

The first week in July an odd couple of guys moved into the flat above Railhead’s on the third floor. I don’t mean they looked odd. They were Pullman porters and looked like ordinary human beings coming in and out of the building. One was tall and husky and black, and the other was tall, willowy, and yellow. Both were in their early twenties and wore jazzy clothes.

Slim’s odd description of the porters—that “they looked like ordinary human beings,” of course suggests that they are not. It turns out that they are bisexual swingers who hire Otis’ sister Bessie and her friend Sally to have an orgy with them for ten dollars. Why that makes them something either more or less than ordinary human beings is not immediately apparent. Otis knows that something odd is afoot as he watches his sisters getting ready for their afternoon with the Pullman porters, but his sisters do not divulge what is going to happen. After they disappear into the Pullman porters’ apartment, Otis is unable to see or hear what is happening through their ajar but chain locked door. Desperate to know what is happening to his sister and her friend, Otis suddenly remembers his mother’s hand mirror.

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Then a thrill idea shot through me. I raced into Mama’s bedroom and got a tiny hand mirror from a purse and sped back to my position on the floor outside the freaky flat. Slowly I stuck the mirror past the doorjamb. I was shocked and excited at the sight of Bessie and the others naked and freaking off on the couch cushions in the middle of the floor. It was really hard to believe it was my big dumb country sister groaning in ecstasy with her face pushed into Sally’s bush. Sally lay there on her back like a bitch dog between the knees of the yellow porter and licked his balls as the black porter knelt behind him and sodomized him with a huge stiff black dick. I was mesmerized as Sally and Bessie paired off and did a sixty-nine while the porters called them filthy names. I was so angry and hurt when Bessie sucked off both guys. Then the yellow guy started fucking Sally from the rear as they lay on their sides watching the black guy lock Bessie’s legs over his shoulders. I held my breath when Bessie cried out as he poked his gigantic whang in her. And then as he pounded into her violently with long brutal strokes, the bitch Sally lay there listening to Bessie scream, and hollered, “Oh shit, your dick is beautiful going in and out of that sweet cunt of hers. Fuck her! Fuck her harder. Oh, you gorgeous mule dick sonuvabitch. Tear that bitch up. Oh! Goddamn, fuck me, you pretty yellow cocksucker. OOEE I’m coming, sissy bastard!”

I do not quote the details of their orgy at such length for prurient reasons, but to show the oddness of this scene. There is of course no way that one could view all the sordid details of this complicated sex scene through a small pocketbook-sized hand mirror. Moreover, this magical hand mirror also apparently magnifies dialogue, since before using it Otis was unable to make out the details of their conversation over the buzz of the electric fan and the music they were playing. Through its disruption of the plausibility of the narrative, intensity of the sexuality depicted, and its disconnection from the overall plot this passage calls attention to itself as a key moment in the novel. This might be because it is Bessie and Sally’s first time turning a trick in the story. It is interesting that this happens outside of the sphere of influence of the many pimps who hover around Bessie and Sally throughout the story trying to pull them into sex work and add them to their enterprise, such as the pimp Grampy Dick. Instead they take up sex-work independently and on their own terms with two men who are both independent and also bisexual.

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Despite the blue language of the passage, it is one of the only sex scenes—particularly gay and lesbian sex scenes—that is not marked by violence in the story. All of Otis’s sexual encounters in the novel involve rape, robbery, and assault. While the encounter with the Pullman porters is mercantile, it appears that all of the participants come away very satisfied.

It would also appear significant to the importance of this passage that the two men are Pullman porters. As historians Larry Tye and Beth Tompkins Bates (among many others) show, Pullman porters have played a very important role in African American culture both politically and symbolically. Employed by railroad magnate George Pullman to serve on the his luxury sleeping cars after the Civil War, Pullman porters were among the most recognizable African Americans until the end of the heyday of railroads in the 1960s. Pullman purposefully employed African Americans as porters for his sleeping cars, intending for a workforce that would be servile, polite, and controllable. Thus Pullman porters had to contend with racist stereotypes and mistreatment in a dehumanizing profession. Beth Tompkins Bates writes:

On the job, Pullman porters sustained a cloak of invisibility, smiling as though they were content with the racial status quo. It was a protective mechanism that shielded them from the charge of stepping out of place—the place assigned by the white world—or “being uppity.” The porter’s role, as one historian observed, resembled that of the black minstrel who wears a mask on stage to protect not just his self-esteem, but also to shield the actor from revealing his true feelings to the audience.70

But at the same time, despite comparatively poor pay, bad working conditions, and racist mistreatment, being a Pullman Porter offered greater compensation than many other opportunities available to African American men in the early 20th century and also offered tremendous social and geographic mobility. Porters were able to travel extensively, interact with all strata of society, and had economic stability. Because of their mobility, Pullman porters were

key in the distribution networks of African American culture in the early 20th century, distributing newspapers like the *Chicago Defender* as well as jazz and Blues records. As Larry Tye writes:

> …notions of the Pullman porter as everyman, or no one, stand in dramatic counterpoint to the porter’s standing in his own world back then. To whites who watched him on the trains or film screen, he epitomized servility. To black neighbors and friends, he personified sophistication and urbanity. He was a man of worlds they would never see or experience. And the porter did more than pass through those worlds. He helped disseminate the culture he saw and tasted to black Americans and whites, in ways that writers and moviemakers seldom appreciated or reflected.71

This complex social position and range of associations lead to Pullman porters being portrayed extensively, as symbols of both black servility and mobility, in literature, film, and music ranging from Eugene O’Neill’s play *Emperor Jones* to Claude McKay’s *Home to Harlem* to the song “Shuffle Off to Buffalο” in the musical *42nd Street*.72 Pullman Porters were even more visible for their political mobilization, forming the first African American labor union—the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters under the leadership Philip Randolph in 1925—and for their important role in the Civil Rights movement. As Beth Tompkins Bates argues, because of their successful union organizing, Pullman porters were highly visible examples of black resistance to economic exploitation and black upward mobility, particularly as symbols of African American masculinity.73

And this is where Slim’s decision to portray the Pullman porters’ sexuality seems to contrast with the depiction of Otis. As we have seen, in *Mama Black Widow*, Slim appears to link

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Otis’s crossdressing and homosexuality with his pacifism. One might conclude that homosexuality and transgender identity are being figured as inherently connected to masochism and passivity and contrasted to a Black Power philosophy. However, the erotic ambiguity and freedom of the Pullman porters exceed these constructions. Eavesdropping and peeking through the locked door with his hand mirror, Otis struggles to know what the Pullman porters are up to. They may represent the freedom, political engagement, and sexual possibilities that Otis is unable to imagine. While Otis considers his sexuality and gender identity a curse, and political passivity the golden rule, the sexually liberated Pullman porters, those “sissy bastards” upstairs, represent a whole other world, one that Iceberg Slim himself may have pointed to but not have fully appreciated. Unlike Otis who only hears pacifism and non-violence in Martin Luther King, Jr.’s philosophy, the historical Pullman porters also understood that it also required concrete politics, collective action, determination, and courage. And if we take example from the Pullman porters in the novel, this is not incompatible with being a sissy.

Considered in the context of the history of the prison narrative, *Mama Black Widow* is a revolutionary novel, playing with the boundaries of the speakable and the unspeakable in its depiction of incarceration, violence, and sexuality. Its use of the Gothic is multivalent, serving both as a form of critique, but also echoing historical terrors in both transgressive and ultimately conservative ways. With its short and erotic depiction of the Pullman porters though, the novel exceeds itself, pointing to forms of political and sexual utopianism that neither its narrator nor its author seem to fully fathom.
Chapter 3

“Every Form of Refuge has its Price”:

Vampires, Pedophilia and Disidentification in the Writings of Miguel Piñero

The publication of Outlaw: The Collected Works of Miguel Piñero by Arte Público Press in 2010 was a tremendous gift to the history of Puerto Rican literature and prison studies in the United States. The collection gathered together his best known plays and poetry, along with some hitherto unpublished poems that enlarge our understanding of his development and artistry. However, the collection also excluded several known works and altered the texts and titles of previous works in ways that reflect a troubling concern to protect and reframe Piñero’s legacy while still maintaining his “outlaw” status, as well as troubling the authority of this volume as Piñero’s collected works. For instance, the title of the play “Irving Horowitz is a Homosexual” was shortened simply to “Irving.” This raises the editorial question of why the word “homosexual” cannot appear in the table of contents of this “outlaw” collection. There were also two seemingly connected draft plays under the working title “Every Form of Refuge has its Price” that were left out of the collected works. The drafts portray the stories of a robbery and love triangle among an ex-con, his wife, and his male prison lover, and the story of a man dying of an unnamed disease during the 1980s in a New York hospital. Although unfinished, both treatments are as strong and persuasive as any of the unpublished poetry that was selected for the collected works. One wonders if the specters of returning homosexuality and AIDS were deemed unfit for Piñero’s legacy? But most troubling was the disappearance of a full-length play that Piñero had written in 1974 and revised in the early 1980s titled “Playland Blues.” The play had
been staged and also published in excerpt in *Action: The Nuyorican Poets Café Theater Festival*. Although the entire play has not been published, the final script is easily available in Joseph Papp’s New York Shakespeare Festival Records at the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, which has an important archive of Piñero’s work given his extensive collaboration with Papp. That some whitewashing of Piñero’s life and career is taking place becomes clear when we read the play. It portrays a man named “Mike,” who is very clearly modeled on Miguel “Mikey” Piñero, and his love affair with a 14-year old boy. It would seem that this was considered too risky even for *Outlaw*.

Given the Gothic obsession with palimpsests and all manner of hidden and lost writings, it should be no great surprise that the Gothic will also be found lurking in the shadows of these suppressed texts. In this chapter we will consider these hidden works by Piñero, as well as his better known writings like *Short Eyes*. We will see how they invoke a discourse of vampirism and monstrosity in order to explore intergenerational relationships. We will also see how these Gothic themes intersect with the history of prison sexuality and American anxieties about Puerto Ricans in mid-20th century America. Lastly, I will show how a critical stance towards American conceptions of identity and sexuality pervades Piñero’s whole oeuvre, a critique that grew from his experiences as a criminal, a prisoner, and colonial subject. Piñero used the Gothic as a way to critique his branding as a monster by American society, and to in order to critique the politics of sexuality and normality in the United States.

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Piñero was born in 1946 in Puerto Rico and moved to New York City with his family at the age of four. His father abandoned his mother while she was pregnant with her fifth child, leaving the family destitute. Piñero’s family struggled with poverty and homelessness throughout his childhood. He began stealing—and if we read the autobiographical evidence of his plays—hustling due to hunger and neglect. This lead to his teen years in and out of reform schools and detention centers. His early twenties are repeated circles of heroin addiction, robbery, and gangs. During his second adult prison sentence in Sing Sing in 1971 for armed robbery, Piñero began writing after working with Marvin Felix Camillo and his theatre workshop the Family. Upon release, Piñero continued work with the Family and wrote his breakthrough play *Short Eyes*. Attracting the attention and support of Joseph Papp, *Short Eyes* won an Obie Award and a Drama Desk Circle Award. With this success and continued support of Papp, Piñero expanded his work as a playwright with further plays such as “Sideshow,” “The Guntower,” “The Sun Always Shines for the Cool,” and “Eulogy for a Small-Time Thief.” With Miguel Algarín, Piñero started the Nuyorican Poets Café which became a center for Puerto Rican poets in the U.S. and continues to influence contemporary writers. Piñero went on to work in television and film as an actor and writer, appearing in movies and television shows such as *Fort Apache the Bronx*, *Baretta*, *Kojak*, and *Miami Vice*.

Despite this professional success, Piñero’s personal life continued to be painful and complicated. He struggled throughout his life with heroin addiction and alcoholism, at times returning to robbery and drug dealing to support his habits. He married and adopted a child in 1977, but separated after two years. Throughout his life he pursued relationships with both men
and women. He died in 1988 of cirrhosis of the liver working on his final play “Every Form of Refuge has its Price.” 76

Most of the critical attention on Piñero has focused on his breakthrough play *Short Eyes*. The play portrays a jail with complicated racial politics. A new prisoner, Clark Davis, is brought into the cell block and his troubling presence disturbs the balance of power among the prisoners. Davis, a white man, is in jail accused of raping young African American and Puerto Rican girls. Over the course of the play the inmates unify against him and decide to rape him. The attempted rape quickly turns into murder. This overt plot runs in counterpoint to the subplot of the rampant desire among the inmates for a young, attractive Puerto Rican inmate nicknamed “Cupcakes” who naively (and not so naively) flirts with the other inmates, but who has been declared off-limits by the sexual hierarchy of the cell block. Over the course of the play the sexual desire of the prisoners is deflected onto the murder of the pedophile Clark Davis. The prisoners assert themselves as normal—despite their own homosexual power dynamics—by sacrificing the sexual pervert in their midst. 77

This narrative has received a number of readings over the years from critics, including Arnaldo Cruz-Malave, Lee Bernstein, and Michael Hames-García. In Cruz-Malave’s reading, Piñero is wrestling with the state of abjection inherent in the experiences of the Puerto Rican male writers in the United States. Puerto Rican writers, being essentially stateless and also ambiguous to the strict racial classifications of the U.S., write from a compromised masculine

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subject position due to the dependence of masculinity on conceptions of race and citizenship.

Cruz Malave argues that:

Nuyorican literature emerges in the gap that opens up when the transcendental subject ...implodes and that its origins are in that lack foundations, in its coming to terms with the condition of reversibility and implication that constitutes Puerto Ricaness in the United States. “Ricans are funny people,” a “white” character assures us in Short Eyes: in a world ruled by ferociously defended racial and sexual limits, they represent... the porous, the permeable—treason: “If a spic pulls a razor blade on you... and there ain’t no white people around... get a spic to watch your back, you may have a chance...” The founding texts of Nuyorican writing, I propose, persistently comment on that porous treacherous condition that constitutes “Puerto Ricaness,” but not so much in order to transcend it as in order to resignify it, to use it to authorize themselves—to find within it, that is, modes of resistance and validation.\textsuperscript{78}

In Cruz Malave’s reading, Piñero has negotiated this abject subject position through sacrifice and displacement—his Nuyorican literary voice articulated through the murder and disappearance of the sexual “freak” Clark. We might conclude from this that there is an essentially conservative and ultimately homophobic strain in Piñero’s play—that it in effect murders the sexually ambiguous character in order to promote a Puerto Rican masculinity based on violence.

Lee Bernstein takes a slightly different tack on Short Eyes in his history America is the Prison: Arts and Politics in Prison in the 1970s. Where Cruz-Malave reads abjection, Bernstein finds the play profoundly ambivalent, alternately homoerotic and homophobic, racist and transcending racial conflicts. Bernstein reads Piñero’s play as exemplary of the prison theatre written and produced at the time, noting that it was the most successful and widely produced prison drama in the 1970s. He sees Piñero’s play as echoing the prisoner solidarity and rising

critique of institutional power common in the radical prisoner politics in the 1970s. In

Bernstein’s reading:

It artfully transforms sexuality and violence—the stereotypical issues of the prison drama—into occasions to explore morality, reform, and catharsis. Over the course of the play, the residents of the cell block find opportunities for solidarity while the guards grow apart. Although divided over whether it was justified to kill a man suspected (wrongly it turns out) of sexually assaulting a minor, the white, African American, and Puerto Rican prisoners nevertheless find common cause in their assumption that the prison guard investigating the murder merits no cooperation; it provides an historical window into a time when aesthetics, politics, and institutions combined to create an explosion of theater workshops.79

Bernstein’s reading is odd on a number of different levels. First he considers Clark innocent due to the failure of the abused child to recognize him in a line up, despite his extensive and dramatic confession to the character Julio of a long history of child molestation. It would seem that Piñero wished to portray the other prisoners as thinking they had murdered an innocent man, while Julio and we the audience know he is in fact guilty of many more crimes than he was accused. That issue to the side, it is also odd to read the prisoners’ collaborative refusal to cooperate with their investigation for the murder of a fellow inmate as an example of progressive and liberatory prison politics. Ultimately for Bernstein, Piñero’s play is most valuable simply for its crossover status, elevating once hushed themes of salacious prison memoirs to the level of high art.

Lastly, Michael Hames-García provides an ultimately philosophical reading of the play. In line with his overarching project to explicate the radical political critique inherent in the works of prison authors, Hames-García sees Piñero as critiquing the dehumanization at work in both incarceration and American society at large. Hames-García focusses on the relationship between

the desired jail ingénue Cupcakes and the critical and experienced prison veteran Julio. Julio
challenges Cupcakes in the play for his participation in Clark’s death, in effect charging
Cupcakes with losing his humanity by colluding with the murder. Julio insists that despite his
walking free from jail, Cupcakes has become “a part of the walls…an extra bar in the gate” by
giving in to the pressure to participate in the destruction of his fellow prisoners. In Hames-
García’s reading:

Clark’s death results from the prisoners’ giving themselves over to an oppressive
society, rather than practicing freedom resistantly. Similarly, Clark’s abuse of young girls
demonstrates his own failure (or, perhaps, inability) to practice freedom, giving himself
over to a sexist and exploitative society. One can similarly view Paco’s sexual assault
against Cupcakes, and the general racial violence and misogyny within the house of
Detention. The play presents this violence as a symptom of a “sick” society dependent on
the exploitation of women, children, people of color, and the poor.80

Hames-García’s reading is very persuasive on the critique of prison dehumanization as seen in
Julio’s indictment of Cupcakes, but seems to stumble on these questions of sexual violence. It is
never clear how Hames-García derives Clark’s pedophilia from a sexist and exploitative society.
Nowhere does Piñero appear to link Clark’s sexual behavior to a widespread societal cause.
Neither is it evident that Piñero considers Clark’s sexual interests and behavior as a form of
sexism. In fact, it is more often figured as a form of racial violence as it is predominantly female
children of color that Clark seduces. The children he confesses to molesting are overwhelmingly
Puerto Ricans. He even states “The easiest ones were the Puerto Rican and the black girls.”81
Similarly, Paco never actually sexually assaults Cupcakes, although he does harass him. He gives
up on his pursuit of Cupcakes because Cupcakes will not reciprocate his affection. Paco shifts his

80 Michael Hames-García, Fugitive Thought: Prison Movements, Race, and the Meaning of Justice (Minneapolis:
University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 183.
advances to the rape and murder of Clark when Cupcakes rejects him, accusing him of being a
coward unwilling to attack a white man.

CUPCAKES

Love me... You use words that you don’t even know the meaning of. Brother…
Love… Shit, here’s a gringo… who does it to little girls… and you want to mess
with me… Why don’t you hit on him… Why? Cause he’s white… and you scared
of Whitey… But you’ll fuck over your own kind… He’s the one you should be
cracking on… He’s the one. Not me… But you’re scared of him.

PACO

Push comes to shove, I’ll take you. But I don’t wanna do that cause I know I’m
going to have to hurt you in the doing. Look, man, I’ll go both ways with you….
I’m going to have you… If I want you… right now… I’m gonna show you I ain’t
scared of nobody… Cause you need to know that you got a man protecting you…
I’m gonna take that honky and you’re gonna help.82

Cupcakes attempts to deflect Paco’s sexual interest onto the easily victimizable Clark. Paco is
more than willing to oblige, if only to prove to Cupcakes that he isn’t a coward and is a lover
capable of protecting him. Rather than portraying Clark’s rape and murder as a symptom of
societal exploitation, it appears to be a crime of passion hatched by Paco to impress his reluctant
love interest, Cupcakes.

Although all of these readings do open up Piñero’s text in compelling ways, they are all
strangely reticent to consider that Short Eyes might be primarily about its ostensible plot—the
murder of a pedophile. That the political and ethical problem of pedophilia might be more than
incidental to Short Eyes, can be seen in the other prisoners’ sexual desire for Cupcakes in the
play. This desire is always framed as intergenerational and focused on Cupcakes’ youth. For

instance, in the previously discussed passages where Paco attempts to seduce Cupcakes in the shower, Paco continually emphasizes their age difference in his sexual desire for Cupcakes, addressing him as “nene,” and “papisito”, telling him “Go on and ask me… Ask me like a daddy should be asked.” Later enraged with jealousy, Paco reveals that the entire cell block is in the grips of the same homoerotic and youth inspired passion. Paco starts by accusing Juan of being with Cupcakes, and then expands to accuse the whole gang of their desires.

Maybe he’s not yet, but he’s setting you up. Giving you fatherly advice, my ass. He’s just like El Raheem. He wants to fuck you too. Putting the wisdom in front of knowledge. He’s calling you a girl. That’s what he means by that. And Omar playing exercises with you so that you can take showers together. Longshoe… giving you short-heist books. Everybody wants you, Cupcakes. Cupcakes, Ice gave you that name, didn’t he? Wasn’t that your woman’s name in the street, Ice?.. Nobody saying anything. Why? Cause I hit the truth. Pushed that little button… Everybody on the floor is trying to cop.

With that homoerotic and intergenerational desire exposed, they then move on to kill Clark, the pedophile in their midst, in some sense expiating their frustrated desires on a victim that mirrors and symbolizes their own motivations.

These other readings also fail to notice the Gothic undertones set into motion by the play. Of course the play’s themes of murder, sexual exploitation, and prison setting bring to mind Gothic stories and theatre, but there is a more explicit and direct Gothic image. Clark repeatedly figures himself as a vampire. When Clark confesses his pedophiliac desires and history to Julio, he figures himself as a fledgling vampire on his first kill.

I remember being… fifteen or sixteen years old… or something around that age, waking up to the sound of voices coming from the living room… They were

watching cartoons on the TV, two little girls. One was my sister, and her friend… And you know how it is when you get up in the morning, the inevitable hard-on is getting up with you. I draped the sheet around my shoulders… Everyone else was sleeping… the girl watching TV with my sister… yes… Hispanic… pale looking skin… She was eight… nine… ten… what the difference, she was a child… She was very pretty—high cheekbones, flashing black eyes… She told her friend wait for me, I’m going to do number two, and they laughed about it. I sneaked in standing a little behind her… She felt me standing there and turned to me… She smiled such a pretty smile… I told her I was a vampire and she laughed… I spread the sheets apart and suddenly she stopped laughing… She just stood there staring at me… Shocked? surprised? intrigued? Don’t know… don’t know… She just stood and stared… I came closer like a vampire… She started backing away…ran toward the door…stopped, looked at me again. Never at my face… my body… I couldn’t really tell whether or not the look on her face was one of fear… but I’ll never forget that look. 85

Using his sheet as a makeshift cape, Clark follows his sister’s young friend to the bathroom and then reveals his naked body to her. His violation of her innocence and vision taking the place of the vampire’s bite. This invocation of vampires is not surprising if we look to the history of Gothic fictions. Although as noted by scholar Leslie Ann Minot, the role of child molestation in vampire fiction has been under studied in the critical literature. 86 Critics have overwhelmingly focused on the gender dynamics of vampires and their victims, rather than the differences in apparent age. Le Fanu’s classic vampire novel Carmilla portrays its heroine Laura as first seduced and bitten as a child by the eponymous vampire. That the novel portrays a lesbian relationship, or at least a nightmare version of women’s romantic friendships in the 19th century, has been noted by many other critics, but little attention has been paid to Laura’s first encounter with the vampire as a child. At the age of six, she awakens in her nursery to have the apparently

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young woman Carmilla hovering above her smiling. Soothed back to sleep by the smiling woman, she awakens to sensation of Carmilla’s teeth in her neck. Years later Carmilla returns to woo her into an erotic and undead love affair. 87

Similarly, as Minot has noted, child eroticism and abuse plays a strange lurking role in Dracula. Early in the novel, still in Transylvania, Dracula disguises himself as Jonathan Harker andkidnaps an infant. He feeds the infant to the vampire sisters to slate their thirst when they are pursuing Harker. Dracula frames Harker for the infant abduction and murder in order to better control him. More prominently later in the novel, once Lucy has been bitten and transformed into a vampire, she survives by feeding on young children. Lucy’s nocturnal hunts for children are covered in the The Westminster Gazette.

