

# Tapestries: Interwoven voices of local and global identities

---

Volume 4

Issue 1 *Threats to the American Dream*

Article 9

---

2015

## “Seize the Time:” The Role of Political Development in Building a Formerly Imprisoned Black Intellectual’s Subjectivity and Praxis

Sophia Hansen-Day

*Macalester College*, [shansend@macalester.edu](mailto:shansend@macalester.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/tapestries>

---

### Recommended Citation

Hansen-Day, Sophia (2015) "“Seize the Time:” The Role of Political Development in Building a Formerly Imprisoned Black Intellectual’s Subjectivity and Praxis," *Tapestries: Interwoven voices of local and global identities*: Vol. 4 : Iss. 1 , Article 9.  
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/tapestries/vol4/iss1/9>

This Ain't no stoppin us now: Adaptation and Resistance in the 1970s is brought to you for free and open access by the American Studies Department at DigitalCommons@Macalester College. It has been accepted for inclusion in Tapestries: Interwoven voices of local and global identities by an authorized editor of DigitalCommons@Macalester College. For more information, please contact [scholarpub@macalester.edu](mailto:scholarpub@macalester.edu).

# “Seize the Time:” The Role of Political Development in Building a Formerly Imprisoned Black Intellectual’s Subjectivity and Praxis

Sophia Hansen-Day

Prisons wage immense violence against the people they cage. Through a climate of bureaucratic terror, prisons rigidly control imprisoned people’s bodies and normalize dehumanizing material conditions. Prisons isolate people from their loved ones, denying the sensory and emotional experiences relationships bring to those on both sides of the prison walls. Prisons hyper-exploit people’s labor, enforcing abhorrent wage structures and policies of retaliation for work refusal. Imprisoned people face pervasive threats of sexual violence from prison guards and grave consequences for violating oppressive gender norms. Prisons are sites in which systems of domination converge; white supremacy, capitalism, colonialism, heteropatriarchy, and ableism intersect to produce state sanctioned violence through imprisonment.

But, while holding prisoners’ bodies captive, prisons cannot prevent those they cage from building spaces of psychic freedom. In his 1969 article “Prison, Where is Thy Victory?” Black Panther Party founder Huey Newton stated, “the prison operates with the concept that since it has the person’s body it has his entire being...[But] all the prison has is his body...The prison cannot be victorious because walls, bars and guards cannot conquer or hold down an idea.”<sup>1</sup> Written during a period of profound state repression, Newton’s text calls attention to the disruptive possibility of counter narratives and political consciousness held by imprisoned people. This paper will focus on the role of political development in imprisoned radical Black intellectuals’ creation of subjectivity and theorizing in opposition to white supremacist unfreedom, and their attendant radical prison praxis.<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Joy James, *Imprisoned Intellectuals: America's Political Prisoners Write on Life, Liberation, and Rebellion* (Lanham, Md: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003), 82.

<sup>2</sup> See the section titled “Defining terms” under the Theory and Context heading for further explanation of the terms

Movements for transformative change must center the knowledge of those most directly impacted by systems of domination. Too often on the left, rigid definitions of the political exclude organic intellectuals imprisoned for participating in criminalized economies from movement support. Personal narratives and political analyses from political prisoners is privileged over that of social prisoners. In an effort to combat such erasure, I interviewed a social prisoner whose forced confrontation with the state catalyzed his political development. As noted by Ethnic Studies scholar Dylan Rodríguez, the caging of social prisoners prompts a “pragmatic urgency of self-education for legal defense and political and spiritual self-defense;”<sup>3</sup> formerly imprisoned Okwute Ekwensu’s experience falls into this narrative. My paper draws from a lineage of imprisoned and formerly imprisoned radical activist-scholars who articulate the prison regime’s reliance upon the logic of anti-Blackness fundamental to capitalism in the United States. The influential writings of imprisoned Black revolutionary George Jackson speak to the role the prison regime plays in reproducing social formations, and exemplify the power organic intellectualism holds in theorizing resistance. Inspired by the collaborative scholarship of University of California Santa Barbara Professor of Sociology Avery Gordon and formerly imprisoned Black intellectual and Coordinator for UCSB’s Educational Opportunity Program Stephen Jones,<sup>4</sup> I will use excerpts of Jackson’s *Soledad Brother* and *Blood In My Eye* to frame my analysis of the

---

subjectivity, white supremacist unfreedom, radical prison praxis, prison regime, etc.

<sup>3</sup> Dylan Rodríguez, *Forced Passages: Imprisoned Radical Intellectuals and the U.S. Prison Regime* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 5. Rodríguez’s scholarship heavily influences my paper; the terminology he uses, his summary and analysis of the wider scholarly conversation, and sections of his text via block quotes can be found consistently throughout my work.