A HAMPSTEAD MYSTERY.

The neighborhood of Hampstead is just at present exercised with a series of events which seem to run on lines parallel to those of what was known to the writers of headlines as “The Kensington Horror,” or “The Stabbing Woman,” or “The Woman in Black.” During the past two or three days several cases have occurred of young children straying from home or neglecting to return from their playing on the Heath. In all these cases the children were too young to give any properly intelligible account of themselves, but the consensus of their excuses is that they had been with a “bloofer lady.” It has always been late in the evening when they have been missed, and on two occasions the children have not been found until early in the following morning. It is generally supposed in the neighborhood that, as the first child missed gave as his reason for being away that a “bloofer lady” had asked him to come for a walk, the others had picked up the phrase and used it as occasion served. This is the more natural as the favorite game of the little ones at present is luring each other away by wiles. A correspondent writes us that to see some of the tiny tots pretending to be the “bloofer lady” is supremely funny. Some of our caricaturists might, he says, take a lesson in the irony of grotesque by comparing the reality and the picture. It is only in accordance with general principles of human nature that the “bloofer lady” should be the popular rôle at these al fresco performances. Our correspondent naïvely says that even Ellen Terry could not be so winningly attractive as some of these grubby-faced little children pretend—and even imagine themselves—to be. There is, however, possibly a serious side to the question, for some of the children,

87 Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu, Carmilla (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2013) passim.
indeed all who have been missed at night, have been slightly torn or wounded in the throat. The wounds seem such as might be made by a rat or a small dog, and although of not much importance individually, would tend to show that whatever animal inflicts them has a system or method of its own. The police of the division have been instructed to keep a sharp look-out for straying children, especially when very young, in and around Hampstead Heath, and for any stray dog which may be about.\textsuperscript{88}

Minot connects this passage in Dracula to the actual stories of child abuse and molestation in London in the late 19\textsuperscript{th} century. She shows how the text, and this passage in particular, invoked popular Victorian concerns with child abuse and prostitution. The passage echoes newspaper stories and prominent cases of children purposefully conceived, raised, and then murdered for insurance income, as well as the market in child prostitutes. The majority of the stories involved a treacherous female who deals in the deaths of children, either murdering them for their parents under the pretense of childcare or procuring them as prostitutes to cater to the rapacious appetites of the upper classes. In this way, Lucy’s thirst for children and Dracula’s own taste for the innocent invoke real life horrors. The way that the children play at imitating Lucy, the “bloofer lady,” suggests 20\textsuperscript{th} century pop-psychology theories that those abused as children are doomed to repeat that behavior as adults—the so called “vampire theory” of child molestation. This confirms scholar James Kincaid’s assertion, as we will see later in this chapter that contemporary narratives of child abuse rely on Gothic narrative models.

As we have seen in previous chapters, when the literary Gothic rears its head, real life horrors are never far behind. Piñero has been compared many times by critics with Piri Thomas. In the critical writings of many theorists, both Piñero and Thomas are framed as foundational texts in Puerto Rican literature in the United States, sharing a deep kinship in their treatments of

\textsuperscript{88} Bram Stoker, \textit{Dracula} (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1897). \url{http://www.gutenberg.org/files/345/345-h/345-h.htm
race, imprisonment, and sexuality. Thomas however is a good generation earlier than Piñero, born in the 1920s and publishing his breakthrough memoir in the 1960s. Piñero has a much closer peer in the life of the famous “Capeman” Salvador Agron, who was both born and died within two years of Piñero. Although also a prison writer, Agron is more famous for his life and crimes, which eerily echo Piñero’s works. As the New York Times summed his short and tragic life:

They called him the "Cape Man." On the night of Aug. 30, 1959, wearing a red-lined black satin cape, he walked into a playground on the West Side of Manhattan and plunged a silver dagger into the backs of two 16-year-olds he thought were rival gang members. His name was Salvador Agron, the remorseless 16-year-old leader of a Puerto Rican gang called the Vampires. And in an era of youth gang violence his crime captured the attention of the city. A few days after his arrest, he was quoted as saying: "I don't care if I burn. My mother could watch me."89

Agron and his case captured all of the fantasies and anxieties of mid-twentieth century New Yorkers for the ever growing Puerto Rican diaspora in their midst. Agron had basically grown up institutionalized. Due to poverty his mother surrendered most of her custody of him to the local convent where she labored in Mayagüez, Puerto Rico. After his mother moved to New York in the 1950s, Agron bounced between the custody of his father, mother, and juvenile detention centers in both New York City and Puerto Rico. In the late 1950s, Agron threw himself into Puerto Rican gang life of New York City, joining first the Mau Maus and later the Vampires.

The details were ultimately never clear on the murders. He was joined that night by fellow Vampire Tony “The Umbrella Man” Hernández, who was armed with an umbrella like the Batman comic book villain the Penguin. It is thought that they mistook the two young

victims, Anthony Krzesinski and Robert Young, Jr., for members of the rival Irish gang the Norsemen with whom they were about to rumble. With its ghoulish undertones, the story became a sensation in New York City and symbolized New Yorker’s anxieties over Puerto Ricans, poverty, and gang violence. Agron received the death penalty, and at 16 was then the youngest person sentenced to death in New York. His case also attracted the attention of political liberals and radicals opposed to the death penalty (including Eleanor Roosevelt and William Kunstler, among others). His death sentence was commuted by Governor Nelson Rockefeller in 1962 and he was paroled in 1979. Along the way he served over three years in solitary confinement and psychiatric custody, as well as earning a bachelor’s degree in psychology and philosophy, and escaping from custody to Arizona in the 1970s.⁹⁰

As historian Eric C. Schneider argues in his chapter on Agron in his study *Vampires, Dragons, and Egyptian Kings: Youth Gangs in Postwar New York*, the public’s fury over the case was fueled by white New Yorker’s deep anxieties over Puerto Rican migration. Puerto Ricans were portrayed as sub-human monsters—a source of disease and violence—and a vampiric drain on the United States. Bringing to mind the vengeful, torch-carrying mobs of 50s horror movies, hundreds gathered outside the precinct on the eve of Agron’s arrest chanting “Kill the spics, Kill the spics.”⁹¹ Although Agron’s story is very clearly a narrative of transnational dislocation and oppression, and the fears of white Americans for their colonial subjects, it is also a story of child abuse and fears of sexual perversity. The public’s anxieties were as much about Agron’s ethnicity as they were about his symbolizing homosexuality and intergenerational sex.

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The news coverage repeatedly focused on Agron’s femininity and beauty. The Hell’s Kitchen park where the Vampires gathered and murdered was also notorious as a pick up spot for teenage hustlers. Agron was assumed to be a teen hustler as well as having sexual relationships with his fellow gang members. That Agron had murdered two innocent boys only added to the Gothic narrative of violence and innocence plundered that his story represented to the public.

These themes of intergenerational and homosexual sex and violence are born out in Agron’s own experiences as related in the book he authored with Richard Jacoby ultimately titled *Conversations with the Capeman: The Untold Story of Salvador Agron*. In the early 1970s, Jacoby was a young graduate student in sociology pursuing a dissertation on the psychological effects of prisoners’ experiences on death row. Jacoby pursued a correspondence with Agron seeking to write a book about his life. The proposed book was to consist of their joint correspondence and communication, but was not published until many years after Agron’s death, following the production of Neil Simon’s musical treatment of his story *The Capeman*. As one can read from the published correspondence, one major reason that the book did not easily come together is that Agron never provided the promised narrative of his life that Jacoby wanted. Instead, his letters stream forth with requests for stamps, books, news, photographs, and pleas for help with his case. In an effort to stimulate the spiritual and political convict narrative that he desired, Jacoby sent him a steady stream of the best-known prison memoirs of the 1960s and 70s, including *Down these Mean Streets*, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, and *Soledad Brother*. But, the narratives that Agron provided were very different than what Jacoby was expecting.

Jacoby’s project was pursuing the thesis that death row prisoners have experiences of spiritual

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transformation while awaiting execution. Instead of narratives of spiritual enlightenment, Agron sent him the narrative of his childhood sexual exploitation while institutionalized in juvenile detention and his ongoing and intensely ambivalent homosexual love affairs. These run side by side with his erotic correspondences with women and his pursuit of Marxist and Boricua nationalist politics. While Jacoby was expecting a 20th century version of Boethius’ *Consolation of Philosophy*, instead Agron sends him letters that read like Pedro Albizu Campos had rewritten Genet’s *The Miracle of the Rose*. For example, here is one striking passage from early in their exchange.

I found out that people lived more in myth than in reality, and they wrote what they thought were facts, but which I knew were lies. The world was in deception, corrupted, and cruel. At first, when I arrived on death row, things were confusing. I even went to the extreme of making a miniature statue out of soap and putting two horns on it and dancing in a sexual frenzy in front of it until ejaculating in ritualistic sexuality. I began to associate my sexuality with devil worship. After this I turned to the Bible, because I felt possessed, but before that happened, I had an experience with Ralph Downs. Ralph did time in Comstock and taught me the way of guards and inmates. He was out of his cell one day and the guard on death row had walked away from the tier for a few minutes. Ralph told me to stand on the stool and put my cock to the bars. I did this and he began to suck on my seventeen year old cock. He held a book next to his face to cover the view in case the guard came down the tier and he would make believe he was showing me something in the book. While this high-yellow skinned fellow blew me, I looked down at the book’s title, *American History*. When Ralph finished (it was only a matter of minutes), I said, “Thank you for the lesson.” I can still remember what he answered. He said “That’s what American history is all about.”

It’s easy to take Down’s quip and Agron’s story as cheap humor, but in fact they sum up the overarching vision of his letters. All of his writings carefully portray a search for human intimacy by people of color despite violence, institutionalization, and incarceration. His later

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letters portray his many attempts to secure meaningful human relationships with his fellow inmates, family, and friends both inside and beyond the boundaries of the prison. What he portrays as a clandestine intimacy through the bars does in fact take on a historical and political significance. Agron’s early prison visions—of himself as a demon and his sexuality as Satanic—give way over the years and the course of his letters to a deeply critical perspective on the way that images of monstrosity are used to create dehumanizing narratives about convicts, people of color, and sexual minorities. In the introductory piece for the book he writes:

“Convict” and “prison inmate” were added to a long list of labels used to try and describe me during my life: premature infant, late walker and talker, malnourished, epileptic, hyperactive, truant, drop-out, incorrigible, illiterate, juvenile delinquent, gang leader, criminal sexual deviant, troublemaker, religious fanatic, revolutionary and drug addict. I have been all these things and yet none of them say much about what my life has been like. In prison, I began to study, sharpen my mind, my memory, and question myself and the Capeman and Dracula legends that the media built around my personality in order to fabricate a monster.\(^94\)

The labels which were used to dehumanize Agron were commonly used by Americans to dehumanize Puerto Ricans in the 1950s and 1960s to the present day. Puerto Ricans were figured as mentally ill, drug-addicted, sexually deviant, criminal, revolutionary, and mentally and emotionally stunted by American popular culture, law, and the social sciences. For just one of many examples, we can look to Oscar Lewis’s classic and influential study of Puerto Ricans as an exemplar of what he diagnoses as the “culture of poverty” in *La Vida: A Puerto Rican Family in the Culture of Poverty—San Juan and New York*. In Lewis’ theory, poverty creates a self-perpetuating culture which imprisons people in hopeless cycles of failure. This strangely echoes  

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In the Ríos family, uncontrolled rage, aggression, violence and even bloodshed are not uncommon; their extreme impulsivity affects the whole tenor of their lives. There is an overwhelming preoccupation with sex, the most frequent cause of quarrels. Sex is used to fulfill a great variety of needs—for children, for pleasure, for money, for revenge, for love, to express machismo (manliness), and to compensate for all the emptiness in their lives. Even family unity, one of the most sacred values in this family-oriented culture, is sometimes threatened by the danger of seduction by stepfathers, the sexual rivalry between sisters, between mothers and daughters, and occasionally even between grandmothers and granddaughters. There is a remarkable openness about sex, and little effort is made to hide the facts of life from children. Although the children in the Ríos family have many problems, they do not suffer from parental secrecy and dishonesty about sex. The male children are erotically stimulated by their mothers and by other members of the family, who take pride in the child’s every erection as an indication of his virility and machismo. Masturbation is generally not punished. In the Ríos family early sexual experience for boys and girls is accepted as almost inevitable, even though ideally mothers are supposed to keep their young daughters under control. ⁹⁵

Lewis portrays Puerto Ricans as vacuous, violent, childish, criminal, and sexually perverse. In Lewis’ view, the Puerto Rican “culture of poverty” is one where grandmothers and

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granddaughters fight over sexual conquests, where children aren’t safe from their stepfathers, and where mothers sexually stimulate their sons for the entertainment of the entire family.

Piñero was writing *Short Eyes* in the context of these dehumanizing discourses—from the fears of the Capeman to the “culture of poverty”—that portrayed Puerto Ricans as vampires and child molesters. Whether he was conscious of these images or not, they have profound resonances with his play. In light of these cultural forces, it is notable that he chose to portray the child molester in *Short Eyes* as a white man who preys on young Puerto Rican and African American girls. This may be meant as a reversal and challenge to the American cultural narratives of rapacious and corrupting Puerto Ricans. Piñero’s decision in *Short Eyes* to critique Clark’s murder by his fellow prisoners through the voice of the character Julio (noted earlier in discussion of Hames-García’s reading of the play) even further complicates the narrative of the play. In some way, Piñero’s play seems to look forward to critique the moral panics about pedophilia in the United States in the 1980s and 90s.

Probably the most profound, but also troubling, reading of child molestation in both British and American culture, is James R. Kincaid’s *Child Loving: The Erotic Child and Victorian Culture* and its more popularized version in his later book *Erotic Innocence: The Culture of Child Molesting*. Writing during the heyday of the panics over pedophilia and child pornography that created current draconian laws and sex-offender registries, Kincaid argues that our culture is trapped in the grips of a Gothic narrative about children. This narrative frames children as inherently innocent, and thereby as irresistible objects of desire. Kincaid charts the invention of childhood innocence in Romantic and Victorian literature, and how these ideas of innocence haunt our thinking to the present. In Kincaid’s view, the portrayal of children as innocents robs them of the agency which would allow them, as well as adults, to make erotic
decisions, thus making child molestation an inevitability. As a culture we are then trapped in a Gothic and paranoid frenzy creating and enjoying stories about horrible monsters devouring innocent children. He follows this story from day-care molestation panics to celebrities revealing the secrets of their childhood sexual abuse. Given the many lives destroyed by these accusations of pedophilia, the problems with the manipulations of recovered memories, and the current horrors of sex-offender registries where people are basically branded as monsters for the rest of their lives, there is much to be said for Kincaid’s analyses. There is also something profoundly troubling in his framing of the problem. Kincaid is highly selective in his engagement with the social sciences and psychology, often citing the odd small study that claims that there are no negative consequences to sexual relationships between children and adults, despite a great deal of research to the contrary. Moreover, his repeated attempts to remove the stigma from intergenerational sex devolves into a universalizing naturalization of these desires. He makes intergenerational sex an even greater inevitability than the Gothic narratives of innocence that he claims to critique. He also continually undermines the ability of survivors of childhood sexual abuse to make any claim that they might have been wronged. In order to as he claims “write a new story” about sexuality and children, Kincaid advises:

We would simply admit that “children’s sexuality does exist and anyone who tries to deny it is willfully ignoring the evidence,” that “sexual activity is commonly observed in children, and steadily increases during the high school years and adolescence.” Further, we would not regard as remarkable statements like “Those being honest will also admit to finding immense pleasure in both their child’s sensuousness, and the sensuous contact that they themselves have with the child.” Such assumptions would rid themselves of their protective defensiveness and become commonplace, common knowledge. Indeed, such things are common knowledge now, although we hardly have room for them in the current story. The candid authors of *The Courage to Heal*, however, do make brief mention of the
common desire of children to “test limits, sexually as well as in other areas,” and of the fact that “parents often have sensual feelings for their children.”

In Kincaid’s view, survivors of childhood sexual abuse—like the authors of *The Courage to Heal*—must admit that children actually want to push sexual limits. This is dangerously close to suggesting that they wanted it. And, all parents must admit to their sensual feelings for their children. For all of his repeated invocations of deconstruction and the history of sexuality, Kincaid in the end enshrines intergenerational sexual desires as transhistorical drives that are inherent in everyone. Kincaid continually refuses the possibility that there might be any power dynamics in intergenerational relationships that could complicate them ethically. He portrays intergenerational relationships as inherently innocent, strangely mirroring the ways that the Gothic framed its innocent children. Kincaid is unable to imagine a more complex ethical world where all sexuality would be implicated in power relationships, where intergenerational sex is neither inherently monstrous nor inherently innocent. A world where, as Piñero might say, every form of refuge has its price.

Although Piñero does portray Clark in *Short Eyes* through the lens of what Kincaid might consider a Gothic narrative of child molestation, the picture is more complicated. If Clark is a monster, we should pay more attention to the roles of monsters in modern narratives. A range of theorists in recent years working in “monster theory” have considered the ways that images of monsters are used to scapegoat cultural outcasts and anxieties. Edward Ingebretsen, in his study *At Stake: Monsters and the Rhetoric of Fear in Public Culture*, has explored our society’s obsession with monsters and how these Gothic narratives are used to dehumanize criminals and

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Kincaid’s reading of the Gothic backstory behind contemporary anxieties over pedophilia falls in line with these analyses. These studies fail to appreciate the full range and power of the monstrous. In their views of Gothic narrative, the monster is only a symbol used to dehumanize and scapegoat people, but there are no real monsters. Piñero’s more nuanced take on human relationships and evil subverts these assumptions. He challenges us to further imagine the reach of the monstrous. In his brilliant introduction to his edited collection *Monster Theory: Reading Culture*, Jeffrey Jerome Cohen offers seven guiding theses on the roles of monster in both classic Gothic tales and contemporary horror:

1. The monster’s body is a cultural body.
2. The monster always escapes.
3. The monster is the harbinger of a category crisis.
4. The monster dwells at the gates of difference.
5. The monster polices the borders of the possible.
6. Fear of the monster is really a kind of desire.
7. Monsters stand at the threshold of becoming.

We can see all of these theses at work in the portrayal of Clark. His body is a cultural body—the object of the other prisoners’ violent and erotic identity crisis. He symbolizes the limits of their desires. The one thesis that seems to fail is that Clark doesn’t escape, having been murdered by his fellow prisoners. But like all cinematic monsters, he rises again. Cohen also frames this thesis as that “the monster always returns.” This can be seen in the reappearance of intergenerational relationships and sexual predators in Piñero later plays, such as “Playland Blues,” where the monster is revealed to be Piñero himself.

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“Playland Blues” is set in an “arcade” in Times Square during its red light heyday. The plot focuses on a trio of young, Puerto Rican hustlers—Hector, Louie, and Pepper—as they negotiate the dangers of the police, junkies, johns, and sexual identity. The main characters are all young male hustlers that have sex with other men for a living, but consider themselves straight. The play progresses through the comic dialogue of the characters as they try to unravel the mystery of sexual identity at the economic crossroads of American and Puerto Rican sexual cultures. Who is a john? Who is straight? Who is a hustler? Who is gay? Who is a bugarrón? The hustler’s discussions and classifications are disrupted by the entrance of “Mike,” a Puerto Rican man that doesn’t identify with any of these ideas and is unclassifiable by their nomenclature. Since he is masculine, he can’t be gay. He’s not paying, so he’s not a john. He’s not selling, so he’s not a hustler. And, he isn’t even a cop. Mike pursues the young hustler Hector, who is 14 years old, and offers to take care of him. He offers Hector a relationship that neither of them are able to name—neither hustling nor gay romance. The play ends with Hector deciding to move with Mike to Philadelphia and leave hustling—uncertain and unable to even imagine the contours of his new life. In “Playland Blues” the Gothic narrative of monstrosity is thus paired with a continual exploration and unravelling of the concept of sexual identity.

The play echoes Short Eyes in many ways, but is also complicated by Piñero’s extensive use of autobiographical content. The character of Mike appears to be based upon and explicitly reference Piñero himself. Piñero was commonly referred to by his friends as “Mikey.” Mike is the same age and nationality as Piñero. Mike’s career as social worker and aficionado of jazz

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echo Piñero’s own work with teen hustlers and love of jazz music. And like Mike, Piñero left New York for a time to establish a home base in Philadelphia. With the character of Mike, Piñero appears to write himself into the action of the play.

The play is even further complicated by the real Hector—Hector Rodriguez. “Playland Blues” is loosely based on an earlier play called “Sideshow” that Piñero wrote in 1974 while working with teen hustlers through the support of a Rockefeller grant. The play starred a young hustler named Hector:

Hector Rodriguez, at age thirteen, was considered a “hopeless incorrigible” by his teachers at a “600 School” for problem children in New York City. Rodriguez could not read or write, nor did he show the slightest inclination for mathematics or science. He spent his days playing hooky on Lower East Side Street corners, or else he would go up to Times Square to hustle money. Hector seemed destined to lead the life of hundreds of other players, pushers, pimps, and prostitutes that infest the Times Square area until he met Miguel Piñero, an award-winning Nuyorican playwright—himself a former child of the barrio. “My brother Louie and I were arguing, and this other dude comes up and punches me in the eye, and I start to cry, and this other dude comes up and says he’s Miguel Piñero, and he buys us some hot chocolate and asks if I’d like to be in a play written by him, and I says ‘sure,’ and the next thing you know I’m working onstage in “Sideshow”…”

The play “Sideshow” presents a series of teen sex workers who each introduce themselves to the audience and then bring the audience through a kind of tour of their addictions, sufferings, and struggles to survive. Their stories in the play were based on their real life experiences. One child acts out his rape in juvenile detention; another shares his love of sniffing glue. One girl prostitute is caught in the middle of their play by her pimp and raped. The other hustlers finally corner and murder the pimp at the end of the play, like a band of Davids slaying

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Goliath. Like the sequel to a horror film, all of the characters from “Sideshow” uncannily return in “Playland Blues.” Given the earlier play as background, the major difference of “Playland Blues”—despite numerous different plot twists—from the earlier “Sideshow” is Piñero writing himself into the play. In “Sideshow” he created a place for the dreams and terrors of each of the teens that participated in his ‘Young Family” theater workshops. In “Playland Blues” he added his own voice and desires. Regardless of whether he was actually lovers with Hector in real life, in “Playland Blues” he very clearly voices his desire for Hector and for teenage boys through the structure and framing of the play. In effect he “frames” himself as the child molester that he killed off in Short Eyes.

“Playland Blues” opens with a strangely heterosexual note with Louie, a fifteen-year-old Puerto Rican hustler, who is arguing with his sometimes girlfriend “Fat Belly Nelly.” Nelly is begging him to marry her since she is pregnant with his child. The two encounter Hector in the arcade playing a video game. Louie refuses her narrative of heterosexual wedded bliss, and scopes out the hustling scene in the arcade with Hector. They are quickly drawn into an epistemological quandary that is both sexual and economic—trying to determine if the man across the arcade that is watching them is a john or a cop. By the way he is watching Louie’s zipper, they determine he must really be a john. Before either of them can finalize a transaction, the rest of their group descends on the scene scaring aware their john. After several rounds of the dozens touching on everyone’s mama, fellow hustler Pepper recounts his and Louie’s dangerous encounter from the previous night. Returning from a john’s house, they were captured by the police who interrogated and almost raped them. It comes out that the john they had just left is a police sergeant, and that the detectives who captured them are his lovers. Already the entire expected sense of sexual roles and identities is coming apart. The hustlers then argue about the
truth of the story, and over the possible johns in the arcade, while simultaneously accusing each other of being gay.

HECTOR: Oye, man. Why don’t you guys stop being so stupid fighting over a fucking faggot? You guys are acting like two faggots.101

The conversation turns to the different varieties of johns, bugarrónes and faggots, as Louie offers to throw Comixbook a trick.

COMIXBOOK: No Puerto Ricans. They’re mean.

LOUIE: Would I do that to you? For that, I give you nothing.

HECTOR: Oooooohhhhh, they’re cheap. Fucking jíbaros, they want to give you six dollars and then they want to do what they feel. Shit, if a spic can’t split with fifty he can split cause it’s just fifty to look at it.

COMIXBOOK: I don’t really trust young spics. Most of them are bugarrónes.

LOUIE: Let me look in my book.

COMIXBOOK: One time I was standing on the corner. It was hot like a motherfucker. I had on a pair of shorts and a T-shirt, right? I’m holding a basketball, just playing with it, shooting a couple shots, and this Puerto Rican dude, a young guy and the man gives me twenty dollars.

LOUIE: For what, man?

COMIXBOOK: For looking so good to him. Wow! Is that sick?102

101 Miguel Piñero, “Playland Blues,” 152.
Although they are all Puerto Rican and have sex with men, they all reject having sex with another Puerto Rican male. They frame male-male sex as an economic transaction which is preferably pursued with whites. Puerto Rican men are seen as not respecting the properly mercantile nature of hustling. They will either give you a pittance and expect you to do everything sexually, or they will throw money at you just for looking at you. For these characters, sex with Puerto Rican men does not fit the proper pricing and exchange values of hustling.

Comic relief then enters in the form of a couple of junkies, Cabeza and Cuchara (Head and Spoon), who ask the hustlers to set them up with a john that they can beat up and rob. Pepper, the older hustler in the bunch sets them up with “Caesar the faggot,” a black belt in karate who later beats the junkies to a pulp. As the hustlers play at karate, mocking the beat down the junkies are going to get, Mike enters. He and Hector have a connection that is immediate, vague, and charged. They banter and argue about money and friendship. Mike invites Hector back to his house to listen to jazz records. Hector, against Mike’s wishes, invites his whole gang up to Mike’s to party. They leave Pepper and Louie in the arcade planning a union for the street hustlers. Pepper, getting too old for the scene at the grand old age of 20, wants to be the leader of the hustlers, save a load of money, and retire from the game to open a nightclub. As they talk and dream of unionizing, a drug dealer kills Pepper. His death and failure to “unionize” the hustlers on the deuce imply that there is no hope for a teenage, Puerto Rican hustler identity politics. The hustlers’ communal mourning of Pepper suggest that there is compassion, fellowship, and hope between them nevertheless. There are communal structures of feeling—
feelings of exile, hunger, danger, and pleasure—which are the basis of their community, however troubled or mercenary.

In Act Two, Mike and Hector talk quietly in his apartment over spaghetti and beer. The conversation quickly goes sour as Hector tries to size him up as a john and accuses him of being a gay.

HECTOR: Man, you sure are a strange bird, first you pick me up on the box, then you try nothing with me…you act like a trick…so I figure you must be one of those rapping freaks.  

Things fall apart as Mike’s friends arrive to party. They make themselves at home and threaten to rob Mike. He brings the party to a halt by pulling a gun and reveals that he too had been a teen hustler.

MIKE: You punk ass motherfuckers…Man, I was out there hustling the streets before any of you were born, pulling the same shit.

Attempting to break the tension after Mike pulls the gun, a young hustler named Just Begun recites a doggerel poem, a round of the dozens, titled the “BALL OF THE FREAKS.”

…Maggots and faggots…sinner and preachers…monster and creatures and a bull dagger named Clyde…the funk was so thick it made count Dracula sick…good thing he didn’t show…cuz back in the kitchen the Wolfman was bitching one of his fine zombie hoes…the mummy was a drag refusing to suck the blood off minstrive (sic) rags…way around two in came Frankenstein… yelling…and his main man Igor heading for the door…now Igor was guilty beyond all doubt cuz his drawers were all bloody and his Johnson was hanging out…never seen anything like the ball of the freaks…

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Again we have the eruption of the Gothic into Piñero’s work, but here in a farcical mode. In a sense, with this round of jail house poetry, Just Begun is calling out Mike for being a freak himself. Igor’s guilt in the poem, with his pants open and covered in blood, call to mind the reenacted stories of child rape and abuse in the earlier play “Sideshow.” The gathered teen prostitutes threaten Mike several times with the possibility that they will report him to the police as an abuser of children. Mike repeatedly claims that his interest in Hector is innocent, but there has to be a price for his attention. Mike berates Just Begun and shuts him up claiming that he is just parroting a jailhouse poem that everyone knows. In effect, Mike rejects what he takes as a clichéd and Gothic narrative of intergenerational desire, one that would paint him as a monster. He rejects these caricatured stories of Dracula, Frankenstein, and bloody jailhouse tales of Igor with “his drawers all bloody and his Johnson hanging out.” Mike is returning to the scene of teenage hustling that created him and in turn seducing a young hustler. His story resembles the vampire theory of molestation, but he rejects that narrative as a cliché. He attempts to reimagine the possibilities of intergenerational relationships.

Act Three opens with Comixbook and Just Begun lamenting the changes in the hustling scene. All the money has moved to 53rd Street, but all the johns there expect you to “give up your bunkie.” As Hector and Mike join them, it comes out that Comixbook is a regular there and will do anything sexual for money—he’s “gay.” The hustlers exit, and Mike and Hector are left alone. Mike confronts Hector, because Hector has been telling his friends that they are lovers and living together. Hector admits that he has been living with Comixbook and his family, and that Comixbook has demanded that Hector have sex with him in exchange for living there:
HECTOR: They should keep it their thing and, you know? Like that dude told this and I thought well, what the fuck? Ain’t nothing if I let a faggot do it for money, I guess I can let my own boy jump on it for free. So I told him that’s cool with me and that night, man, that night, he wanna go bunkin’ with me. He wanna bunkin’ me. Man, that’s out.\textsuperscript{106}

Although Hector will have sex with johns, he won’t have sex with friends or peers. He can only imagine sex as a flat commercial enterprise. More complex relationships of economics and sex are beyond him. Mike asks Hector to come live with him, be his lover, and move with him to Philadelphia. Mike takes all the other hustlers to dinner, giving Hector time to think. Louie arrives, and Hector confides his dilemma to him:

HECTOR: That dude, Mike.

LOUIE: He’s gay?

HECTOR: That’s what I really don’t know, man. Like he asked me to go away with him. And like, I don’t know what to do.

....

HECTOR: What would you do? Like if you had nobody checking on you out nowhere to check into—and be free about it—what would you do Louie, if a man like him came up to you and told you that he wanted to take care of you, but that you would have to go have sex with him. Would you go with him? Would you live with him? Would you have sex with him?

LOUIE: Yeah. I would go with him. Yeah, I would live with him and yeah, if he wanted to go have sex with me I would have sex with him.

HECTOR: No matter if he’s doing you, Louie?

LOUIE: No matter if he’s doing me. But, you see? I would check him out, like, if the next day he treats me cool, I guess I would stay with him. If he don’t, well, I

\textsuperscript{106} Miguel Piñero, “Playland Blues,” 188.
rip him off and look for somebody else ‘cause you know, Hector, there ain’t no guarantee in hustling. If they really mean it or it’s part of their thing…

Mike and the other hustlers return. Hector agrees to go away with Mike. Mike says it’s “forever.” Hector says it’s for “as far as the word goes.” Hector chooses the hope of safety and security with Mike over hustling, but he does not reject the economic implications of sexual relationships. His relationship with Mike retains a necessary aspect of economic support. There is no moral high ground for either of them. Their relationship will always be based on uncertainty and exchange.

At the end of the play Just Begun recites another poem for them. This time Just Begun goes beyond the Gothic doggerel of “THE BALL OF THE FREAKS.” The poem he recites is Piñero’s own famous “Scatter My Ashes on the Lower East Side.” This poem was a kind of eulogy and testament that Piñero wrote for himself in advance in the early 70s. It was recited a decade later, when his friends gathered to scatter his ashes through the streets of the Lower East Side. It ends:

I don’t wanna be buried in Puerto Rico
I don’t wanna rest in Long Island cemetery
I wanna be near the stabbing shooting
gambling fighting and unnatural dying
and new birth crying
so please when I die
don’t take me far away
keep me near by
take my ashes and scatter them thru out

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By placing his own poetic eulogy at the end he further identifies himself with Mike. By putting this eulogy at the end of the play he symbolically kills Mike/Miguel, so that “Playland Blues,” like *Short Eyes*, ends with the death of the pedophile. The story of balling “freaks” has ended again with the monster’s symbolic death. However, that Mike and Hector leave together suggests that it is the idea of the monster which has in fact been killed. The demonized and scapegoated image of the monstrous pedophile has been transcended, but something much more troubling has been revealed in its place.

“Playland Blues” strategically invokes the Gothic themes that we had found in *Short Eyes*, but parodies and rejects them. It is as if Piñero, much like James Kincaid, is parodying the dominant cultural narratives of intergenerational relationships as Gothic farce. However, unlike Kincaid, Piñero never portrays Mike and Hector’s intergenerational relationship as innocent or safe from relationships of power and exchange. Instead, Hector goes into the relationship quite clear that he is exchanging intimacy for safety, food, housing, stability, and affection. Their relationship never ceases to be mercantile. Although Mike is neither a john nor a cop, no relationship is free of coercion. Hector has no other options than to exchange his sexuality for sustenance and safety. If he doesn’t go with Mike, then he is stuck with Comixbook, a peer his own age that also wants to exchange sexuality for shelter. Piñero’s symbolic suicide through the performance of his eulogy in the play appears to indict him in the end. He cannot pretend that his relationship with Hector is innocent or ethically unproblematic. This is a valuable corrective to Kincaid’s utopian critique of taboos on intergenerational relationships. Kincaid would pretend

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that these relationships can be freely chosen as if by un-coerced, independent equals. Piñero instead shows that they are fundamentally relationships of power, but he goes further to question whether any relationships are innocent or uncoerced.

This question of whether any relationships can be ethical, looks forward to his final work, “Every Form of Refuge has its Price.” Although it is referred to as being set in an intensive care ward, that is only the second act of the play. The draft is badly organized, and the second act is barely readable. However, the first act tells the story of two robbers, Harry and Hector, returning from a theft. Harry has been out on parole and living a fairly happy married life. He meets up with Hector who convinces him to pull off a heist. When they get home to Harry’s, his wife is there. Hector confronts Harry’s wife with the fact that they had been lovers in prison—that Harry had been his “punk” for years. Hector had turned Harry out when he was a new prisoner. Harry had submitted to the relationship in exchange for protection, but over the years grew into it. Although Harry had been living a new life on the outside after his release from prison, meeting up with Hector pulled him back into the old roles. Over the course of their conversation it becomes clear that it is Hector who desires and needs Harry. Why else would he pursue Harry, try to draw him back, and confront Harry’s wife? When the police come to arrest them, Harry sells out Hector to save his wife as the script itself begins to collapse into incomprehensibility. Hector’s desire has had its price, and now Harry is the one in control.109

That the seducing stranger inserting himself in this precarious domestic scene is named Hector, invoking the presence of Hector from “Playland Blues” and “Sideshow,” suggests that this is again the specter of intergenerational sexuality erupting into the play. Hector returns like a

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vampiric spawn to disrupt the romantic heterosexual narrative. Hector disrupts Harry and his wife’s lives with sexuality that is framed through power, violence, theft, and money. Hector reveals that Harry had sex with his wife’s brother in prison in exchange for a sandwich. In Piñero’s world there is no love that is not haunted by hunger and abuse.

A notable feature of the relationships portrayed in all of these plays is the repeated evasion of categories of sexual identity. This can be seen in the refusal of sexual identification by the inmates in Short Eyes, the hustlers’ ambivalences with identifying as gay in “Playland Blues,” and ambiguities of sexual identities in “Every Form of Refuge has its Price.” In each play the characters question and resist sexual identities.

This critique of identity runs strongly through all of Piñero’s works in counterpoint to his investigations of vampires and pedophilia. The cultural anxiety, violence and scapegoating of the pedophile are contrasted with a raucous world without sexual mores or identifications. This begins in the opening of Short Eyes where the inmates parody assertions of identity as forms of political and sexual power. After Black Muslim El Raheem goes on a nationalist tirade against Longshoe, calling him a “Whitey…Devil” the rest of the inmates mock his nationalist politics of identity:

OMAR
Salam Alaikum.

PACO
Salami with bacons.

ICE
Power to the people.
LONGSHOE
Free the Watergate 500.

JUAN
Pa’lante

CUPCAKESS
Tippecanoe and Tyler too.

PACO
(On the table, overly feminine)
A la lucha…. A la lucha… que somo mucha…

OMAR
Hey! Hey ….you know the Panthers say “Power to the people.”… (Strong voice)
Power to the people. And gay liberators say… (High voice, limp wrist in fist)
Power to the people.110

Piñero’s pronounced disdain for concepts of sexual identity could be ascribed to the
ambivalence over sexual identity in prison which has been historicized by scholars like Regina
Kunzel in Criminal Intimacy: Prison and the Uneven History of American Sexuality. Kunzel
chronicles the ways that concepts of “situational homosexuality” were used to preserve ideas of
normative heterosexuality, while explaining away sexual behavior in prisons. For Kunzel,

cultural anxieties over prison intimacy reveal the instability of modern sexual categories. But Piñero goes much further, mocking concepts of sexual and racial identity generally. Although scholars like Cruz Malave and Bernstein have suggested that Piñero was homophobic, something quite different seems to be at stake. Looking to the ways he portrays relationships as structured by power and exchange, one might think that Piñero is critiquing or rejecting these relationships in favor of safe, egalitarian, non-commercial forms of sexuality. However, in his plays that present such relationships—plays dealing with American sexuality and identity—he mocked them. For Piñero, egalitarian relationships and sexual identities are always farce. This can be read in two of his less studied plays—“Irving Horowitz is a Homosexual” and “Paper Toilet.”

These plays call to mind José Esteban Muñoz’s work on disidentification and queer utopias. Their shared focus on sex in public toilets strangely anticipating Muñoz’s reading of Amiri Baraka/Leroi Jones’ play “The Toilet.” Muñoz’s essay “Cruising the Toilet” used this troubling homoerotic play from the 1960s as the point of departure for an extended meditation on the possibilities of queer utopianism and anti-identitarian politics. Building on his previous work on disidentification, Muñoz combined his earlier articulations of a positive anti-essentialist politics with Ernst Bloch’s work on the philosophy of hope in order to open the potential of reading utopian possibilities in even the most ambivalent, disavowed, and even violent texts.

Baraka’s play is set in a high school toilet. A group of young African American men capture and assault a young gay white man Karolis, while homaphobically and homoerotically taunting him due to a love letter he has written to Foots, also known as Ray, the leader of their group. Over the course of the play’s action it is revealed that Ray and Karolis have been lovers in that very toilet,

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and that the violence has been staged by Ray to cover up his sexual involvement with Karolis. The young men brutally beat Karolis leaving him on the floor of the bathroom, and abandon their leader Ray for his lack of mettle in the fight. In the play’s final scene, Ray embraces Karolis in a richly ambiguous mixture of what the audience may infer is desire and regret. It’s this potent ambiguous moment that Munoz identifies as the utopian moment in the play.\footnote{José Esteban Muñoz, “Cruising the Toilet: LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka, Radical Black Traditions, and Queer Futurity” \textit{GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies} 13 (2007): 353-367.}

Unlike the ambiguous tragedy of Baraka’s play, Piñero recasts the ambiguity of public sex and interracial desire as outrageous farce. Vampires do not appear in these plays, although teenage sex workers are again featured prominently. These plays counter the vampire with an even stranger monster, the specter of the collapse of sexual identities. This wild possibility terrorizes the characters in these plays that function as representatives of middle-class society and the law.

Piñero’s one-act “Irving Horowitz is a Homosexual,” later published simply as “Irving,” portrays the titular Irving throwing a coming out party for himself. He has invited his extremely stereotyped Jewish-American family—mother, father, uncle, sister, and brother—over to announce to them that he is gay. Unfortunately for Irving, his sister Mimi shows up to his house with her new African American boyfriend Butch. In the action, it is revealed to the audience that Butch is a closeted bisexual who has actually been cheating on Mimi with Irving. Comedy rapidly ensues. Initially, Irving’s parents are horrified that their daughter is dating an African American man, and his mother feigns a heart attack at Butch’s suggestion that Mimi might be pregnant. With this family drama, Irving is barely able to get any attention for his big coming out.
While the family panics over Mimi’s inter-racial relationship, Irving and Butch debate the merits of coming out and Butch asks to be left out of Irving’s declarations of his sexual identity. When Irving finally manages to get his family’s attention to his coming out, his mother complains that she just doesn’t understand. Irving tells her:

What’s there to understand, Mom? I’m vulnerable…as soft as a water balloon…which anyone can burst at will…for fun…for spite…for abuse…for whatever neurotic reason. See. Mom, anyone can write graffiti about me in any public john where a blank space stares at a magic marker. Whenever a person goes into a public toilet or any toilet, for that matter, and he has in his possession a magic marker, besides relieving himself, he has one other purpose for going in there: that’s either to hurt somebody by writing silly things on the walls, such as “Irving Horowitz is a homosexual,” or he’s going to advertise himself, his wit, his poetic sense, his disapproval of politics today, commentaries on the state of the nation, on the state of his mind, his desires or his lost religion…A man with a magic marker is a hired killer, like a soldier in Vietnam or a policeman in the South Bronx. Some use a gun and some use a pen, while others don’t give a shit how they use their tongue.¹¹³

Through Irving’s voice, Piñero sets out the public toilet as this cultural site of both incredible homophobic violence and utopian possibility. A dangerous place where we can be named, branded with identities, and called out, but also a space where innermost desires can be revealed.

As Irving’s family grapples with his coming out, his sister turns homophobic. Butch is offended and comes out of the closet as well, but ambivalently. Butch is willing to be honest about his sexual relations with men, but is bored by the attempt to build an identity around it. As Irving has a tortured last conversation with his mother about being gay, Butch leaves saying:

I told you before, I don’t wanna be around to hear dumb raps about it man—that is that—so I am not saying that Irving don’t have the right to run them dumb raps, I…just saying I have an option to leave and do something useful like going to the store and getting the things we need for the house and choose to ensure that my

For Butch, sexual identity isn’t nearly as interesting as direct questions of hunger and satisfaction. Although he is willing to satisfy his desires with Irving, he has no patience for Irving’s ideas about homosexuality and identification. Piñero voices this critique through the African American character as slightly outside of the mainstream of American discourses of homosexuality, but this critique is then referenced to an ironic and erotic Spanglish voice. “Until the banana baby.” Throughout the play the characters each reveal a painful distance from Puerto Ricans. The characters are each shadowed by a Latino other. Irving is called by his drug dealer Ramón to sell him some “Panama Red.” Mimi drops references to Latin American communist movements. Irving’s brother, uncle, and father each drop lines of mangled Spanish to sound hip, or complain about their Puerto Rican employees.

The shadowing of the American characters in the play with a Latino alterity marks this problem of sexual coming out as a uniquely middle-class American problem through contrast. It provides an external vantage point onto the action of the play, in which its sexual identities can be revealed as “vulnerable” as Irving calls himself, and profoundly historically constructed. Piñero evades construction of political sexual identities while frankly and unabashedly insisting on the lived realities of desire.

In his other sexual farce, “Paper Toilet,” Piñero uses a subway restroom cruising spot as a site from which to mock American conceptions of gender and sexuality. The play begins with a comic look at toilet cruising, with men eyeing and making passes at one another at the urinals. A

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lewd man cruising the subway toilet comes onto another man innocently trying to pee. The man trying to relieve himself aggressively fends off the cruiser. The first cruiser is quickly replaced with yet another man making advances. The peeing man then entices the second cruiser with suggestions of mutual masturbation, only to then arrest him, revealing himself to be an undercover Vice Cop. Throughout the play a man is trapped in a toilet stall without any toilet paper, stinking up the place, while begging someone to pass him a newspaper to wipe himself. Two young thieves enter the restroom to split the loot from a purse they’ve snatched from an old woman. It turns out that although she fought them tenaciously over the purse, it contains nothing but 59 cents and a welfare card. The man on the toilet tries to purchase the newspaper from the thieves, only to be robbed of his pants and wallet by them in turn. The old woman who has been robbed tracks the young thieves into the men’s restroom, demanding her purse and threatening to accuse them of rape if they don’t return it. This attracts the police and the Vice Cop, who arrest not only the thieves, but also the woman for disrupting gender norms by daring to enter the men’s restroom. They arrest her for disorderly conduct, or “peeping Tomasina,” the Vice Cop tells them:

What will become of society if we allow things like this to go unpunished? What? Tell me what? Men in women’s toilets…women in men’s toilets… next thing you know, women will be in men’s toilets standing up to take a piss. Can you imagine that, can you? No, but I can...You bet I can. I been working this beat long enough to know all the perverted thoughts and actions that take place in people’s minds. I know them all… but I’m strong, I stick to my guns… women standing up taking a piss, men sitting down… it can turn your stomach just thinking of it….You take this as a joke but you are not realizing the seriousness of it…What will become of our children, our beautiful boys and girls? they’ll be in a constant identity crisis…what will become of your daughter if she walks into a toilet and finds a man putting on a sanitary napkin, what?…or your son if he walks into the john and there’s this stupid broad with one leg up taking a piss?…do you understand about the signs on the doors that indicate whether it’s a men’s room or a ladies’ room…kings and queens…caballeros and caballeras… those signs on the toilet doors that are the most important thing that has come out of civil society…I am
not taking part in this communist conspiracy to rid our society of signs on toilet
doors...Not me... I am a true spirit of the revolution...Long live Betsy Ross!115

The play ends with the Vice Cop arresting them all, the cruisers, thieves, and the old woman,
calling her a “pinko bullydike, and carting them all off to jail singing “God Bless America,”
leaving the poor man on the toilet stall still begging for a newspaper to wipe himself. Through
this short farce, Piñero has mocked the hypocrisy of American social norms that both foster and
police sexual deviancy. The government as the Metropolitan Transit Authority both created these
bathrooms which were sites of public sex while simultaneously policing them to capture people
pursuing sexual activity. I quote the Vice Cop’s speech so extensively here because it is
ironically the queer utopian moment in the play. Although the Vice Cop is giving an impassioned
defense of protecting sexual norms, the speech comically functions as an actual invitation to
sexual confusion. What will become of society if we allow things like this to go unpunished?
Can we imagine this monstrous world of sexual disorder? The cop’s speech invites us to. It
challenges us to. Although he claims not to be taking part in this communist conspiracy, he is
actually at its heart, since he is the object of desire for all the men cruising the toilet. And, his
final declaration “Long live Betsy Ross.”? What could be queerer? The Vice Cop’s rallying
speech for conformity to gender and sexual norms ends in complete camp.

The Vice Cop’s repeated concerns in his speech over the exposure of children to sex and
gender ambiguity also returns us to Piñero’s early themes of pedophilia and abuse. Here the
theme of indecent exposure to children is treated in a comic and absurdist manner in sharp
contrast to Clark’s confession in Short Eyes of exposing himself to little girls. Over the course of

his artistic career, Piñero wrestled with Gothic depictions of intergenerational sex and with alternatives to the discourses of sexual identity in late 20th century America. These are discourses that his work and analysis of his historical context show are deeply intertwined with American conceptions of race and ethnicity. Piñero challenged these scapegoating discourses of sexuality, monstrosity, and identity with an alternative view of the world. He presents a world in which desire is never innocent, love is never free, and identities are farce because we are all really monsters.
Chapter 4

“In my Solitude You Haunt Me”: Billie Holiday, Frankenstein, and the Blues Gothic

In this chapter I will examine Billie’s Holiday’s memoir *Lady Sings the Blues*. Although it has not usually been considered a prison narrative, I will show that incarceration is one of its most important themes and the overarching frame of the memoir. Following this thread of incarceration lead to other framing narrative structures in the book: the Gothic, slave narratives, and of course the Blues. I will show that Holiday’s narrative is actually pointing to the intertwined history of these cultural discourses. Each of these artistic discourses will be shown to be critiquing the concept of domesticity, with home and intimacy being cultural commodities that are dangled just out of reach of the subjects in each of these genres.

The political dimensions of Holiday’s profound artistic achievements have been evaluated most eloquently by Angela Davis in her classic study *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism*. Davis reads Holiday’s achievement to have been conquering the American popular song, transforming it by claiming romantic love as a sphere for black liberation and exposing the inequalities in male and female relationships, as well as the racism of American society. Davis writes:

Billie Holiday could sing with prophetic conviction about the transformative power of love because it may have come to represent for her all that she was unable to achieve in her own life. In a more complex racial and cultural context, she was able to carry on a tradition established by the Blues women and Blues men who were her predecessors: the tradition of representing love and sexuality as both concrete daily experience and as coded yearnings social liberation.\(^{116}\)

In this chapter I aim to extend Davis’ analysis of the politics of Holiday’s work by showing the deep importance of incarceration in her life and art. Billie Holiday’s memoir *Lady Sings the Blues* has not previously been deeply considered critically in the context of American prison literature. This is in part due to the fact that the memoir was “ghostwritten” by William Dufty. This literary partnership has been used as grounds to dismiss Holiday’s own framing of her life story and her incisive critiques of racism, incarceration, and the criminalization of drug use in the United States. Holiday’s memoir has been critiqued by her biographers for numerous factual errors that they have in turn blamed on Dufty, considering him a hack writer attempting to profit on Holiday’s tarnished representation. As Farah Jasmine Griffin has argued in her sensitive meditation on Holiday, *If You Can’t Be Free Be a Mystery*, Holiday has been trapped in a double bind by her biographers and critics.

A few things are striking when you consider the various stories that circulate around the writing of the autobiography. First, almost everyone attributes the book to Dufty and at the same time they accuse Holiday of lying within its pages. Even though he is charged with never interviewing Holiday, Dufty escapes the charge of dishonesty. And while Holiday is accused of having led about the details of her life among other things… few question the veracity of her statement that she did not read the book.  

Holiday’s memoir has been dismissed both as a fabrication of Dufty and as a web of lies by Holiday. However, John Szwed’s recent study *Billie Holiday: The Musician and the Myth* shows that the factual “errors” in Holiday’s narrative are actually the creations of Holiday herself. Through detailed analysis of the manuscript of *Lady Sings the Blues* and its publishing correspondence, Szwed shows that Dufty based the book on Holiday’s published interviews, with large swaths reproduced verbatim. The remaining sections of the memoir were based on

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extensive interviews with Holiday, which Dufty attempted to recreate for the page in her distinctive tone and voice. Despite Holiday’s own later claims to have never read the book when she was challenged on its contents, Holiday actually reviewed the book carefully before it went to press. In correspondence with the publisher, Holiday expressed extreme dismay at the publisher’s editing of the book which excised passages that might implicate some notable celebrities in her drug use or homosexuality, such as Tallulah Bankhead. Szwed’s study proves that the narrative and persona of *Lady Sings the Blues* were carefully crafted by Holiday in partnership with Dufty. Given Szwed’s proof of Dufty’s profound access to Holiday and her critical involvement in the editing of the memoir, in this chapter I will treat the memoir as her statement no more compromised by editing than most other published literary works. I will not consider the work as a piece of history, but as Holiday’s own representation of her life and times.

The presence of co-authors and ghost writers is quite common in the world of 20th century musicians, as well as prisoner memoirs, and has not prevented them from being taken seriously as historical documents or as serious works of literature. For instance, Malcolm X’s collaboration with Alex Haley on the *Autobiography of Malcolm X* has not prevented scholarly consideration of this work. A quick search of MLA International Bibliography shows over 300 essays, dissertations, and books exploring Malcolm X’s autobiography. Strangely a similar search for works analyzing Holiday’s memoir brings up only 21 works devoted to *Lady Sings the Blues*. The memoir’s resistance to scholarly exploration may also be due to Holiday’s multiple faces and voices in the work.

On this first level, of musician’s memoir, *Lady Sings the Blues* gives us numerous insights into Holiday’s evolution as an artist and the relationship between her artistry and the

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harsh events of her life. Holiday uses her memoir as a way to place herself in the traditions of African American music both formally and historically. Holiday identifies the origin of her interest in music as rooted in the American counterculture of prostitution, nightclubs, and crime—the sporting life. Holiday tells us that her first exposure to the jazz music that made her famous took place in a bordello.

Alice Dean used to keep a whorehouse on the corner nearest our place, and I used to run errands for her and the girls. I was very commercial in those days. I’d never go to the store for anybody for less than a nickel or a dime. But I’d run all over for Alice and the girls, and I’d wash basins, put out the lifebuoy soap and towels. When it came time to pay me, I used tell her she could keep the money if she’d let me come up in her front parlor and listen to Louis Armstrong and Bessie Smith on her Victrola. A Victrola was a big deal those days, and there weren’t any parlors around that had one except Alice’s. I spent many a wonderful hour there listening to Pops and Bessie. I remember Pops’ recording of “West End Blues” and how it used to gas me. It was the first time I ever heard anybody sing without using any words. I didn’t know he was singing whatever came into his head when he forgot the lyrics. Ba-ba-ba-ba-ba-ba-ba and the rest of it had plenty of meaning for me—just as much meaning as some of the other words I didn’t understand. But the meaning used to change, depending on how I felt. Sometimes the record would make me so sad I’d cry up a storm. Other times the same record would make me so damn happy I’d forget about how much hard-earned money the session in the parlor was costing me.119

It’s notable, as we will see later in her narrative, that Holiday here portrays music as a kind of power that transcends reciprocity of economy. Despite her “commercial” character as a youth—she was 13 years old at the time of this episode—music has the power to make her forget dollars and cents. It allows her to temporarily forget her labors and the cost of those labors. Music is portrayed as a kind of wordless magical force that transcends her monetary needs. Despite placing her first encounter with jazz and Blues in a whorehouse, Holiday wishes to distance the music from this context.

I guess I’m not the only one who heard their first good jazz in a whorehouse. But I never tried to make anything of it. If I’d heard Louis and Bessie at a Girl Scout

jamboree, I’d have loved it just the same. But a lot of white people first heard jazz in places like Alice Dean’s, and they helped label jazz “whorehouse music.” Holiday performs a kind of double movement in this passage both placing the origin of her encounter with the Blues and jazz in a whorehouse, but denying that there is an essential relationship between the music and prostitution. She instead insists that labeling jazz and Blues as “whorehouse” music is an effect of white racism. She portrays this view as an opinion that would only be considered by a white patron who only encountered African American music in the context of a visit to a house of prostitution. Of course there were also many critics and opponents of jazz and the Blues within the African American community as well, such as luminaries like W.E.B. DuBois. Holiday’s pronounced ambivalence about the relationship between the music and prostitution may be due to her own ambivalence about her own childhood sex work. According to her biographers, Holiday was not just running errands at Alice Dean’s place, but was a child prostitute there as well.  

In her memoir, Holiday, while not denying doing sex work, takes pains to cover up how early she started, and to deny its connection to her music. Holiday spent her youth bouncing between sex work and working as a domestic, like her mother before her. Holiday was deterred from prostitution by several bouts in prison. Watching her mother’s suffering and angered by the racist mistreatment of black domestic workers, she is determined “not to be anyone’s damn maid.” Singing appeared in her life as a kind of magical solution, a power that transcends the ravages of economics. One evening, desperate for money because she and her mother are going to lose their apartment, Holiday finds that she has the power to influence people with her singing and could actually make a living at it. She goes into a club begging for a job, and since she fails terribly at everything else, they ask her if she can sing.

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They were going to throw me out on my ear, but I kept begging for the job. Finally the piano player took pity on me. He squashed out his cigarette, looked up at me, and said, “Girl, can you sing?” I said sure I can sing, what good is that?” I had been singing all my life, but I enjoyed it too much to think I could make any real money at it. Besides, those were the days of the Cotton Club and all those glamour pusses who didn’t do nothing but look pretty, shake a little, and take money off the tables. I thought that was the only way to make money, and I needed forty-five bucks by morning to keep Mom from getting set out in the street. Singers were never heard of then, unless it was Paul Robeson, Julian Bledsoe, or someone legit like that. So I asked him to play “Trav’lin’ All Alone.” That came closer than anything to the way I felt. And some part of it must have come across. The whole joint quieted down. If someone had dropped a pin, it would have sounded like a bomb. When I finished, everybody in the joint was crying in their beer, and I picked thirty-eight bucks off the floor. When I left the joint that night I split with the piano player and still took home fifty-seven dollars.\(^\text{122}\)

The freedom she found in singing is contrasted throughout the memoir with Holiday’s numerous bouts with incarceration. But in another way, Holiday also places the origin of her artistry, her utterly unique powers of interpretation, in the prison and the bordello.

I’ve been told that nobody sings the word “hunger” like I do. Or the word “love.” Maybe I remember what those words are all about. Maybe I’m proud enough to remember Baltimore and Welfare Island, the Catholic institution and the Jefferson Market Court, the sheriff in front of our place in Harlem and the towns from coast to coast where I got my lumps and scars, Philly and Alderson, Hollywood and San Francisco—every damn bit of it. All the Cadillacs and minks in the world—and I’ve had a few—can’t make it up or make me forget it. All I’ve learned in all those places from all those people is wrapped up in those two little words. You’ve got to have something to eat and a little love in your life before you can hold still for any damn body’s sermon on how to behave. Everything I am and everything I want out of life goes smack back to that.\(^\text{123}\)

The experience of incarceration in Welfare Island, the Catholic Institution, The Women’s House of Detention, and the sheriffs who have taken her in have been central to her understanding of

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hunger and love, the essences of her artistry and message. Her memoir actually opens with the threat of incarceration occasioned by Holiday’s conception and birth.

Mom and Pop were just a couple of kids when I when they got married. He was eighteen, she was sixteen, and I was three. Mom was working as a maid with a white family. When they found out she was going to have baby they just threw her out. Pop’s family just about had a fit, too, when they heard about it. They were real society folks and they never heard of things like that going on in their part of East Baltimore. But both kids were poor. And when you’re poor you grow up fast. It’s a wonder my mother didn’t end up in the workhouse and me as a foundling.  

Workhouses were of course forms of incarceration for the poor in 19th and early 20th century United States. She portrays her very birth as possible grounds for both her mother’s and her own institutionalization, a fate that might have befall Holiday’s mother as both poor and as a pregnant unwed child. Biographers have shown that Holiday here obscured her origins in that her mother was 16 when she was born and that her parents actually never married. There has been much speculation as to why she altered her origins in this way. It is quite possible that she rewrote her life in this way in order to portray her own origins as clandestine and in danger of incarceration and institutionalization from day one. After being born in danger of capture by the state, she spent her entire life in and out of jails and institutions.

Holiday’s first time being incarcerated was after being kidnapped and almost raped when she was 10 years old. She is kidnapped by one of her neighbors, Mr. Dick who brings her to a deserted house and attempts to rape her. Her mother manages to find her.

When we got there instead of treating me and Mom like somebody who called the cops for help, they treated me like I’d killed somebody. They wouldn’t let my mother take me home. Mr. Dick was in his forties and I was only ten. Maybe the police sergeant took one look at my breasts and limbs and figured my age from that. I don’t know. Anyway, I guess they had me figured for having enticed this old goat into the whorehouse or something. All I know for sure is that they threw

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me into a cell. My mother cried and screamed and pleaded, but they just put her out of the jailhouse and turned me over to a fat white matron. When she saw I was still bleeding, she felt sorry for me and gave me a couple of glasses of milk. But nobody else ever did anything for me except give me filthy looks and snicker.\textsuperscript{125}

As should be no surprise at this point in this study, Holiday’s narrative of imprisonment quickly transforms into a Gothic narrative. After her time in jail, due to her extreme youth she is sentenced to five years in a Catholic institution.

I’ll never forget that place. It is run by the Catholic sisters, the kind that never go outside the four walls. When you go in they give you a blue and white uniform and a saint’s name. I drew the name of St. Theresa. There were about a hundred girls there, mostly for stealing and hooking from school. But they knew I was there on account of a man, so they all looked up to me as some sort of big shot.\textsuperscript{126}

The nuns in the institution through their cruelty and strangeness are reminiscent of the evil Catholic clergy in classic Gothic novels. Rather than punish the wards in their charge physically, the nuns prefer to deprive them of privileges and humiliate them. They force the misbehaving girls to wear a red punishment dress which is uncannily reminiscent of Hester Prynne being forced to wear the scarlet “A” in Hawthorn’s classic American Gothic \textit{The Scarlet Letter}. The introduction of the red punishment dress is also the occasion of introducing the sinister occult powers of the nuns.

I’ll never forget the first girl I saw wear the dress. She was a real wild one and she was alone in the back yard, standing on a swing. She kept swinging higher and higher, shouting and hollering, swinging higher and higher. She worked so hard she was puffing and huffing. And the kids stood around her; all eyes. The Mother Superior tried to keep the kids moving and break up the crowd of gawking girls. The girl in the raggedy red dress just kept swinging and screaming. I guess she figured as long as she stayed up there on the swing no one could touch her. The Mother Superior looked at her, the she turned to a group of us and said: “Just remember, God will punish her. God will punish her.” In a few seconds there was a terrible jerk. As she swung to the highest point she could make on the swing, the chair broke and the girl flew through the air, over the fence, screaming as she

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sailed through the air. Then there was a terrible thud and then nothing. When they found her, her neck was broken.\textsuperscript{127}

With the help of her employer, Holiday’s mother is eventually able to free her from the institution and moves them both to New York. But her mother is a live-in domestic and forced to board her in the city, in what turns out to be another house of prostitution. Holiday took up sex work, seduced by the possibilities of what seemed like easy money and luxury. However, Holiday ends up in jail after refusing a well-connected customer. Although she is only 13, upon her arrest her mother testifies that she is 18 to prevent her being sent again to an institution. This only results in her being incarcerated in an adult prison instead. She was incarcerated on Welfare Island, an equally Gothic reality as the Catholic institution she was locked up in in Baltimore. Her time incarcerated on Welfare Island is marked by giant rats and her introduction to solitary confinement, all at the age of thirteen years old.

The rats in that place were bigger than anything I’d seen in Baltimore. And they all seemed like they’d been trained. They’d walk right past without bothering you unless they were hungry. And even if they were hungry they wouldn’t bother the girls in the wards, they’d come in the kitchen just like a pet. I worked in the kitchen for a while, and there was one old rat, so beat up most of his fur was worn away, who came in regularly to get his chow…That place was the end—a cell so tiny there wasn’t any room to take one step. You had a cot, room to stand up or sit down, and that was it. No lights, it was so dark down there you lost track of night and day and had to give up counting your time. After a while you didn’t even care. They gave you two pieces of bread with saltpeter in it every day and some water. I had to do ten days on that diet, but I used to throw it back in their faces.\textsuperscript{128}

Her institutionalized childhood and this time in prison for prostitution set a pattern for the rest of her life, bouncing in and out of prison. This movement seems to mark a profound absence of domestic space in her memoir, so much so that the prison becomes a kind of default domestic space.


space. As we have seen earlier, since her mother was a live-in maid she was forced to continually board Holiday as a child, first with family and later in “houses” of prostitution. By age ten, Holiday was already institutionalized first in Catholic reform school and later incarcerated for sex work. Holiday attempts to escape incarceration as well as the life of a domestic, a forced servant in someone else’s home. Later at the height of her singing career, when she is later framed and incarcerated for possession of narcotics, there is an odd irony that the place of her imprisonment emerges as one of the most seemingly domestic spaces portrayed in the memoir.

After your first five months in the joint, you get assigned to a beautiful room with a hospital-type bed— not soft, not hard, but o.k. You had one comfortable chair and one straight chair. They let you buy material, if you got the loot, to make drapes and slip covers for the bed. But you have to keep the whole joint clean, waxing floors and everything. When inspection time comes, one of the matrons comes around with a white glove on her hand, and there better not be any dust on anything, or puff, there goes those cigarettes again… The only thing I wanted besides butts was a little yarn to knit with. I got on the knitting kick early and it really helped me from going nuts… After Marietta taught me, I knitted up a storm and got real fancy. I made cable knit sweaters for Bobby Tucker and his little boy. After I got to be a wheel in the kitchen, I used to take care of Marietta by saving her the best food, especially when she came home for lunch.129

The pronounced domesticity of Holiday’s portrayals of her time in federal prison is almost shocking when compared to the rest of the narrative. One of the great ironies of Holiday’s memoir is that after a lifetime of being denied a home and family that she appeared to find such pronounced domesticity in prison— sewing curtains, cooking for her roommate, and knitting away for friends and family. And, what are we to make of this domestic scene when compared to her earlier Gothic depictions of prison life and institutionalization as a child and a teenager in New York City? This contradiction in Holiday’s memoir points to the other literary resonances

in the text, to the Gothic novel and the slave narrative. These two literary forms are deeply intertwined both in *Lady Sings the Blues*, and as we shall see, historically.

These two literary discourses emerge together in the text when Holiday is a child in the care of her aunt. Given her aunt’s cruelty and her sexual abuse at the hands of her cousin, Holiday’s only solace is her great-grandmother.

She really loved me and I was crazy about her. She had been a slave on a big plantation in Virginia and she used to tell me about it. She had a little house in the back of the plantation. Mr. Charles Fagan, the handsome Irish plantation owner, had his white wife and children in the big house. And he had my great-grandmother out in back. She had sixteen children by him, and all of them were dead by then except Grandpop. We used to talk about life. And she used to tell me how it felt to be a slave, to be owned body and soul by a white man who was the father of her children. ¹³⁰

It’s interesting that Holiday uses the phrase “body and soul” in describing the ownership of slaves. “Body and Soul” was of course a popular love song that Holiday helped make famous and of which she recorded probably the definitive take. This off-hand remark links Holiday’s music to the legacy of slavery. As scholars like Angela Davis have argued, part of Holiday’s genius was to imbue the lyrics of seemingly superficial love songs with the gravity and intensity of African American struggles for liberation. Holiday’s great-grandmother was chair-bound for years, unable to lay down for fear of heart failure. Tired of constantly sleeping upright, and possibly weary of this world as well, her great-grandmother begs Holiday to let her lay down for a nap. Holiday helps great-grandmother out of her chair to lay down and tell her a story.

Finally I spread a blanket on the floor and helped her stretch out. Then she asked me to lie down with her because she wanted to tell me a story. I was tired too. I’d been up early that morning to scrub steps. So I laid with her. I don’t remember the story she told me because I fell asleep right away. I woke up four or five hours later. Grandma’s arm was still tight around my neck and I couldn’t move it. I tried and tried and then I got scared. She was dead, and I began to scream. The

neighbors came running. They had to break Grandma’s arm to get me loose. Then they took me to a hospital. I was there for a month. Suffering from what they said was shock. When I got home Cousin Ida started right in where she had left off, beating me. This time it was for letting Grandma out of her chair. The doctor tried to stop her. He said if she kept it up I’d grow up to be nervous. But they never stopped.\footnote{Billie Holiday with William Dufty, \textit{Lady Sings the Blues: 50th Anniversary Edition} (Harlem Moon: New York, 2006), 8.}

The image is indelible. The child Holiday asleep on a blanket with her dead great-grandmother’s arm wrapped and locked in rigor mortis around the child’s neck. Holiday makes a point that she doesn’t remember her great-grandmother’s last story on that fateful afternoon. We can assume that it was another story of slavery, of ownership, desire, and violence. The image and the story suggest that Holiday is haunted both by that incident and by her great-grandmother’s stories. This sense of haunting by her great-grandmother’s death and stories is emphasized by her repetition of the incident and its impact which Holiday directly connects later in the memoir with the experience of incarceration.

During her first time being institutionalized in the Catholic reform school, Holiday is disciplined by being deprived of privileges and forced to wear the red punishment dress. But this is not enough to satisfy the nun’s cruelty. On top of this, they force her to sleep with a dead body.

But this wasn’t punishment enough. They wouldn’t let me sleep in the dormitory with the other girls. Another girl had died and they had her laid out in the front room. And for punishment they locked me in the room with her for the night. Maybe it was the girl who broke her neck on the swing. I don’t really remember. All I knew is that I couldn’t stand dead people ever since my great-grandmother had died holding me in her arms. I couldn’t sleep. I couldn’t stand it. I screamed and banged on the door so, I kept the whole joint from sleeping. I hammered on the door until my hands were bloodied.\footnote{Billie Holiday with William Dufty, \textit{Lady Sings the Blues: 50th Anniversary Edition} (Harlem Moon: New York, 2006), 18.}
Holiday viscerally relates her experience of incarceration to the strangling experience of her great-grandmother’s death and the haunting stories of slavery that her great-grandmother transmitted to her. It is as if there is a tangle of forces and narrative threads at the center of Holiday’s memoir, an intertwining thread of the Blues, the Gothic, prison narratives, and haunting stories of slavery running through the book. Rather than this being something peculiar to Holiday’s experience, I would like to suggest that Holiday is pointing out that these are historically related discourses. The Blues, the Gothic, slave narratives, and prison literature are all deeply intertwined historically, and Holiday’s memoir is highlighting and riffing off of these interconnections in this layered presentation of the echoing, choking grasp of her dead great-grandmother.

Fleshing out these connections more fully will help illuminate Holiday’s memoir. In the previous chapters we have seen the deep and dialogical relationship between prison literature and the Gothic. But what of these other narratives? H. Bruce Franklin, a pioneer in the study of American prison literature, made the connections between prison narratives and the slave narratives quite clear in his classic study *Prison Literature in America: The Victim as Criminal and Artist*. According to Franklin, American prison literature is the critical continuation of the slave narratives, paralleling the uncanny continuation of slavery in convict labor. As scholars like Angela Davis in *Are Prisons Obsolete?* and Colin Dayan in *The Law is a White Dog* have noted in analysis of the 13th Amendment, this amendment is both the formal end of legal slavery in the United States and also served as the guarantor of the legalized enslavement of convicts. As the amendment states—"Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, except as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted, shall exist within the United States,

or any place subject to their jurisdiction." Therefore it was not as much the ending of slavery as
its occult continuation under disguised terms, with slavery and social death being then the legal
consequences inflicted upon those convicted of crimes. This took the form of the various forms
of convict leasing in the south and industrial prison labor in the north in the late 19th and 20th
century. As Franklin argues:

Under the convict lease system, prisoners were rented out to landowners, railroad
and mining companies, or contractors who then sublet them to employers. The
private lessee guarded, disciplined, fed, housed, and worked the convicts as they
saw fit. This system was indistinguishable from slavery except for the element of
“crime” and the much higher mortality rate. By the beginning of the twentieth
century it was under attack and was gradually being replaced by more
sophisticated systems, most of which have persisted to the present. There is the
“state account” method, in which the state actually goes into business, selling the
products of convict labor on the market. The enormously profitable prison farms
of Arkansas, Texas, and Mississippi are a form of state account. There is the
“state use,” in which the state does not sell but uses the products of prison labor.
Using convicts for public works, such as in chain gangs in the South, is actually a
form of state use. Under the “contract” system, a private employer contracts with
the state for the use of a certain number of convicts, but, unlike the convict lease
system, the state still maintains custody of the prisoners… Throughout the Black
Belt in the South, all these methods were until very recently fed by the fee system.
In this system, many local deputy sheriffs and police received no regular salary,
but were paid a fee for each person arrested. The judge who tried the accused then
drew his pay from the costs levied against those he found guilty…this system also
abundantly fed the institution of debt peonage, which itself “practically
reinstituted slavery.”

Franklin sees this uncanny transformation at work in the history of prison narratives. The
earliest criminal narratives in the United States were execution narratives from the 18th century.
These were confessional texts that were usually transcribed and edited by the minister attending
to a convicted criminal shortly before their execution. The criminal narrator would confess their
sins and then find salvation in Jesus prior to their death. These texts were common and extremely

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134 H. Bruce Franklin, Prison Literature in America: The Victim as Criminal and Artist (New York: Oxford University
Press, 1989), 103.
popular reading in 18th century America.\textsuperscript{135} As Franklin points out, these were narratives of an individual’s fall and redemption told first for the moral elevation of the audience in the 18th century and later for the titillation of an early 19th century audience with more sordid tastes. With the emergence of the penitentiary system during the 19th century in the United States there was a corresponding transformation of the literature of crime. The two emerging models for incarceration in the early 19th century, the solitary model at Eastern State Penitentiary in Philadelphia and the solitary labor system at Auburn Prison in New York, produced two corresponding modes of prison narratives. The solitary model gave birth to narratives of personal redemption and transformation in the context of solitary confinement, such as we have seen in the first chapter with the memoir of Jimmy Santiago Baca. The Auburn system, of industrial labor under conditions of silence, resulted in narratives that critiqued industrial labor in the context of incarceration. These narratives drew on conventions of slave narratives in their descriptions of forced labor, torture, and dehumanizing conditions. They also fed into later naturalist critiques of prison labor in the late 19th and early 20th century. In Franklin’s analysis the prison narratives of the 20th century are the inheritors of the slave narratives of the 19th century, because the modern prison system is an uncanny and occult repetition of slavery.\textsuperscript{136}

As the prison memoir is rooted in the slave narrative, the slave narratives themselves are also deeply indebted to the Gothic novel. That their language and imagery are indebted to the Gothic is not to say that they were fictionalized, but the Gothic was the only cultural discourse available that could even begin to describe the horrors of slavery. As Maisha L. Webster elucidates in her study of the Gothic roots of African American literature:

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…the slave narrator’s life was extraordinarily and innately Gothic, needing no fictionalizing to augment market appeal. Despite their formulaic tales and determinations to prove their claim that they are not fictionalizing or performing acts of “poiesis” but are exercising “clear-glass, neutral memory that is neither creative nor faulty”… the ex-slave writers, among many others, manage to inscribe Gothic formulations within their narrative beyond mere plot. The very life of the slave is also inevitably a Gothic existence. The murders/suicides, rapes, entrapment and escape cycles, torture (brutal whippings), and familial secrets (illegitimate births) that make up numerous Gothic plots constitute the real, daily existence under slavery. Therefore, these writers have recourse to Gothic ideological tropes, exercising them as rhetorical asides upon an already Gothic plot. Furthermore, as texts such as *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* illustrate, the slave narrative easily transitions, typologically and ideologically, into the Gothic novelistic mode.

If we take Webster’s example of the Gothic currents at work in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, the narrative focuses on Harriet Jacobs’s struggles to free herself and her children from slavery to escape the lecherous clutches of her de facto owner Dr. Flint who intended to force her into a sexual relationship. In defiance of Dr. Flint, “Brent” pursued romantic relationships of her own free choosing. First with a free black carpenter and then later with a white man and future congressman, Mr. Sands (Samuel Tredwell Sawyer), resulting in her two children. After essentially faking her own escape to the north and then being hidden first in an attic and then in a garret behind her grandmother’s house for seven years, Brent is able to finally escape to the north and free herself and her children. The horrors of corporal punishments and sexual depravity described by Jacobs have been taken as signs of the novel’s debt to the Gothic by scholars like Webster and Teresa Goddu. Dr. Flint in his violence and sexual depravity is easily a villain out of any classic Gothic novel. However, I would argue that it is Jacobs’s long imprisonment hiding in the garret that is the most Gothic aspect of her story.

A small shed had been added to my grandmother’s house years ago. Some boards were laid across the joists at the top, and between these boards and the roof was a very small garret, never occupied by anything but rats and mice. It was a pent roof, covered with nothing but shingles, according to the southern custom for such buildings. The garret was only nine feet long and seven wide. The highest part
was three feet high, and sloped down abruptly to the loose board floor. There was no admission for either light or air. My uncle Phillip, who was a carpenter, had very skillfully made a concealed trap-door, which communicated with the storeroom. He had been doing this while I was waiting in the swamp. The storeroom opened upon a piazza. To this hole I was conveyed as soon as I entered the house. The air was stifling; the darkness total. A bed had been spread upon the floor. I could sleep quite comfortably on one side; but the slope was so sudden that I could not turn on the other without hitting the roof. The rats and mice ran over my bed; but I was weary, and slept as the wretched may, when a tempest has passed over them. Morning came. I knew it only by the noises I heard; for in my small den day and night were all the same. I suffered even more for air than for light. But I was not comfortless. I heard the voices of my children.  

Alone and cramped in the stifling darkness, Jacobs hungered for sight of her children, her reason for survival. She bores a hole in the wall so she can peek out and see her family and life on the street.

"Now I will have some light. Now I will see my children." I did not dare to begin my work during the daytime, for fear of attracting attention. But I groped round; and having found the side next to the street, where I could frequently see my children, I stuck the gimlet in and waited for evening. I bored three rows of holes, one above another; then I bored out the interstices between. I thus succeeded in making one hole about an inch long and an inch broad. I sat by it till late into the night, to enjoy the little whiff of air that floated in. In the morning I watched for my children… At last I heard the merry laugh of children, and presently two sweet little faces were looking up at me, as though they knew I was there, and were conscious of the joy they imparted. How I longed to tell them I was there!

Jacobs remained in that garret, peeping out onto her children and the larger world for seven years. Her predicament is reminiscent of the worst extremes of solitary confinement that we have seen from the prison narratives. It also quickly brings to mind the nightmare of premature burial that plays out so prominently in Gothic literature. However, it is also strikingly reminiscent of the predicament of one of the most memorable anti-heroes of the Gothic novel, Frankenstein’s monster. After his rejection by Dr. Frankenstein, the monster flees across

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Europe. He travels only by night for fear of the rejection, horror, and violence of human beings. He luckily happens upon a small cottage with an adjoining shed behind which he finds shelter. He also luckily finds a peephole onto domestic life.

On examining my dwelling, I found that one of the windows of the cottage had formerly occupied a part of it, but the panes had been filled up with wood. In one of these was a small and almost imperceptible chink through which the eye could just penetrate. Through this crevice a small room was visible, whitewashed and clean but very bare of furniture. In one corner, near a small fire, sat an old man, leaning his head on his hands in a disconsolate attitude. The young girl was occupied in arranging the cottage; but presently she took something out of a drawer, which employed her hands, and she sat down beside the old man, who, taking up an instrument, began to play and to produce sounds sweeter than the voice of the thrush or the nightingale. It was a lovely sight, even to me, poor wretch who had never beheld aught beautiful before. The silver hair and benevolent countenance of the aged cottager won my reverence, while the gentle manners of the girl enticed my love. He played a sweet mournful air which I perceived drew tears from the eyes of his amiable companion, of which the old man took no notice, until she sobbed audibly; he then pronounced a few sounds, and the fair creature, leaving her work, knelt at his feet. He raised her and smiled with such kindness and affection that I felt sensations of a peculiar and overpowering nature; they were a mixture of pain and pleasure, such as I had never before experienced, either from hunger or cold, warmth or food; and I withdrew from the window, unable to bear these emotions.138

The family that the monster adopts is in exile from Paris due to the misfortunes visited upon their father by jealous rivals and the son’s ill-fated love affair with an Arab Christian woman who later joins them in exile. The father of the family is blind and his son and daughter dote on him with kindness and true devotion. The monster receives a kind of sentimental education peering at their peephole. He learns to speak by eavesdropping on their conversations. He learns history and philosophy by listening to their reading aloud. And most importantly, by eavesdropping and peeping upon their familial bonds and devotion the monster learns to desperately desire domesticity, family and romantic love. After many months of creeping and observing the family,

the monster reveals himself to them desperately hoping that he will be accepted into their circle. They are completely unprepared for his monstrosity, and assault him, banishing him from their cottage.

The monster then tracks down his creator, Dr. Frankenstein, to demand that the Doctor create him a companion, so that he can enjoy the companionship and love that any human being would desire.

If any being felt emotions of benevolence towards me, I should return them a hundred and a hundredfold; for that one creature's sake I would make peace with the whole kind! But I now indulge in dreams of bliss that cannot be realized. What I ask of you is reasonable and moderate; I demand a creature of another sex, but as hideous as myself; the gratification is small, but it is all that I can receive, and it shall content me. It is true, we shall be monsters, cut off from all the world; but on that account we shall be more attached to one another. Our lives will not be happy, but they will be harmless and free from the misery I now feel. Oh! My creator, make me happy; let me feel gratitude towards you for one benefit! Let me see that I excite the sympathy of some existing thing; do not deny me my request!"139

There are a number of powerful resonances between Frankenstein’s monster and Harriet Jacobs’s narrator. Superficially we have this same remarkable image of the runaway hidden away in the garret behind the house, and in each case the hidden fugitive finds solace at a peephole. In each case the peephole looks out onto a view of domestic and intimate life that is denied to them. Frankenstein’s peephole looks into a scene of domestic devotion and romantic love that he will never be able to enjoy himself due to his physical monstrosity. For Jacobs, while her peephole looks out onto the street, the peephole allows her to spy her children and also her white lover, both of whom are denied her by the dehumanizing brutality of slavery. Slavery denies her legal rights to her family and as well as the right to romantic and sexual autonomy.

Although Frankenstein was written over forty years before Jacobs’s narrative, there is substantial evidence that Mary Shelley was in part inspired by the horrors of slavery in the Americas when constructing her monster. Her parents William Godwin and Mary Wollstonecraft were both in favor of the abolition of slavery. H. L. Malchow has argued that Shelley based her description of the monster on racist caricatures of Africans as dark, deformed, and apelike. In Malchow’s view the monster’s plots of revenge on Frankenstein—killing his family and bride—were based in part on stories of slave insurrections from the United States and Caribbean.\(^\text{140}\) The Frankenstein monster’s constant peregrinations, hiding and running to avoid capture and violence from horrified people, are strangely reminiscent of the hazardous journeys of an escaped slave. It is notable that Frankenstein’s monster promises several times to flee to the wilds of South America with his companion if he is granted his bride by Frankenstein. It is as if they would disappear into the mountains like escaped maroons. Lastly, throughout the novel, both Frankenstein and his monster argue over who is the master and who is the slave, as the monster attempts to torture and blackmail Frankenstein into creating his bride by killing off his family and loves one by one. For instance, this passage is one of many where the monster confronts Frankenstein.

"Slave, I before reasoned with you, but you have proved yourself unworthy of my condescension. Remember that I have power; you believe yourself miserable, but I can make you so wretched that the light of day will be hateful to you. You are my creator, but I am your master; obey!"\(^\text{141}\)

In *Slavery and the Romantic Imagination*, Debbie Lee has argued that *Frankenstein* was integrally influenced and in turn influenced British debates about slavery. Lee argues that


\(^{141}\) Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2012), 120.
Frankenstein is shot through with images of cannibalism and vampirism that relate to England’s vampiric relationships with its colonies. *Frankenstein’s* vision of a monstrous creation gone out of control reflects British fears of both their colonies and the monster of slavery that they had created.

Indeed, the parallels between *Frankenstein* and British lawmakers are striking. Within the emancipation debate itself, lawmakers accused each other of committing the same sin Frankenstein blames himself for: having "bred and reared the negro" but having not measured "out to him, with merciful liberality, all that may conduce to his happiness — and that may advance his welfare." Like Frankenstein, these lawmakers protected the "beings of their own species" — plantation owners and British consumers — rather than courageously solving the monstrous problem they had created. So monstrous was the problem, it was appropriate for Canning to invoke Shelley's novel to help his fellow members of Parliament effectively imagine the problem of consumption in African-British relations. The interaction between Shelley's novel and the parliamentary debates demonstrates how issues of slavery were fundamental to a strain of Romantic imaginative writings. More importantly, it underscores the fear of social chaos Britons imagined as the end of the slave system, and the real face-to-face encounter, drew near. Mary Shelley mapped out one possible course of events: the failure of alterity is pronounced quietly but firmly in the last moments of the novel: "Yet I seek not a fellow-feeling in my misery. No sympathy may I ever find," the creature says as he drifts off into the dark and frozen sea.¹⁴²

In her study of the intertextuality of British women’s and American slave narratives, *Subjects of Slavery, Agents of Change: Women and Power in Gothic Novels and Slave Narratives, 1790-1865*, Kari J. Winter argues for the central role played by domesticity in both bodies of work. Winter argues that the domestic space appeared as a place of imprisonment for both Gothic women writers and survivors of slavery. Moreover the Gothic writers often used the metaphor of slavery to describe their own condition.¹⁴³ Conversely, Gothic writers (and as we have seen authors of the slave narratives) also countered the enslaving home with an ideal home,

a lost Edenic home, as Kate Ferguson Ellis argues in her classic study of the Gothic and domestic ideology.

Focusing on crumbling castles as sites of terror, and on homeless protagonists who wander the face of the earth, the Gothic, too, is preoccupied with home. But it is the failed home that appears on its pages, the place from which some (usually “fallen” men) are locked out, and others (usually “innocent” women) are locked in. The theme of “paradise lost” links the paired strands of literary Gothicism that critics have variously identified as Radcliffian and Lewisite, “feminine” and “masculine,” “terror Gothic” and “horror Gothic.” Either the home has lost its prelapsarian purity and is in need of rectification, or else the wandering protagonist has been driven from the home in a grotesque reenactment of God’s punishment of Satan, Adam, and Eve.¹⁴⁴

For Ferguson Ellis, Frankenstein unites these opposing strands of horror and terror, which may further explain its uncanny resonances with the slave narratives.

If we shift now to the Blues tradition, there is a strong body of literature linking the Blues to the narratives and legacies of slavery and to the history of prison literature. Scholars like Amiri Baraka and H. Bruce Franklin, have linked the origin of the Blues to the spirituals.¹⁴⁵ Similarly, a great number of the most prominent artists in the history of the Blues began their singing in prison, such as Leadbelly, among many others. And, the experience of incarceration is one of the most prominent themes in the Blues. If we take Bessie Smith, whom Holiday often pointed to as an influence, some of her most moving Blues are about incarceration.

Thirty days in jail, with my back turned to the wall, turned to the wall  
Thirty days in jail, with my back turned to the wall  
Look here, Mr. Jail Keeper, put another gal in my stall

I don't mind bein’ in jail, but I got to stay there so long, so long  
I don't mind bein’ in jail, but I got to stay there so long, so long  
Well, every friend I had is done shook hands and gone

You better stop your man from ticklin' me under my chin, under my chin

You better stop your man from ticklin' me under my chin
'Cause if he keeps on ticklin', I'm sure gonna take him on in

Good mornin’ Blues, Blues how do you do, how do you do?
Good mornin’ Blues, Blues how do you do?
Say, I just come here to have a few words with you

However, we might not immediately think of the Blues as a Gothic discourse. We should not forget that the Blues were nicknamed the Devil’s music, in contrast to the pious, long suffering, plaints of the spirituals.146 Since Robert Johnson’s famed deal with the Devil at the crossroads, the Blues have been rife with imagery of supernatural horror. To turn again to Holiday’s favorite Bessie Smith, the most Gothic song that she recorded was probably “Blue Spirit Blues,” penned by Spencer Williams.

    Had a dream last night that I was dead
    Had a dream last night that I was dead
    Evil spirits all around my bed
    
    The devil came and grabbed my hand
    The devil came and grabbed my hand
    Took me way down to that red hot land
    
    Mean Blues spirits stuck their forks in me
    Mean Blues spirits stuck their forks in me
    Made me moan and groan in misery
    
    Fairies and dragons spittin’ out blue flames
    Fairies and dragons spittin’ out blue flames
    Showin’ their teeth, for they was glad I came
    
    Demons with their eyelash dripping blood
    Demons with their eyelash dripping blood
    Dragging sinners to their brimstone flood
    
    "This is hell", I cried, cried with all my might
    "This is hell", I cried, cried with all my might
    Oh, my soul I can't bear the sight
    
    Started running 'cause it is my cup

Started running 'cause it is my cup  
Run so fast till someone woke me up\textsuperscript{147}

Smith’s interpretation of the song, recorded in 1929, is suitably dramatic, a plaintive wail backed by a discordant funeral march and eerie tremolos. The apocalyptic lyrics with their visions of devils, faeries, dragons, and demons that drag, cut, and burn the song’s narrator can only make us wonder what is the social content of this vision? What is the actual horror that is being processed by this dream work and fantasy? The Gothic tone of “Blue Spirit Blues” is neither an isolated song in Smith’s oeuvre, nor out of character within the larger body of songs in the Blues canon. Just in Smith’s work alone there are many other songs like this, such as “Graveyard Dream Blues,” “Cemetery Blues,” and the “Haunted House Blues.” This Gothic character of the Blues has been seen by some scholars as a symptom of common superstitions at play in African American culture. Scholars of the Blues like Paul Oliver have seen the ghosts, curses, jinxes, and hoodoo presented in the Blues as simply a reflection of the folk beliefs that were common in African American culture in the early 20\textsuperscript{th} century.\textsuperscript{148} Other scholars, like Gerhard Kubik, have placed more import on those folk beliefs, seeing these “superstitions” as remarkable survivals of traditional African culture in the Americas, seeing Legba and Egungun playing their traditional roles disguised as the devil and haints.\textsuperscript{149} However, for those familiar with both traditions of Southern Hoodoo as well as traditional African religions, the visceral horror of these songs is quite remarkable, unlike anything in the liturgies of these spiritual traditions. It is notable that these Gothic moments in the Blues are almost always connected with missing lovers. For

\textsuperscript{147} Angela Davis, \textit{Blues Legacies and Black Feminism} (New York: Vintage Books, 1999), 268.  
\textsuperscript{148} Paul Oliver, \textit{Blues Fell this Morning: Meaning in the Blues} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1960), 117-137.  
\textsuperscript{149} Gerhard Kubick, \textit{Africa in the Blues} (Jackson: University of Mississippi, 1999), 21-50.
instance, if we look to Smith’s “Graveyard Dream Blues,” the horror of the story revolves around a trip to the cemetery to visit a dead lover’s grave.

Blues on my mind, Blues all around my head
Blues on my mind, and Blues all around my head
I dreamed last night that the man that I love was dead

I went to the graveyard, fell down on my knees
I went to the graveyard, fell down on my knees
And I asked the gravedigger to give me back my real good man please

The gravedigger look me in the eye
The gravedigger look me in the eye
Said "I'm sorry lady but your man has said his last goodbye"

I wrung my hands and I wanted to scream
I wrung my hands and I wanted to scream
But when I woke up I found it was only a dream.¹⁵⁰

According to Blues musician and scholar Adam Gussow, these Gothic passages in the Blues have to be read in the context of the history of lynching in the United States, which was at its height during the emergence of the Blues as an art form. Turning back to the “Blue Spirit Blues,” the song’s description of the victim’s being pierced, dragged, and burned are eerily similar to the real tortures experienced by victims of lynching. The dream’s odd menagerie of supernatural torturers—including devils, demons, faeries, and dragons—echoes the infernal hierarchies of the Ku Klux Klan, whose officers’ titles included “Wizards,” “Dragons,” “Furies,” “Goblins,” “Cyclops,” and “Ghouls.”¹⁵¹ The numerous graveyard dreams of the Blues in the early 20th century are, in Gussow’s reading, lyrical transpositions and coded protests of the kinds of horrors that were being inflicted on African American men at the time. These songs are graveside

laments by African American women for all of the men that they have lost to lynching. As we have seen in earlier analysis of the Gothic, it inevitably opens onto the vista of real horrors.\(^{152}\)

Holiday has not usually been seen through the lens of the Gothic. But in the light of the Gothic strategies at play in Smith’s work, it is quite easy to see these same patterns at work in Holiday’s songs. In analyzing the lyrics there are of course songs that Holiday wrote herself and those that were written for her or adopted from popular song writers. However, Holiday stressed many times in her autobiography and interviews that she couldn’t stand to sing a song that she didn’t feel, that she had to fully experience and embody the heart of a song to be able to interpret it. While in her early career she was forced to take and record whatever songs were assigned to her from Tin Pan Alley composers by her recording company, by the time of her mature work she was selecting and controlling her own repertoire for both concert and recording. So although she may not be the author of the lyrics, she is making a statement through the songs that she chose to interpret and represent her image. Through the selection and interpretation of material, Holiday wove a tapestry that commented upon desire, race, gender, poverty, and incarceration, in addition to the sharp insights of the lyrics that she penned herself. As is attested to multiple times in her memoir, few songs were associated with Holiday as much as “Gloomy Sunday” and “Strange Fruit.” Both are immensely Gothic in tone and content. Although some critics and historians questioned Holiday’s choice to perform and record “Strange Fruit” seeing it as a form of political opportunism or questioning her firsthand experience of lynching, her decision to bring this song to life is clearly within the Blues tradition that she inherited. If we look at the lyrics of “Strange Fruit” it is as if they make concrete what had been transposed and obscured in the lyrics of earlier Blues artists like Bessie Smith.

Southern trees bear a strange fruit
Blood on the leaves and blood at the root
Black bodies swingin' in the Southern breeze
Strange fruit hangin' from the poplar trees

Pastoral scene of the gallant South
The bulgin' eyes and the twisted mouth
Scent of magnolias sweet and fresh
Then the sudden smell of burnin' flesh

Here is a fruit for the crows to pluck
For the rain to gather, for the wind to suck
For the sun to rot, for the tree to drop
Here is a strange and bitter crop.¹⁵³

While earlier songs by Blues performers would typically soften or take back the harsh content of the song by declaring its narrative a dream at the end, “Strange Fruit” is uncompromising in portraying the horror and death of lynching. The other song that Holiday records in her memoir being asked repeatedly to perform is “Gloomy Sunday,” which in light of these other lyrics also clearly emerges as a kind of Gothic narrative. The song portrays a woman dreaming of her lover’s death. Overcome with sorrow at their demise, the narrator of the song decides to commit suicide to join her lover, unable to go on without them.

Sunday is gloomy
My hours are slumberless
Dearest the shadows
I live with are numberless
Little white flowers will
Never awaken you
Not where the black coach
Of sorrow has taken you
Angels have no thought of
Ever returning you
Would they be angry
If I thought of joining you
Gloomy Sunday

Gloomy is Sunday
With shadows I spend it all

My heart and I have
Decided to end it all
Soon there'll be candles
And prayers that are sad
I know, let them not weep
Let them know
That I'm glad to go

Death is no dream
For in death I'm caressing you
With the last breath of my
Soul I'll be blessing you

Gloomy Sunday
Dreaming
I was only dreaming
I wake and I find you
Asleep in the deep of
My heart
Dear

Darling I hope that my dream
Never haunted you
My heart is telling you
How much I wanted you
Gloomy Sunday

The original “Gloomy Sunday” was written in Hungarian by Rezso Serees in 1933 and was a Gothic meditation on love, poverty and the rise of fascism in Europe. Uncannily, the song took flight landing first in England, where it was banned, and finally the U.S. where it was arranged by Sam M. Lewis and recorded by Billie Holiday. The song was one of Holiday’s absolute signature numbers and spawned over sixty interpretations, including a horror movie the Kovak Box. It was also banned for its supposed power to induce suicides.

The song rapidly became internationally known and was alleged to have been banned on a few radio stations when claims spread about listeners becoming so depressed by it that they killed themselves. Scant evidence exists to prove such

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assertions, and even though it may have not been widely banned, the legend persists as strongly as ever.¹⁵⁵

By recording this song, Holiday clearly placed herself at the crossroads of the Blues and Gothic traditions. It invokes the histories of graveyard poetry, the lynching nightmares of the Blues, as well as the solitary nightmares and ruminations of the prison narrative. Given these Gothic and Blues undertones in Holiday’s oeuvre, we might wonder if there is similar estrangement from domestic life at play in her work. Did Holiday, like Frankenstein’s monster or Harriet Jacobs, have her eye peeping through to a domestic and intimate life that was denied to her? Although there are no recorded Billie Holiday numbers about looking through a peephole, I would argue that this historical dynamic manifests in her work through her many songs about the tortures of solitude and ephemerality of domestic happiness. Probably Holiday’s most famous meditation on loneliness is her recording of Ellington’s song “Solitude” from which I’ve taken this chapter’s title—“In my solitude you haunt me/With reveries of days gone by.” Less famous is Holiday’s truly desolate song “Left Alone,” one of only ten songs that Holiday penned herself.

First they hurt me, then desert me
I'm left alone, all alone

There's no house that I can call my home
There's no place from which I'll never roam
Town or city, it's a pity
I'm left alone, all alone

Seek and find they always say
But up to now it's not that way
Maybe fate has let him pass me by
Or perhaps we'll meet before I die
Hearts will open, but until then

I'm left alone, all alone¹⁵⁶

The sorrow and emotional desolation of this lyric are palpable with its absolute refrain of “I’m left alone, all alone.” I think it is important to hear this lyric with Holiday’s extensive personal history of imprisonment in mind. And, one could easily imagine Frankenstein’s monster or a runaway slave composing a similar song. In the lyric’s narrative she is deprived of a home so absolutely that the expression of her essential homelessness requires a double negative—“There's no place from which I'll never roam.”

This song works in tandem with Holiday’s many recorded songs pointing to the ephemerality of love and family, like “Nice Work If You Can Get It,” “Yesterdays,” and Trav’lin Light.” Probably her most powerful song on the ephemerality of love and family being “God Bless the Child,” also one of the songs that she penned herself.

Money, you’ve got lots of friends
Crowding round your door
But when you’re gone, and spending ends
They don’t come round no more
Rich relations give
Crust of bread and such
You can help yourself
But don’t take too much
Mama may have, Papa may have
But God bless the child that’s got his own
That’s got his own

Mama may have, Papa may have
But God bless the child that’s got his own
That’s got his own
He just don’t worry ’bout nothin’
Cause he’s got his own

The song points to the centrality of money in human relationships, but more importantly it portrays the fickleness and greed that make all human relationships fundamentally ephemeral.

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And, it points to an essential human loneliness for the one who has “got his own,” a combined self-sufficiency and definitive solitude.

These themes contrast with intense desire that Holiday repeats again and again in her memoir for the bliss of domestic life.

Look at my big dream! It’s always been to have a big place of my own out in the country someplace where I could take care of stray dogs and orphan kids, kids that didn’t ask to be born; kids that didn’t ask to be black, blue or green or something in between. I’d only want to be sure of one thing—that nobody in the world wanted these kids. Then I would take them. They’d have to be illegit, no mama, no papa. I’d have room for twenty-five or thirty, with three or four big buxom loving women just like my mom to take care of them, feed them, see to it the little bastards go to school; knock them in the head when they’re wrong, but love them whether they’re good or bad. We’d have a crazy big kitchen with chartreuse stove and a refrigerator to match, and I’d supervise the cooking and baking. We might have a doctor and a nurse and a couple of tutors. But I’d always be around to teach them my kind of teaching—not the kind that tells you how to spell Mississippi, but how to be glad to be who you are and what you are.158

Holiday dreams not of being a mother exactly, but of providing an entire orphanage full of children of color with everything that she herself lacked as a child. A team of mothers who could give them everything that she truly desired. Uncannily and somewhat sadly, Holiday’s dream of domestic bliss strangely resembles a beautifully and kindly run reform school. Farah Jasmine Griffin has argued quite eloquently that Holiday’s frequently expressed fantasies of domesticity in her memoir and popular media were an attempt to regain respectability after her arrests and imprisonment for narcotics.159 However, I think that they should also be read simultaneously as the sincere desires of someone who had never really had a home, someone who had grown up in bordellos and institutions, and spent their adulthood on the road, on the run, and in and out of prison. This reading helps us understand the centrality of incarceration to her life and work,


which was the root behind the way she sang the word “hunger” and the word “love.” It also helps us to read the interweaving counterpoint of the Blues, the Gothic, and the stories of slavery echoing in her songs. Her memoir illustrates the deep historical relationships between the Blues, the Gothic, slave narratives, and prison narratives, that we might term the Gothic Blues.
Chapter 5

Zombies, Ogres, Pigs, and Other Devils: Representations of Monstrosity in African American Prison Narratives

In the previous four chapters we have explored the many Gothic strategies at work in the writings of African American and Latina/o prison writers in the mid to late 20th century. In the first chapter, we saw how Jimmy Santiago Baca’s memoir *A Place to Stand* uses images of the incarcerated as a kind of ghost or revenant in order to critique the horrors of solitary confinement as live burial. In the second chapter, we saw how Iceberg Slim played with the boundaries of the unspeakable when attempting to describe the tortures of prison as well as monstrous representations of sexuality and gender non-conformity in *Mama Black Widow*. In the third chapter, we saw how Miguel Piñero and Salvador Agron transformed representations of Puerto Ricans as vampires as they challenged both U.S. colonialism and incarceration. Lastly, we saw how Billie Holiday’s seemingly cool Blues artistry in *Lady Sings the Blues* invoked the solitude and suffering of Frankenstein, slavery, and lynching. Each of these writers can be read as wrestling with monstrous representations of criminals and incarceration in order to critique societal injustice and create a space to reassert their fundamental humanity.

Given the way that consideration of the Gothic strategies at work in these writers points to the monstrous representations of criminals, in this concluding chapter we will look more deeply into the trends in modern history that seek to frame criminals and prisoners as monsters, as well as the challenges that prison writers face when they engage with these metaphors. A range of contemporary thinkers have shown from quite different vantage points how metaphors
of monstrosity have been central to the conception and treatment of crime and punishment since the 18th century. I will first review the most important trends in this framework. I will focus on Colin Dayan’s treatment of incarceration as a form of zombification in *The Law is a White Dog: How Legal Rituals Make and Unmake Persons*, Michel Foucault’s notes on monstrosity and incarceration in his 1975 lectures on the “abnormal,” Karen Halttunen’s consideration of monstrosity in 17th through 19th century American crime writings in *Murder Most Foul: The Killer and the American Gothic Imagination*, and the monstrous representations of African Americans in 19th and 20th century literature according to Elizabeth Young in *Black Frankenstein: The Making of an American Metaphor*. I will then turn to a series of African American prison writers from the 18th to the 20th century to see how they engage with these themes. I will begin with *Sketches of the Life of Joseph Mountain, a Negro* from 1790, then the recently rediscovered *The Life and the Adventures of a Haunted Convict* by Austin Reed from the 1850s, Chester Himes’ story “To What Red Hell?” from the 1930s, then George Jackson’s prison letters of the 1960s, and finally end with Sanyika Shakur’s *Monster: The Autobiography of an L.A. Gang Member* from the 1990s. This large historical arc will make clear the continuing importance and striking evolution in the use of metaphors of monstrosity in African American prison writings.

The overarching metaphorical paradigm of Colin Dayan’s analysis of incarceration and civil death in her study *The Law is a White Dog: How Legal Rituals Make and Unmake Persons* is based on the practice of stealing souls in the creation of a zombies. Dayan had previously done extensive fieldwork and history of Haitian Vodou, charting the ways that Vodou religious and magical practices are both sites of resistance to colonial forces, but also haunted by the horrors and power structures of slavery. In her analysis of the laws of incarceration, Dayan begins with a
kind of parable, remembering the horrid work of a houngan she had encountered in Haiti years ago.

In Port-au-Prince, Haiti, I heard a story about a white dog. Reclaimed by a houngan—a priest who “deals with both hands,” practicing “bad” magic—a ghost dog comes to life. Starving, its eyes wild, it appears late at night. A Haitian friend calls it a “dog without skin.” To have white skin was to have no skin at all. But this creature was not really a dog. When a person died, the spirit, stolen by the houngan, awakened from what had seemed sure death into a new existence in canine disguise. We all agreed that no spirit formerly in a human habitation would want to end up reborn in the skin of a dog. Being turned into a dog was bad enough, but to end up losing its natural color, to turn white, was worse. In this metamorphosis, the old skin of the dead person, like the skin discarded by the snake, is left behind. But the person’s spirit remains immured in this coarse envelope, locked in the form of a dog. 160

Contrary to the lore of American monster movies that would make us think the zombie was a reanimated corpse, the actual zombie is a captured enslaved soul, a spirit stolen and imprisoned within a bottle, a cauldron, or in this tale into the corpse of a dead skinned dog. Dayan considers legal formulations of “civil death” as a comparable form of sorcery, magical incantations that capture the souls of the incarcerated and deprives them of life. Civil death is a legal principle in both American and British law reaching back to the Middle Ages, whereby a convicted felon is permanently deprived of all legal rights, ending their marriage, dispersing the convict’s property to their heirs, and nullifying any and all contracts. Although this principle lessened in strength in American legal practice from the late 19th to mid-20th century, it is far from being a fiction. It is alive and well in the continued deprivation of prisoners’ civil rights, as well as the life-long disenfranchisement and deprivation of livelihood inflicted upon felons once they are released from prison. 161

Dayan carefully charts the transitions in conceptions of civil death in relation to conceptions of personhood and legal rights under slavery. In Dayan’s view the two legal frameworks developed in tandem in the 19th century, with the slave being deprived of all legal personhood except for the ability to be held culpable of a crime, and the criminal increasingly deprived of all legal personhood, with these two conceptions then fusing in the legal allowance for enslaving criminals in the Thirteenth Amendment.

The Thirteenth Amendment marked the discursive link between the civilly dead felon and the slave or social nonperson. Criminality was racialized and race criminalized. The chiasmus that had once made racial kinship a criminal affiliation, once adjusted to the demands of incarceration resulted in a novel banishment and exile. This amendment, too often obscured by attention to the Fourteenth Amendment, is essential to understanding how the burdens and disabilities that constituted the badges of slavery took powerful hold on the language of penal compulsion. Once the connection between prisons and slaves had been made, slavery could resurface under other names not only in the South but also in the North.¹⁶²

Dayan’s analysis shows that far from endeavoring to resurrect and rehabilitate criminals, despite the prison managers’ and reformers’ claims to the contrary, the legal system itself and emerging systems of incarceration in the 19th century aimed to capture, dehumanize, and contain the convicted, like the spirit of a zombie sewn into a dog’s corpse. The convict lease system and the chain gangs instituted during reconstruction were not imposed in order to rehabilitate, but to reinstitute slavery and to criminalize African American lives. They were instituted to deprive people of their legal personhood.

Dayan’s analysis of civil death, zombification, and containment of criminals resonates with Foucault’s analysis of conceptions of monstrosity in the rise of incarceration as a form of

punishment in the modern period, which he considered in a series of lectures at the Collège de France in 1974 through 75. In these lectures, Foucault charts the transition from medieval conceptions of monstrosity to modern conceptions of abnormality in criminology, penology, and psychiatry. Foucault proposes that prior to the modern period the legal conception of monstrosity focused on the problems presented by physical deformity, including severe birth defects, Siamese twins, and hermaphrodites. These people existed at the limits of medieval and Renaissance conceptions of humanity, raising questions of the nature of the soul, human autonomy, and sexual identity.

Foucault identities a shift in conceptions of monstrosity and the law at the time of the French Revolution, with the previous legal obsession with physical difference being replaced by two new monsters, the corrupt vampiric royalty that lives off the poor and the angry cannibalistic mob that breaks the social contract. This transformation pivots on the use of punitive power and, according to Foucault, occasions the rise of the Gothic novel itself.

…the reactivation of these themes and the new picture of bestial savagery are linked to the reorganization of political power and the new rules for its exercise. It was not by chance that the monster appeared in connection with the trial of Louis XVI and the September massacres, which were, as you know, a sort of popular demand for a justice that was more violent, speedy, direct, and fair than institutional justice. The two figures of the monster appeared around the problem of law and the exercise of institutional power. These figures were important for another reason. They were echoed widely in the literature of the age, literature in the most traditional sense of the term, or in any case the literature of terror. It seems to me that the sudden irruption of the literature of terror at the end of the eighteenth century, in the years roughly contemporary with the revolution, are connected to this new economy of punitive power. It is the unnatural nature of the criminal, the monster, that appears at this moment…On the one hand we see the monster of the abuse of power: the prince, the lord, the wicked priest, and the guilty monk. Then, in this same literature of terror, there is also the monster from below who returns to wild nature: the brigand, the man of the forest, the brute
Foucault’s analysis confirms a running theme throughout this study that the Gothic novel is intimately connected to modern conceptions of criminality and punishment. According to Foucault, in the shift from the 18th to the 19th century the monster ceases to be the limit case of the law, like Siamese twins or hermaphrodites, but instead its principle object. The legal concern with monstrosity shifts to the diagnosis of monstrous character framed as the psychological propensity for crime, and containment of these anti-social forces in the modern prison. In Foucault’s view this requires a demotion of the monstrous. When once monsters were the stuff of legends, magic, and bestiaries, they have been reduced to a cast of characters on the criminal psychiatrist’s couch. Foucault focusses attention on three pivotal murder cases in France in the 19th century that disrupted then current conceptions of criminality and madness. Given their seeming lack of motive, the cases challenged conceptions of crime that depended upon passions (avarice, lust, greed, and anger) or delirium as the causes of criminal acts. Henriette Cornier’s well-publicized murder of an infant in 1825, for no apparent reason—due to “an idea” according to the murderer—became according to Foucault paradigmatic for a new legal and psychiatric discourse of criminal instincts, which would identify and classify abnormalities of character, replacing previous legal concerns with abnormalities of bodies. The analysis of Cornier’s case floundered on the inability to attribute her crime to neither a moment of delirium nor a criminal motive. Lacking either cause, analysts turned instead to an emerging discourse of criminal instinct. Foucault writes:

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…the instincts will become, of course, the major vector of the problem of abnormality, or even the operative element through which criminal monstrosity and simple pathological madness find their principle of coordination. Basing itself on the instincts, nineteenth-century psychiatry is able to bring into the ambit of illness and mental health all the disorders and irregularities, all the serious disorders and all the little irregularities of conduct that are not, strictly speaking, due to madness. On the basis of the instincts and around what was previously the problem of madness, it becomes possible to organize the whole problematic of the abnormal at the level of the most elementary and everyday conduct. This transition to the minuscule, the great drift from the cannibalistic monster of the beginning of the 19th century, is finally converted into the form of all the perverse little monsters who have been constantly proliferating since the end of the nineteenth century. This transition from the great monster to the little pervert could only have been accomplished by means of this notion of instinct and its use and functioning in the knowledge and operations of psychiatric power. 164

According to Foucault, this new form of psychiatric inquiry and corresponding legal practice engendered new forms of social policing and institutionalization, working in tandem with the societal surveillance and social control that he diagnosed as endemic to modern societies in Discipline & Punish: The Birth of the Prison.165 This new form of social discipline centered on the detection, classification, and containment of abnormality.

Foucault’s analysis might be seen as limited to the French intellectual and legal milieu on which he focusses, but his history is paralleled and complimented in remarkable ways by Karen Halttunen in her study Murder Most Foul: The Killer and the American Gothic Imagination. Halttunen studies transformations in popular accounts of and memoirs by murderers in the 17th through 19th centuries. In Halttunen’s analysis, American conceptions of crime during this period shift from a religious account, which would see crime as a symptom of the pervasive flaws in a fallen human nature, to a Gothic theory of criminality, which would view the criminal as an exceptional monster that must be controlled and eradicated. Halttunen reads the wide range of

execution narratives published in the United States in the 17th and 18th centuries for evidence of this religious view of crime. These execution narratives were extremely popular during this period. They were usually written by a clergyperson who interviewed and took the confession of the criminal just before their execution. The clergy person would take their confession and hopefully assist them in repenting their sins and finding absolution. The minister would then use the example of their life, crimes, and death as an occasion for a sermon. In Halttunen’s reading, the most notable feature of these narratives is that they considered the criminal an exemplar of the foibles of common humanity. Far from being a monster, the criminal was all too human.

Not only were all women and men equally burdened by that original sin which was the root cause of murder; all were guilty as well of committing those besetting sins which would lead to worse crimes. The moral kinship of the larger community with the condemned murderer was strengthened by the execution sermon’s emphasis on the progressiveness of sin, for what unchaste woman could deny that her course might lead to infanticide? What drunken man, what disobedient servant could be certain that he had not placed his foot on the road to murder?166

Halttunen charts a transition in these narratives through the 18th century as enlightenment conceptions of human nature replace religious conceptions of original sin and as popular genre literature replaces the sermon. As Enlightenment ideals of inherent human rationality replaced Christian conceptions of original sin, the criminal came to be seen as aberrant, inhuman, and monstrous. In parallel, popular genre literature began to vie with the sermon publishing. Popular secular accounts of crimes emerged that set out the crime as an object of titillation, rather than moral instruction, making way for the Gothic literature of the late 18th and 19th centuries.

In seventeenth-century New England, monstrosity had been a manifestation of the “world of wonders,” an awe inspiring reminder of God’s providential power. But in the late eighteenth century, Gothic fiction made monstrosity “the outward show of the terrible inner distortion of man’s innate good nature into evil.” The Gothic

novel’s treatment of the villain pointed toward the emergence of the nineteenth-century understanding of evil as psychological monstrosity, an unhealthy aberration of the natural mind. The image of the murderer as monster expressed the incomprehensibility of murder within the rational Enlightenment social order. In effect, this Gothic emphasis on the monstrosity of the evil-doer served to protect the secular faith in human reason by treating profound evil as an unnatural perversion. The moral monstrosity attributed to the murderer effectively placed him beyond the pale of humanity.167

Halttunen sees our contemporary discourses of crime as trapped within this Gothic mode of representation. Halttunen shows that the Gothic both drew upon the literature of crime, as Foucault showed in his analysis of abnormality, but also in turn influenced the literature of crime and punishment by setting its central metaphors of monstrosity, horror, and containment.168

Lastly, echoing Colin Dayan’s analysis of civil death in the legal context of slavery, it cannot be forgotten that all of these conceptions of criminality and monstrosity were also deeply racialized in the United States. As we saw in analysis of the Gothic counterpoint of Billie Holiday’s memoir, the monstrous figure of Frankenstein was always looming in the background of American prison writings as well as the slave narratives. As Elizabeth Young has shown in her study Black Frankenstein: The Making of an American Metaphor, the image of Frankenstein became a powerful focal point in the 19th century for monstrous and dehumanizing representations of African Americans. The figure of Frankenstein’s monster was used to frame African Americans as rebellious inhuman monsters rebelling against their masters. These images were used as justifications for slavery in the early 19th century and as symbols of supposed black

168 A very similar argument is made by Edward Ingebretsen in his study At Stake: Monsters and the Rhetoric of Fear in Public Culture (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001). However Ingebretsen focusses on analysis of a number of high-profile contemporary crime stories, linking them to popular horror films. Ingebretsen lacks the historical depth provided by Halttunen.
lawlessness post-emancipation. Young finds traces of the Frankenstein story in a range of American cultural productions from the *The Confessions of Nat Turner* to Stephen Crane’s novel *The Monster* to D. W. Griffith’s *Birth of a Nation*. Young shows that these racialized images continued in the 20th century in the cinematic versions of *Frankenstein*, among many other racialized images of monstrosity. These were in turn taken up by a wide range of African American artists from Blaxploitation filmmakers to comedians who in turn critiqued and transformed those dehumanizing images. Young’s reading turns on a powerful use by comedian Dick Gregory’s of *Frankenstein* in his work.

I remember coming home from the movie theatre one day in tears. I had just seen *Frankenstein*. My Momma asked me what was wrong. Still crying, I told Momma, “I just saw Frankenstein and the Monster didn’t scare me.” Momma couldn’t explain it and I couldn’t explain it. I was afraid I wasn’t normal. But now that I look back, I realize why I wasn’t frightened. Somehow I unconsciously realized that the Frankenstein monster was chasing what was chasing me. Here was a monster, created by a white man, turning upon his creator. The horror movie was merely a parable of life in the ghetto. The monstrous life of the ghetto has been created by the white man. Only now in the city of chaos are we seeing the Monster created by oppression turn upon its creator.169

Given these historical currents, it is no surprise that African American prison writers from the 18th to the 20th century have engaged extensively with metaphors of monstrosity. It would appear to be one of the central governing metaphors of our systems of punishment and incarceration, as well as the operations of racism in the United States. Given that our culture frames criminals as aberrant monsters to be contained, prison writers have struggled to assert their humanity against this ideology. This has required a range of strategies. At times, some prison writers have internalized these images and have portrayed their crimes as a process of

losing their humanity and becoming monstrous. In contrast, other prison writers have instead portrayed the prison system itself as the dehumanizing force. This strategy is accomplished through monstrous representations of the prison system, judges, and guards. These writers effect a reversal whereby the system of incarceration is indicted as the true monster. Lastly, in some writers there is a counter strategy that might be seen as an attempts to transcend Gothic ideologies of criminality and incarceration. Abjuring the image of the criminal as a monster, this perspective insists that we are all in the grip of simple human passions and that the person who has committed a crime has simply proved their humanity. A range of these strategies can be found at work in the writings of prisoners from the 18th to 20th centuries. Here we will focus on five exemplary American prison narratives dealing with the problems of monstrosity, criminality, and incarceration, comparing and contrasting their uses of these possible strategies. Analysis of these texts will show an uncanny continuity across time in these writings. This will in effect prove that we are still deeply mired in Gothic discourses of crime and punishment.

I will begin my survey with the *Sketches of the Life of Joseph Mountain*, an execution narrative published in New Haven in 1790. Mountain was an African American from Philadelphia who sailed away to find his fortune in 1775. He arrived in England and quickly fell into a life of crime, first as a pickpocket and footpad, and later as a very successful highwayman. Between the campaigns of his robberies, Mountain hired out as a sailor, traveling across the Atlantic covering Lisbon, Gibraltar, Menorca, Leghorn, Venice West Africa, Jamaica, Grenada, Philadelphia, New York, Boston, and Greenland. When a course of employment ended in Boston, Mountain set out on adventures by foot. Back in the United States his luck ran out. Despite a spectacular career as a thief abroad with ever facing the law, Mountain was apprehended for a petty theft in Connecticut. He escaped with the charges dismissed, but finally
met his end in New Haven, after propositioning and attacking two young women while drunk. He was charged with rape and hanged in 1798.

Mountain’s narrative is on the cusp between the essentially religious execution sermons of the colonial period and more sensational crime literature of the 19th century as described by Karen Halttunen. His narrative begins with the formulaic and obligatory statement bemoaning his lost piety and innocence.

The first seventeen years of my life were spent in Mr. Mifflin’s family.—As a servant in the house I acquired the reputation of unusual sprightliness and activity. My master was industrious to instruct me in the Presbyterian religion which he professed, teach me to read and write, and impress my mind with sentiments of virtue. How grossly these opportunities have been neglected, the following story will too fully evince.170

And, it ends with the formulaic statement of repentance.

It now remains that I die a death justly merited by my crimes. "The cries of injured innocence have entered the ears of the Lord of Sabaoth, and called for vengeance." If the reader of this story can acquiesce in my fate and view me "stumbling on the dark mountains of the shadow of death," with composure, he will yet compassionat e a soul stained with the foulest crimes, just about to appear unimbodied before a God of infinite purity.171

But in between these two formulaic conceits the narrative lacks any serious religious deliberations on salvation and human nature. Instead, Mountain engages in a picaresque and often conceited account of his enormous successes as a criminal and the tragedy of his fall for a minor theft and a rape that he ultimately denied committing. Mountain’s life of crime begins when he encounters two mountebanks, Hyde and Wilson, in London.

One day, at an ale-house in London, I accidentally became acquainted with one Francis Hyde, originally from Middlesex, and one Thomas Wilson, of Staffordshire in England. They were travelling the country, with a hand organ and various other musical instruments, pretending to great art in numerous performances, and really possessing surprising knowledge in every species of juggling. This was their employment in the day time, for the purpose of executing more effectually the principal business of their lives, highway robbery. They soon found me susceptible of almost any impressions, and neither incapable of, nor averse to, becoming a companion in their iniquity… We were on the spot at the hour agreed upon, and disguised ourselves for the adventure. Hyde and Wilson were dressed in white frocks and boots, with their faces painted yellow to resemble Molattoes. Mountain was dressed in the same manner, with the addition of a large tail wig, white gloves and a black mask over his face. When the stage arrived, I started, and caught the leading horses by their bridles, while Hyde and Wilson each presented a brace of pistols in at the coach window, and demanded of the passengers their money. There were four gentlemen and one lady in the coach. They denied having any money. Wilson said, "Deliver, or death." They then gave us a bank note of 50£ one other of 20£ and about 60 guineas in cash. We then retired to an unfrequented place, shifted our dresses, and prepared to prosecute our journey to Chatham in the county of Kent.172

It is interesting that on his first journey out as a thief, Mountain is with two robbers who disguise themselves as mulattos. This detail is used symbolically by his editors to symbolize racial mixing and criminality. That given, one can see from the tone of the narrative its picaresque quality, recounting his apprenticeship in each type of crime as he leaps from caper to caper. It is an essentially secular and mercantile tale. According to historians Lawrence Goodheart and Peter Hinks, Mountain’s narrative is one of the most important stories in the history of the Black Atlantic, documenting the unique lifeworld opening between Africa, Europe, and the Americas in the 18th century.

The persona Mountain developed after 1775 was a complicated intertwining of the increasing choices afforded a black man in the Atlantic world of the late eighteenth century, especially in Britain. These choices, constrained by race, class, poverty, and a state which largely intervened in the lives of the lower

classes through the courtroom, prison, impressment, and the gallows, could combine violence and selfishness with broader challenges to fundamentally inhumane racial derogations and social hierarchies. Vast numbers of people black, white, free, enslaved, indentured, impressed, convicted, poor in the Atlantic world in the second half of the eighteenth century shifted between licit and illicit work in order to sustain themselves at a time of profound transition and tumult where the powerful and wealthy still stole “the common from the goose.” These “picaresque proletarians” evinced the reliance of the newly emerging capitalist order upon mobility and deft opportunism.

Mountain’s narrative was complicated by the editing of David Daggett, an attorney in New Haven who was anxious about both the possible abolition of slavery and the corrupting influence of the British monarchy and racial mixing. The narrative was further complicated by its public performance by the minister who preached the sermon for his execution based on his confession, Reverend James Dana, who was opposed to the quick and decisive abolition of slavery, thinking that the enslaved were not morally and spiritually ready for their freedom. While Mountain presented his story as a secular picaresque, Daggett and Dana appear to have framed his story as a tale of monstrosity and evil.

According to Goodheart and Hinks in their thorough history of Mountain’s narrative, his editor Daggett purposefully foregrounded issues of racial mixture, crime, and mob violence in his story. For instance, detailed attention is paid to Mountain’s marriage to a white woman while in London, his participation in the Gordon Riots, and the methods and yields of his criminal exploits, but his extensive travels across the Atlantic world are glossed over tersely. Mountain’s complex and stunning life were edited down to represent everything monstrous to the white audience in late 18th century Connecticut. The richness of his adventurous life are flattened down to a shadowed silhouette.

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Daggett set Joseph Mountain perfectly into this waterborne matrix of disorder. Some popular fear had emerged after the peace of 1783 that returning soldiers and transients, faced with the post-war depression and general economic distress, had prompted a wave of crime against property. But what Daggett highlighted about Mountain were the organized and social contexts nurturing and facilitating his subversive career. Mountain’s meaning was far grander than that of a lone transient. Daggett subsumed in him all that a rapacious monarchism, an uncertain patchwork of black freedom commencing with Somerset, and a disruptive capitalism and democracy had launched in the Atlantic world. Passed through this alembic, “this early wanderer from the path of good education” was reborn a monster of appetite and tumult, a perfect marine for Anarch.\footnote{Lawrence B. Goodheart & Peter P. Hinks, “See the Jails Open and the Thieves Arise: Joseph Mountain’s revolutionary Atlantic and consolidating early national Connecticut,” \textit{Atlantic Studies} 10 (2013): 497-527.}

While Mountain symbolized political anarchy to lawyer Daggett, he symbolized a racialized evil for Reverend Dana.

For Dana, times of upheaval raised the capacity of false ideas to corrupt society. The government of God was first of all about the preservation of the state to safeguard the Christian community against the inherent tendency of humans to sin. Safeguarding that Christian community and the integrity of its apparatus of authority was for Dana indispensable to any system of right governance, especially in the current revolutionary times when the expansion of individual liberty heightened subversion and license that yielded the Mountains who threatened to destroy Christian government. Indeed, for Dana, Mountain probably afforded an example of why the state should dissolve slavery with only the greatest caution: he was a black man “under the power of wicked spirits” whose unfortunate release from a bondage of one sort or another in 1775 spawned his evil career. However steadily contracting, the institution of slavery in Connecticut for now continued to serve a constructive political and religious function: its restraints precluded the dangerous release and infusion of men like Mountain into a society already turbulent enough without them.\footnote{Lawrence B. Goodheart & Peter P. Hinks, “See the Jails Open and the Thieves Arise”: Joseph Mountain’s revolutionary Atlantic and consolidating early national Connecticut,” \textit{Atlantic Studies}, 10 (2013): 497-527}

Unlike the generalized human sinfulness of the colonial execution narratives, Dana’s gloss of Mountain’s case identified his racial admixture as in itself a source of evil, moving us into the Gothic discourse of criminality and race coming in the 19th century.

Moving forward 60 years to the mid-19th century, Austin Reed’s recently rediscovered memoir \textit{The Life and Adventures of the Haunted Convict} is exemplary of a prison narrative that
wrestles with imagery of monstrosity. Reed in some ways internalized dehumanizing conceptions of criminals, but also indicted the evil and monstrosity of the system of incarceration that had been instituted to punish and contain him. Reed was an African American from New York who was incarcerated in Auburn State multiple times throughout the 1840s through 1860s. He composed his memoir while incarcerated in the 1850s. Reed’s narrative disrupts the histories of monstrosity and incarceration that we reviewed earlier in this chapter. His narrative draws a great deal of its rhetoric from religious frameworks. Reed’s narrative begins in his early childhood with the death of his father. After his father’s death Reed is left angry and unruly. Unable to manage her troubled son, his mother hired him out as an apprentice. At only nine years old, the young Reed was unable to cope with leaving home and was brutally disciplined by Mr. Ladd, his master. Reed ran away and later attempted to murder Mr. Ladd and burn down his farm at the tender age of ten. Reed was placed in a house of refuge, a kind of juvenile prison. Upon his release from the house of refuge, Reed fell into a life of petty crime and worked as a butler for a series of gamblers and thieves. In keeping with Foucault’s analysis of the rise of instincts as an explanation for criminality, throughout the memoir Reed blames his crimes on his terrible temper, a dangerous force within him, that forces him at all times to rebel against authority and structure, abjuring the blessings of his parents and his own God given goodness. By Reed’s account, this instinct for trouble lead him from a life of petty crimes to larceny and then to Auburn State Penitentiary for the first time at the age of 19. Earlier in this study we have extensively discussed the Philadelphia incarceration model of solitary confinement. The Auburn model was its major rival in the 19th century. Within the Auburn model, prisoners were kept under a rule of silence, labored, and were subjected to extreme forms of physical punishment, including whippings, waterboarding, extreme confinement, and the proverbial ball and chain.
The disappointments in his life and the shock of prison drove Reed to despair and brought out a demonic force within him. In a fit of rage he shredded the bible assigned to him in his cell.

…the Esq. ordered me to take my bible down from off my shelf and sit down in one corner of my cell and reflect on my past conduct until he had time to take my case in hand. I took my bible down from my shelf and tore it in a thousand pieces and tramp the leaves under my feet. Ah, precious old book, how often have I thought of thee. I tremble with fear every time I think of thee, and fear that every rag of thy contents which I trod under foot will rise up in the judgement day and condemn me….I sat in one corner of my cell and covered my face with both hands and gave way to a full flood of tears and silent reflections— that I entered the prison with my mother’s prayer upon my lips and my father’s blessings upon my head, endown with good reason and an ample store of good education, but you, ye dare face looking devils, have whipped my mother’s prayers from my lips into curses, and beaten my father’s blessing from my head with a heavy hickory club, and took away from me all the good reason which God had endowed me with.¹⁷⁶

Jaded as we are in the early 20th century to all manner of blasphemy, we can only imagine the force of this act in early 19th century America. Rather than use the terms monster, given his religious leanings, throughout his memoir Reed refers instead to devils, demons, and the demonic. At this moment in the memoir Reed appears to descend in his own regard to the level of a demon, having surrendered completely to the violence of his temperament. But from his testimony we can see that Reed does not only confess the devil within himself, but also clearly indicts the demonic character of Auburn prison. Recounting his experiences, Reed is quite clear that he is in hell and being tortured by demons. For instance, after being bound and whipped with a “cat” —a special flail made of cured and braided cat entrails that have been equipped with biting metal tips—until he bleeds and collapses, Reed is found sleeping in his cell before the official time for bed. The guard on duty rouses him from his bloodied stupor for punishment of this infraction. Reed is quite clear that this is the work of a monstrous devil.

In vain did I try to reason and expostulate with the hard and cold hearted devil, but all of my tears and begging and reasoning and rough and cruel treatment couldn’t make any effect on this cold hearted devil’s heart, but went right off and got the key of my cell door and unlock it and ordered me to follow him down stairs. Pensively and slowly did I follow the demon down stairs, while the cold clods of blood still clung to my back, groping my way down the stairs. He led me out into the kitchen and order me to pull off my shirt. I strip myself and turned my back around towards the cruel hearted guard, and all the marks and blood that came oozing from my back couldn’t soften the heart of the guard, and he laid four light lashes upon my back with cats.\textsuperscript{177}

The guards are depicted as inhuman monsters, capable of every kind of horror and abuse. Reed describes plainly in excruciating detail the tortures inflicted by the managers and guards at Auburn prison, the true ancestor of our contemporary prisons.

The next morning, between the hours of nine and ten, three officers and the Warden came to the dungeon door, and looking in, the warden asked me if my temperature had got cool. I told him it had. He then ask me kind a gently what I thought of myself for acting in the way I had towards my Keeper. I made no reply, for I had no good reason to give. It was that bad devilish temper of mine which had led me astray. He then ask me if I didn’t think that I deserved a severe punishment. I told him I did, and he unlock me my cell and ordered me to follow him. I followed him to the state shop, and taking a heavy ball and chain, he made it fast to my leg and put a pair of handcuffs around my wrists and made me hold both hands up straight over my head, where he took a rope, and bringing one end through the handcuffs, he made it fast, and then drew the other end of the rope through a pulley until it brought me right firm upon my tiptoe and made the rope fast. In this tedious and tiresome condition I stood crying with pain for two hours. At the ends of two hours he unfasten the rope and let me loose, but kept the ball and chain ion me for three weeks after. My hands was swollen so by the rope that I was not able to work for three weeks after…\textsuperscript{178}

Beyond their physical impact, Reed makes clear that these torturers are a dehumanizing force. They rob him of his humanity and the goodness given to him by God and nurtured by his parents. The torturers of the prison are thus likened to the infernal machinations of the Devil battling to rob a human soul of its salvation.

\textsuperscript{177} Austin Reed, \textit{The Life and the Adventures of a Haunted Convict} (New York: Random House, 2016), 198

\textsuperscript{178} Austin Reed, \textit{The Life and the Adventures of a Haunted Convict} (New York: Random House, 2016), 198.
But in that day I shall stand before God, I’ll show him my back where the tyrant has printed it with cats, and will point to him the gloomy dungeon where I’ve laid my head many a cold night, without a bed or blanket, and some days not a morsel of bread to eat, and I will point him to the showering bath and tell him of the water that has been showered on my head. I will show him the tyrants that has tortured and tormented me during my confinement within the gloomy walls of a prison. Those who might have done me a heap of good turned to be my destroyers, and took away all of the good principles and reasons to which I was endowed with, and the high and noble mind which God had given to me have all been destroyed by hard usage and a heavy club. The very prayers which my mother printed upon my lips have all been washed away beneath the waters of the showering bath.  

Moving forward to the early 20th century, Chester Himes echoes many of the same metaphors of hellishness found in Reed’s memoir, but liberated from their religiosity and internalizations of monstrosity. Himes is one of the great and largely forgotten African American crime novelists and memoirists of the 20th century. He began writing while incarcerated for armed robbery in the 1930s. His best known prison writing is his autobiographical novel Cast the First Stone, published in 1952, which was also a pioneering depiction of homosexual relationships. However, his breakout prison piece was a story “To What Red Hell?” published in Esquire magazine while he was still in Ohio Penitentiary in 1934. This piece is probably his most concentrated statement on incarceration, monstrosity, and human nature. The story meanders, without a plot, giving the reader an almost leisurely tour of a catastrophic fire that ravaged Ohio Penitentiary in 1930. From its opening lines the story locks us in the bleak world of the Gothic.

Smoke rolled up from the burning cell block in black, fire-tinged waves. The wind caught it and pushed it down over the prison yard like a thick, gray shroud, so low you could reach up and touch it with your right hand. Flames, seen through the mist of smoke, were devils’ tongues stuck out at the black night. Buildings were shadows in the crazy pattern of yellow light that streaked the black blanket of smoke. The old cell block, stretching across the front of the prison, was a big,  

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gray face of stolid futility with grilled steel bars checker-boarding the pale glow of the windows. Ghosts of forgotten suicides lurked in the shadows of its eaves.180

The narrator “Blackie,” wanders through the chaos and death of the burning prison as the inmates fight over clothes and food, attempt to set fire to remaining buildings, and simply entertain themselves. Resonating with earlier Gothic narratives of incarceration, the burning prison is quite literally hell on earth. At one point Blackie is running over a carpet of burning corpses.

Suddenly he felt an insane desire to laugh. Something sticky was crawling about in his mind. He felt for a moment that he was going crazy. He started moving fast, trying to get away from the dense crop of corpses. His feet slipped on leg bones. The scalp rolled under his hair.181

Despite the horror and danger of the fire, its consuming violence and power to reduce the inmates to gray corpses is framed as an ultimate fulfillment of the prison’s purpose.

He sauntered over to the sidewalk, leaned against a post, looked out over the yard. The gray, prone bodies got in his eyes. Some were the bodies of old men with gray hair and weak eyes, some of young men, some of white men, some of black men—some used to be bankers, once upon a time, some used to be sneak thieves, some big shots, some chiselers… But now they were all just stiffs with a gray sameness. No more banquets and cocaine balls. Doctors moving among the living were white angels. Black-robed priests flitting here and there among the dead were black ghouls.182

Expanding upon this characterization of clergy as ghouls, Himes uses the backdrop of the burning prison to mock religion. In the midst of the inferno, Blackie visits the prison’s chapels, both Protestant and Catholic.

He walked on to the chapel, tried the door. It was open. He walked inside. A guy was standing in the vestibule just inside the doorway cursing God with a slow, deliberate monotony. Inside, some guys were shooting craps on the floor of the

aisle down in front of the stage. He listened a moment to the snapping of their fingers, the rattle of dice. Then he heard a slow run on the bass keys of a piano... He looked toward the stage. Somebody had rolled the cover from the grand piano over in the corner and a curly-headed youth was sitting on the stool, playing Saul’s Death March with slow feeling. A pencil streak of light, coming through a cracked door, cut a white stripe down the boy’s face. He saw that the boy’s cheeks were wet with tears. Then he slow, steady beat of the bass keys hammered on his mind like a cop’s fist. He said: “Don’t you know people are dying outside?” The youth looked around and said: “Sure,” without stopping. “I’m playing their parade march into some red hell.”

While the Protestant chapel offers only tragedy and surrealist theatre, his visit to the Catholic chapel at first appears to offer spiritual solace, but it is a consolation that Blackie can’t finally accept.

He noticed the curved backs of several fellows bent over the railing before the Images of the Saints. He caught himself reciting: “I believe in God, The Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth...” Then he thought of the prone, gray figures on the cold ground outside; of the smoke and flame and confusion. He felt a sneer form on the bottom side of his lips next to his teeth... “I believe in the power of the press, maker of laws, the almighty dollar, political pull, a Colt’s .45...”

Himes contrasts the monstrous and ghoulish horrors of the burning prison and the hollow promises of the chapels with the essential humanity of the prisoners. As the prison burns they gamble, eat, pick out new clothes, argue, revolt, and make love. While the fire in one way fulfills the prison’s function to consume and destroy the convicts, it also creates a temporary window for them to fully enjoy their humanity once again.

White teeth flashing in sweaty black faces... Working like hell, seeming jolly about it... Men romping here and there without purpose... Men standing still... Men running in packs like wolves, bent on destruction... Men laughing, solemn, some a little hysterical... Drunk with their momentary freedom... All convicts, all

clad in gray—the quick and the dead… To some it was just fun, excitement, something to do—a lurid break in the dull monotone of routine.\textsuperscript{185}

The most human quality the prisoners prove during the fire is their intimacy and love for one another. Some embrace and kiss, some weep over fallen lovers, and some risk their lives to free lovers that are trapped in solitary confinement. Even their foibles further prove their humanity. One prisoners weeping over his dead lover takes a moment to retrieve the money secreted in the corpse’s clothes. The inhuman violence of the burning prison, throws this simple human concern into high relief. Throughout the story Blackie finds himself unable to extend himself to the other prisoners, unwilling to connect with their sorrow or risk his life to save his fellow prisoners. At the story’s end, Blackie encounters a prisoner who has been set to guard one of the buildings from arson. He finds the prisoner’s willingness to cooperate with the prison authorities a repugnant betrayal. The monstrousness of the prison authorities is shown in their unwillingness to liberate the prisoners trapped in this inferno. The prisoner’s inhumanity is to fall in line with the guards. Blackie tells the fellow convict “I think a con who’d guard a lousy building on a night like this is a goddamn rat.”\textsuperscript{186} With that final realization of some commonality with his fellow prisoners and rejection of collaboration with the guards, Blackie wanders off into the night. Himes doesn’t tell us if he escaped, or if perhaps he has freed himself a little in his mind. While Reed had accepted the mantle of monster himself while also using the image of the monster to critique the horrors of the prison, Himes indict the ghoulishness of the prison and is able to contrast it with the real ordinary humanity of the prisoners.


The prison letters of George Jackson, written in the 1960s and 70s, make use of remarkably similar images and rhetoric, but now relieved of their Christian imagery. First and foremost in Jackson’s letters is the clear and forceful analysis that incarceration is a form of dehumanization.

The camp brings out the very best in brothers or destroys them entirely. But none are unaffected. None who leaves here are normal. If I leave here alive, I’ll leave nothing behind. They’ll never count me among the broken men, but I can’t say that I am normal either. I’ve been hungry too long. I’ve gotten angry too often. I’ve been lied to and insulted too many times. They’ve pushed me over the line from which there can be no retreat. I know that they will not be satisfied until they’ve pushed me out of existence altogether. I’ve been the victim of so many racist attacks that I could never relax again. My reflexes will never be normal again. I’m like a dog that has gone through the K-9 process.¹⁸⁷

There is an uncanny resonance between Jackson’s account and Colin Dayan’s use of the dog metaphor in her study of civil death. According to Jackson, the experience of incarceration robs people of their normality and humanity and reduces them to the form of a dog, much like Dayan’s houngan traps the soul of an enemy in the body of a dead dog. And notably, it isn’t just any dog, but a trained police dog, one that has gone through a “K-9 process.” It is a dog that is a servant, a beast of burden for the police state.

Like Reed, at times Jackson internalizes the image of criminal monstrosity, but he ultimately rejects it to insist that the dehumanizing monster is the prison itself.

To be certain that you dig what I’m saying, I’ll here admit that most of the people who come through these places are genuinely sick in one way or the other, monsters, totally disorganized, twisted, disgusting epitomes of the parent monster. Those who aren’t upon arrival will surely be so when they leave. No one escapes unscathed. An individual leaves his individuality and any pride he may have had behind these walls… The guy who earns a parole surrendered some face in the course of his stay here prior to his board. He walked away from some situation to save his body—at the cost of some part of his face (read mind, or pride, or

principle). No black will leave this place if he has any violence in his past, until they see that thing in his eyes. And you can’t fake it—resignation, defeat—it must be stamped clearly across the face.\(^\text{188}\)

In Jackson’s view it is not the torture and abuse in prison that are the worst forms of dehumanization, but the requirement to accommodate and collaborate with that dehumanization. The requirement to totally submit in order to be released, so that the resignation and defeat are clearly stamped on one’s face, is the final and most awful blow of dehumanization.

Like Reed, Jackson insists that the guards themselves are the most horrific monsters. Jackson contrasts the state of the undead police dogs to which the prisoners are reduced, to the horrors of the pigs—the guards and police. Although “pigs” is a common slang for police, I think his use of the word for the guards transcends this common slang usage, and is intended to portray a voracious and filthy animality in the prison staff. According to Jackson, the pigs “feed on the garbage heap” of the prison out of stupidity and sadism

Pigs come here to feed on the garbage heap for two reasons really, the first half because they can do no other work, frustrated men soon to develop sadistic mannerisms; and the second half, sadists out front, suffering under the restraints placed upon them by an equally sadistic-vindicitive society. The sadist knows that to practice his religion upon the society at large will bring down upon his head their sadistic reaction. Killing is great fun, but not at the risk of getting killed (note how they squeak and pull out their hair at losing even one). But the restraints come off when they walk through the compound gates. Their whole posture goes through a total metamorphosis. Inflict pain, satisfy power complex, and get a check.\(^\text{189}\)


Jackson’s most famous use of the monster metaphor is the following passage where he attempts to liberate the monster that has been “engendered” in him. Interestingly, this is one of the passages used by Caleb Smith to insist that this Gothic monster imagery ultimately traps the prison writer in their own dehumanization. I think there is actually a very different lesson if we look closely at the whole passage in context, rather than read only that one line. This passage directly follows Jackson’s indictment of the monstrous pigs.

This monster—the monster they’ve engendered in me will return to torment its maker, from the grave, the pit, the profoundest pit. Hurl me into the next existence, the descent into hell won’t turn me. I’ll crawl back to dog his trail forever. They won’t defeat my revenge, never, never, never. I’m part of a righteous people who anger slowly, but rage undammed. We’ll gather at his door in such numbers that the rumbling of our feet will make the earth tremble. I’m going to charge them with reparations in blood. I’m going to charge them like a maddened, wounded rogue male elephant, ears flared, trunk raised, trumpet blaring. I’ll do my dance on his chest, and the only thing he’ll ever see in my eyes is a dagger to pierce his cruel heart. This is one nigger who is positively displeased. I’ll never forgive, I’ll never forget, and if I’m guilty of anything at all it’s of not leaning on them hard enough. War without terms.  

Jackson’s use of the word “engendered” is notable here, as it both embodies the monster but also distances him from the monster. It is a monstrousness that has been begotten upon him, as if he had been raped or were a farm animal. And it is a monster that is dead, but that will return from hell, as if it were a miscarried child, a lost monstrous soul, like Foucault’s medieval monstrous babies that die before they can be baptized. But this monster is not alone; it is part of a righteous people who will gather at the door of their oppressors. When invoking the righteous people there is a kind of shift in the metaphor where now the monsters are the pigs, the guards and prison system that tortures him. It is as if now they are Frankenstein and he is part of the angry mob.

chasing the monster. Then the metaphor shifts again, as he metaphorically transforms into a raging, injured elephant rampaging. Finally he transforms into a desperate fighter committing to all-out war. Across the passage he transforms from a stillborn monster, to an angry mob, to a dying elephant, and finally into a desperate human being—“one nigger who is positively displeased.” Far from collapsing into monstrosity, Jackson uses this series of startling images to unleash his anger and assert his humanity.

Lastly, if we turn to Sanyika Shakur’s appropriately named crime and prison memoir *Monster*, we see a deeper evolution of the use of the image of monstrosity. Shakur’s memoir chronicles his process of joining the Crips in Los Angeles as a young teenager in the 1970s. Shakur’s nickname “Monster” was earned after beating and disfiguring an older man into a coma early in his career as a Crip. After hearing the police say that whoever had committed the crime must be a monster, Shakur adopts it as his calling card.

> In the neighborhood, respect was forthcoming. In 1977, when I was thirteen, while robbing a man I turned my head and was hit in the face. The man tried to run, but was tripped by Tray Ball, who then held him for me. I stomped him for twenty minutes before leaving him unconscious in an alley. Later that night, I learned that the man had lapsed into a coma and was disfigured from my stomping. The police told bystanders that the person responsible for this was a “monster.” The name stuck, and I took that as a moniker over my birth name.\(^{191}\)

Shakur goes on a terrible career of robbery, violence, and murder which lead him to California Youth Authority and eventually land him in San Quentin and Pelican Bay prisons. This story of his transformations from young boy to criminal and convict could be read as simply reinforcing dehumanizing images of African American men and of the incarcerated. In one way Shakur internalizes the image of himself as an amoral monster.

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In a perverted sort of way I enjoyed being Monster Kody. I lived for the power of life and death in my hands. Nothing I knew of could compare with riding in a car with three other homeboys with guns, knowing that they were as deadly and courageous as I was. To me, at that time in my life, this was power. It made me feel powerful being responsible for either killing someone or letting them live.

However, what makes Shakur’s memoir profound and unique is that Shakur details how he came to see himself as a monster and how he found his way back to his fundamental humanity. In revealing his story, Shakur shows that it is the simplest and most human instincts that lead people to monstrous acts. As a young teen, Shakur is confronted by his mother to explain what is happening to him. What is dragging him into gang life? The young Shakur is unable to explain to her or himself what is happening.

I had no adequate answer then for Mom about what was happening to me. Actually, I wasn’t fully aware of the gang’s strong gravitational pull. I knew, for instance, that the total lawlessness was alluring, and that the sense of importance, self-worth, and raw power was exciting, stimulating, and intoxicating beyond any other high on this planet. But still I could not explain what had happened to pull me in so far that nothing outside of my set mattered.\footnote{Sanyika Shakur, \textit{Monster: The Autobiography of an L.A. Gang Member} (New York: Grove Press, 2004).}

Despite his inability to articulate his drive to join gangs and commit violent acts, simple human drives shine through his seemingly monstrous desires. He desires freedom, self-worth, and power. These are natural human instincts that have been deprived of an outlet in the poor and dangerous environment where he has grown up. Shakur frequently compares his life in a gang with the lives of soldiers, businessmen, and political leaders. In Shakur’s view, these professions support and provide an outlet for the human instincts for which he and his peers had been deprived an opportunity due to poverty and racial oppression. Later, looking back on violence against non-gang members, Shakur has an epiphany about his motivation to throw himself into gang life. He refused to be a victim of violence.
I just couldn’t imagine living the life of a “hook,” those seemingly spineless nerds who were always victims of someone’s ridicule or physical violence, who never responded to an affront of any type. I had, while in primary school, been victimized by cats during their ascent to “king of the school.” My milk money was taken. My lips were busted two or three times. Not because I decided to defend my dime or honor, but because my assailant simply whacked me. Early on I saw and felt both sides of the game being played where I lived. I was during my time in elementary school that I chose to never be a victim again, if I could help it. There was no gray area, no middle ground. You banged or held strong association with a gang, or else you were a victim, period. 193

So the origin of his involvement in gangs, violence, and crime is simply fear and the desire for self-respect. By revealing the origins of his supposed monstrosity in these basic human emotions, Shakur very precisely counters the Gothic narrative of crime and punishment. These Gothic narratives, as Halttunen and Foucault have argued, work to place criminals beyond the pale of humanity. According to Foucault, they theorize abnormal, anti-social instincts that separate the criminal from the rest of society. Similarly, according to Halttunen, the Gothic narratives of crime mythologize crime and turn criminals into outcasts. Shakur’s story could be seen as transcending this Gothic discourse of crime. In this view, rather than see the criminal as a monster who has forsaken their humanity, the person who has committed a crime has instead merely proven that they were human, subject to the passions of fear, ignorance, and desire. Shakur’s memoir challenges us to imagine how our systems of justice would look if we considered committing a crime to be fundamental proof of one’s humanity, rather than its forfeiture.

Resonating with Elizabeth Young’s analysis of the dehumanizing images of African Americans, in prison Shakur finds himself as a human being, that his being a person of color proves his essential humanity. In prison Shakur is befriended by a Muslim teacher with whom he

continues a relationship after completing that sentence. The teacher’s deepest point is to convince Shakur that being a person of color is to be human.

“...Hey, ever heard the words mankind and human?”
“Yeah, I’ve heard ‘em.”
“Do you know what hue is” he asked, looking at me now over the top of his car.
“Hue? No, don’t know what it means.”
“Color, it means color!”
“And?”
“And? Bro, can’t you see it? Look...Human...Hue-man.”

Caleb Smith has read these kinds of epiphanies in the memoirs of African Americans and Latina/os as in collusion with the ideology of the resurrecting power of the prison and dismissed them as examples of racial essentialism and nationalism. However, this fails to account for the long history of racialized dehumanization and brutality experienced by people of color. This realization and assertion of humanity is actually a lifesaving moment. Notably, Shakur has the epiphany outside of prison, when going for a drive with his spiritual mentor. He attributes this realization to the power of friendship, rather than any contemplative property of the penitentiary.

In a later prison sentence, Shakur has another quiet epiphany where he rejects inflicting violence on his fellows. Rat, a fellow prisoner, has set out to dominate, abuse, and rape another cellmate who is thought to have betrayed the Crips. Shakur tries to convince Rat to leave him alone. He questions Rat as to what in the world he is doing to a fellow human being. Rat explains his strategy of dehumanization as a lesson learned from slavery.

“You see, Monsta,” he said like a college professor, “the first thing I did was strip him of his clothing, dig? This make him feel less than strong. Then I degraded him by pissin’ on him, you see? And then I wouldn’t let him wash it off, ya

know? So he was feelin’ pretty fucked up inside, and wit’ a punch now and again, sheeit, fool ready fo’ anything.” “Where you learn that from, Rat?” “Slavery.” “Slavery? Nigga, you ain’t never been no slave, fool.” “Naw, but I read that in a book befo’, ‘bout how the slaves wasn’t ‘loud to have clothes or wash they self so they lost they self… esteem, yeah, that’s it. So I took his self-esteem, right.”

With this lesson from the history books, Shakur roots his analysis of dehumanization as a monstrous legacy of slavery, a legacy that he refuses to perpetuate. I would argue that with this realization Shakur is reborn, abandoning the fanatical obsession and commitment to gang life that he has embraced as a child. Shakur finds the quality of mercy within himself and thus his true humanity. This redemption is not produced by the reflection enforced by the solitude of the penitentiary, but by communication with one’s fellows both in prison and the world at large. This spiritual transformation is effected by recognizing the simple human roots of seemingly criminal actions and the context of political inequality in which those actions take place.

Over the course of this chapter, and this overarching study, we have seen how African American prison writers have engaged with discourses of crime and monstrosity. These are discourses that have been historically deployed to dehumanize and destroy them. From Joseph Mountain to Sanyika Shakur we have seen how these writers have transcended dehumanizing images of themselves by insisting on their fundamental humanity and countering that the system of incarceration and its collaborators are the real monsters. Their strategy is to use the imagery of monstrosity in order to convince us to go beyond Gothic models of incarceration and punishment.

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Conclusion

I never visited my sister when she went to jail, or later when she went to prison upstate. Too angry at her for what I judged as her self-destructive behavior, I let her disappear as if she had sailed beyond a medieval map’s dreadful demarcations of the world—“Here, There Be Dragons.” My mother is a better person than I am, and so she journeyed dutifully to Rikers Island every week until my sister went to trial, enduring many hours on trains and busses, and many brutalizing searches, to see and console my sister. And then my sister disappeared—“upstate”—tied back to reality and family by only the slender thread of insanely over-priced telephone calls. She never speaks about her time in prison, except once describing getting her head shaved while they played Michael Jackson’s song “Man in the Mirror” in shock-incarceration, a Clockwork Orange style program combining military bootcamp with psychological warfare. The only other time that she discusses her incarceration is when she counts her felonies before applying for a job or contemplating her inability to vote, the continual reminders of the social death that hangs on her like a permanent marking and makes her punishment lifelong.

At the same time that she was in prison, I began my first job as a librarian in Brownsville, Brooklyn, in the middle of the Van Dyke Projects. It was there that I got my first taste of American prison literature in the remarkable novels of Chester Himes, Iceberg Slim, and Donald Goines. We literally couldn’t keep them on the shelves. Every three months we reordered them by the boxful. They were borrowed and stolen. The ones that made their way back to the library had been read through and passed through many hands. The pages were blackened, thumb worn,
and bent to the juiciest moments. Their novels viscerally reflected the experiences of the people
that our library served, and they reflected my own experience as well.

Later, I pursued an MFA in poetry and delved into the history and literature of the
Nuyorican literary renaissance, trying to understand my own roots. I was shocked to realize that
so many of those writers began writing in prison or worked on the other side of the law. I found
that criminality and punishment were some of the central issues in writers of the Puerto Rican
diaspora, ranging from ex-cons like Piri Thomas of *Down These Mean Streets*\(^\text{197}\) to ex-
prosecutors like Edwin Torres of *Carlito’s Way*.\(^\text{198}\) This recurring theme reminded me of the
irrefutable thread of institutionalization in my own family. My grandmother grew up in an
American run orphanage in Puerto Rico during the Great Depression after her mother, my great-
grandmother, abandoned her there in poverty and despair. Her mother told her to stay with the
nice ladies there for a minute, she’d be right back, and she didn’t see her mother again for over a
decade when she rejoined her in New York City. When I was little my grandmother would tell
me about the orphanage, about the American food, about her best friend, about how they weren’t
allowed to talk. The girls in the orphanage developed their own sign language to communicate in
secret. My grandmother taught it to my mother and they used it when my mother was little,
communicating secretly on busses, trains, schools, and in front of strangers. I never learned the
signs. While I was pursuing my MFA my grandmother succumbed to dementia and I had to
place her in a nursing home. I knew that it was her greatest fear because it reminded her of the
orphanage—institutionalization. Every week I visited her and she recounted to me her phantasies
of the horrors being inflicted upon the other patients: odd operations, secret rituals, thefts, and
molestations. I wondered which of these had happened to her as a child.

\(^{197}\) Piri Thomas, *Down These Mean Streets* (New York: Vintage Press, 1997).
Several times my mother attempted to commit suicide, I believe weighed down by the force of all this collective memory and trauma. She was sent to the locked ward. I remember the first time I visited her there. I remember the doors shutting behind me. Sitting with her and smoking, assuring her she would be fine. She’d be out soon. She nodded, unable to speak. Finished, I went to leave. I told the guard that I was ready to go now. And he said “Yeah, sure you are.” I panicked in that moment, completely terrified that I would be unable to prove that I wasn’t a patient. For one moment I had some small inkling of the terror that my sister, my grandmother, and my mother faced.

I share these stories in order to place myself in relationship to the narratives that I have treated in this dissertation. In one way a dissertation naturally becomes an autobiography. This project has occupied a central part of the past ten years of my life. It also grew organically out of my experiences prior to pursuing doctoral study. The many experiences of incarceration and institutionalization in my own family convinced me that these are central issues in American society, inextricable from the experiences of race, ethnicity, gender, social class, and sexuality. My professional work as a librarian taught me that prison literature is a vibrant body of societal critique and to look to popular and non-canonical literatures as central to the lived experiences of subaltern communities. I was always struck by what my sister, grandmother, and mother could not tell me about their experiences. This unspeakableness was my first clue that these experiences were ultimately tied to the Gothic. Ultimately, I’m interested in what buries people and how they claw their way out. These life experiences inspired me to approach this material in what I hope is a unique and personal way.

First, I have endeavored to place the literature and perspectives of the incarcerated at the center of my work. In the Tibetan Buddhist meditation practice of Tonglen you meditate on a
series of pithy pieces of advice. My favorite has always been “Of the two witnesses, hold the principle one.” Of all the many experts on incarceration—lawyers, sociologists, historians, prison managers, and all—let’s assume that those who have experienced incarceration first hand are the best witnesses. I have referred to Caleb Smith’s project in *Prisons and the American Imagination* several times within this study. Although I have tremendous respect for his work, at the end of the day I believe that his study is deeply flawed by privileging the testimony of the prison managers and theorists over that of the inmates. This leads him to see the incarcerated as imprisoned by the Gothic metaphors of the modern prison. Through the close analysis of each of the writers considered in this study—Baca, Slim, Piñero, Agron, Holiday, Reed, Himes, and Shakur—I think that I have shown that they actually deployed the images of the Gothic consciously and with great liberating power. Given the monstrous representations of prisoners, they had no choice but to engage in these Gothic strategies. The whole possibility of critique and counter-asserting their humanity depended on these strategies.

Beyond Smith’s work, I see this dissertation as making a contribution to both the growing critical interpretation of prison writings and the history of the Gothic. In the field of prison studies, this project joins a number of studies that would insist on the primacy of the vision of prisoners themselves. Two outstanding works in this field are Dylan Rodriguez’s study *Forced Passages: Imprisoned Radical Intellectuals and the U.S. Prison Regime* (2006) and Michael Hames-García’s *Fugitive Thought: Prison Movements, Race, and the Meaning of Justice* (2004). Both Rodriguez and Hames-García eloquently insist on the primacy of prisoners’ own analysis of their condition and the incisiveness of their political analysis. However, they each read prison writers in effect as philosophers, with little attention to their rhetorical strategies, metaphorical resonances, and uses of genre. They read prison writers as theorists rather than as complex works
of literature. Expanding on their analyses, I have endeavored to read American prison writings as literature, with close attention to both what is expressed and how it is expressed.

Secondly, I see this study as contributing to a growing body of work on the Gothic that would show that the Gothic refers not to some psychoanalytic fantasy, but instead to lived experience. We are actually living in a Gothic world. Throughout this project I have endeavored to show that the Gothic imagery pervasive in American prison writings is owed to the actual monstrosity and horror of the American system of incarceration and punishment. I see this as furthering the analyses of critics like Colin Dayan and Karen Halttunen who in different ways show the Gothic character of modern punishment. Dayan powerfully shows how our legal system itself functions like some monstrous enslaving sorcerer, while Halttunen shows the dreadful power that the Gothic narratives of punishment have in the actual lives of the accused and punished, transforming them into objects of fear, banishment, and torture. I also see this project as furthering the larger use of the Gothic in contemporary analysis. This includes Teresa Goddu’s theories in *Gothic America* of “haunting back” as a Gothic strategy in African American cultural productions to Avery Gordon’s work on haunting as a social force in *Ghostly Matters*, again proving that these occult and Gothic tropes are viscerally operating in our lives.\(^{199}\)

Third, I see this project as making a contribution and intervention in the growing field of Latina/o literary studies. My decision to read Jimmy Santiago Baca’s and Piñero’s work alongside of both their African American peers and the larger history of the Gothic is motivated by a suspicion that, whatever the Latina/o literary canon might be, it is intimately intertwined with the both the mainstream and the underbelly of American literature as whole. Both the Nuyorican and Chicano literary renaissances of the late 20\(^{th}\) century were deeply indebted to

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movements such as the Black Arts Movement, as well as the renaissance in writings by the incarcerated that Lee Bernstein chronicles in *America Is the Prison: Arts and Politics in Prison in the 1970s*.\(^{200}\) In this way I see it as joining an emerging range of work on Latina/o literature in the context of both African American studies and studies of the criminalization of Latina/os, such as Monica Brown’s study *Gang Nation*.\(^{201}\) Brown, I think, rightly sees that issues of criminality have been central in Latina/o literature and canon formation. I have tried to further extend this line of inquiry. I have also attempted to deepen the consideration of Latina/o literature in the context of the Gothic, expanding possibilities best laid out by Lyn di Iorio in *Killing Spanish: Literary Essays on Ambivalent U.S. Latino/a Identity*.\(^{202}\) As show in my reading of Puerto Ricans and vampirism, I concur with di Iorio that U.S. Latina/o experience is essentially Gothic.

This project leaves me with several new avenues for research. First, within this dissertation I have not fully considered the Gothic aspects of intimate relationships as portrayed prison writings. In her study *Criminal Intimacy: Prison and the Uneven History of Modern American Sexuality*, Reginal Kunzel has argued quite persuasively that homosexuality is figured by both prison management and popular media as one of the most frightening horrors and monstrosities of incarceration.\(^{203}\) But, prisoners themselves figure incarceration itself as a far worse horror. That said, there is a complicated tangle of images in American prison literature around the idea of “wolves,” as a slang for sexual aggressors in prison that I think invokes the


Gothic history of homosexuality, which has also been figured historically as a monstrous aberration. I think these images invoke classic images of the werewolf, and its associations with homosexuality. If studied closely, Oscar Wilde’s classic novel of sexual depravity *The Portrait of Dorian Gray* has remarkable intertextuality in plot and language with *Wagner the Werewolf*, the first werewolf novel, which was published as a penny blood serial in the 1840s. I think there are strong resonances of these classic Gothic works with the ways that same-sex intimate relationships are portrayed in 20th century American prison literature. I would pursue this question in reference to Chester Himes’ pioneering prison novel *Yesterday Will Make You Cry* and Donald Goines’ rewriting of it in *White Man’s Justice, Black Man’s Grief*. The key question ultimately being—how do people in dehumanizing contexts find and sustain intimacy? As interesting as this series of questions is for me, it will have to wait for a later project.

Another avenue for this research is to consider these themes in light of perspectives on humanism and post-humanism. In recent years, given a constellation of concerns with the environment, animal rights, ability and disability, health, and technology, there have been a range of perspectives proposed to displace humanism with something that might be post-humanism. This can include a wide range of theorists including Michel Foucault, Bruno Latour, Rosi Braidotti, Cary Wolfe, Elaine Graham, N. Katherine Hayles, Donna Haraway Stefan Lorenz Sorgner, Francisco Varela, and Douglas Kellner, among many others. Central to this constellation of concerns are the desire to question the centrality of human beings given our catastrophic influence on the world ecology, the growing blur between the animal, the machine, and the human, and the hope to counter forms of social control that have been put in place in the

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However, when we look at the range of prison writers that I have considered in this study—writers who have spent their actual and imaginative lives wrestling with the societally imposed image of the monster—they have each quite uniformly proposed a renewed commitment to humanism. This is not unique to the specific selection of writers that I have considered, but bears out in wider reading of prison narratives in the 20th century. As I have shown in this dissertation, prison writers have responded to both the dehumanizing Gothic conditions of the prison and the dehumanizing Gothic images that are deployed to justify that incarceration by counter asserting their essential humanity. That those held in American prisons are among the most vulnerable and oppressed people in our society, and that in their writings they quite strongly insist on the importance of humanism, should I think give us some critical pause when evaluating academic proposals to abandon or surpass humanistic perspectives. At the very least it should cause us to question how we can articulate the importance of human rights within the wider context of ecological, technological, and historical concerns that posthumanists propose. Consideration of this array of posthumanist reflections in light of the works of prison writers that I have studied is the next logical step in my project.

Lastly, as I began describing in this conclusion, I have spent many years being haunted by incarceration and institutionalization. Coming from a basically criminalized family, essentially the Nuyorican lumpenproletariat, I have spent my life watching the forces of incarceration and institutionalization grind away the lives of those I love. I have seen firsthand how society treats felons as monsters. For this reason I have endeavored in this dissertation to show the problem of crime and punishment from the perspectives of the prisoners. From their perspectives—as I think I have made evident in my readings of Baca, Piñero, Slim, Holiday, 

Reed, Shakur, and others—it is the modern system of incarceration that is the true monstrosity. In this way I hope that this dissertation has made some small addition to the abolition of prisons as we know them. Being merely a literary critic and a librarian, I would not pretend to be sure what might replace them. But, taking the principle testimony of those incarcerated cannot fail to teach us that incarceration is an essentially dehumanizing force in our society. It is a malignant hell that dehumanizes both the imprisoned and those charged with capturing, holding, working, and torturing them. It is my sincere hope that revealing the Gothic history and character of the modern prison might help inch us one step closer to some more human alternative.
Bibliography