<sup>4</sup> Avery Gordon, “Seize the time’: an interview with Stephen Jones,” *Race and Class* 53, no. 2 (2011): 14-27.

testimony shared by former Minnesota prisoner Okwute Ekwensu.<sup>5</sup>

While Minnesota has one of the lowest overall imprisonment rates nation-wide, we hold some of the most acute racialized disparities; Black people are imprisoned at a rate 26.8 times that of white people.<sup>6</sup> The Minnesota Department of Corrections identifies over one third (34.6 percent) of Minnesota’s prisoners as Black while only 5.2 percent of Minnesota’s population identifies as such according to the 2010 Census.<sup>7</sup> In addition, the vast majority of prisoners in Minnesota receive mandates for psychological treatment. Such programs push religious ideology, undermine prisoner solidarity, serve to maintain prison’s rehabilitative image, and, perhaps most relevant to my project, push prisoners to internalize their oppression.<sup>8</sup> In light of such conditions, imprisoned people in Minnesota face unique challenges in resisting the state’s

---

<sup>5</sup> Okwute Ekwensu is a pseudonym I will use in place of my interviewee’s legal name as recommended by the Macalester Institutional Review Board to ensure any potential harm from this research is minimized. I wrestled with this recommendation as crediting the person I interviewed for his scholarship feels ethically significant, but decided minimizing potential harm outweighed the potential benefits. My interviewee chose Okwute Ekwensu as the name he wanted to be used in place of his legal name. As discussed later in my paper, my interviewee identifies as Igbo, a people from southeastern Nigeria, because of his father’s ancestry. Okwute grew up hearing stories about the Igbo’s armed resistance against the Nigerian government for their own autonomous state. In Igbo, Okwute means rock, and Ekwensu is a trickster Alusi (spirit) whose a versatile force of chaos and change.

<sup>6</sup> Council on Crime and Justice, *Justice, Where Are Thou? A Framework for the Future* (Minneapolis: Council on Crime and Justice, 2007).

<sup>7</sup> The politics of racial identification are fraught, particularly given the history of scientific racism, biological determinism, and the one-drop rule in relation to Blackness. I could not find information on whether the MN DOC uses self-identification for race or categorizes prisoners’ racial identities based on observation.

<sup>8</sup> Okwute Ekwensu. “Moral and Intellectual Authority in the Prison Industrial Complex.” Unpublished article shared with author, 2014.

psychological violence. Thus, my guiding question for this research paper is: How does political-intellectual development shape imprisoned radical Black intellectuals’ creation of subjectivity and theorizing in opposition to Minnesota’s prison regime and inform radical prison praxis?

I begin my paper by providing theoretical grounding and historical context. In this section, I discuss and define the terminology I use, share a condensed history of the prison regime in the United States and in Minnesota, outline theory produced from within the academy and by imprisoned organic intellectuals, and contextualize George Jackson’s writings and organizing in the prisoner rights movement era of the 1970s. I then move into my Methods section, discussing why I chose to conduct an oral history interview for my research, describing the editing process I used to produce a conversational narrative between George Jackson and my interviewee Okwute Ekwensu, and sharing hopes I hold for the reader. Next comes my Positionality section, in which I share reflections on my social location and lived experiences in relation to this paper, along with describing the political commitments I hold and the scholar-activists who influence my work. After this, I delve into the body of my paper, or my Findings and Analysis. I begin each section with a quote from George Jackson and then share sizable quotes from my interview with Ekwensu. The themes I cover include: (1) Ekwensu’s experiences with state violence as a Black youth, (2) his analysis of the ideologies pushed in Department of Corrections treatment programs, (3) his reflections on political conversations with fellow (neo)slave’s in Minnesota’s prison industries, (4) his identity transformation from criminal to protoradical to revolutionary<sup>9</sup> via political readings that theorized morality and authority, (5) his

---

<sup>9</sup> Rodríguez defines protoradical as a person “committed to insurrection and rebellion against structures of domination, though in the absence of a formal ideological system,” whereas a revolutionary has a specific political-intellectual vein they identify with that grounds their organizing (*Forced Passages*, 5).

implementation of radical prison praxis, and (6) the movement work Ekwensu engages with today. Finally, I close my paper with broad reflections on the prison regime and a concluding call to action.

## Theory and Historical Context

### *Defining Terms*

Language structures the way we think, and thus provides us with frameworks for analyzing current power structures and imagining alternatives. In this first section of my paper, I will share definitions of the terminology I use so as to clarify meaning, credit the scholars whose work I draw upon, and make complex language more accessible. I hope to also share the political intentions behind using the terms that I do.

I use the definition of white supremacy shared by Pinoy scholar-activist Dylan Rodríguez in his book *Forced Passages: Imprisoned Radical Intellectuals and the U.S. Prison Regime*. He defines white supremacy as a logic or system of thought that “produces regimented, institutionalized, and militarized conceptions of hierarchized ‘human’ difference.”<sup>10</sup> Under this logic, the white (European and Euro-American) subject is defined as fully human in relation to people of color and indigenous people. The construction of the universal human (white) subject depends on the “frequent social, political, and biological neutralization or extermination of the (nonwhite) subhuman or nonhuman.”<sup>11</sup> Rodríguez names the deeply relational nature of racialization (the process by which race is ascribed upon bodies and peoples), and illustrates how the logic of white supremacy justifies domination via genocide, warfare, and imprisonment of people of color and indigenous peoples.

Racism structures the institutional formations, both formal and informal, that implement and maintain the logic of white supremacy. As expressed by geographer Ruth

Wilson Gilmore, racism can be defined as “the state sanctioned or extralegal production and exploitation of group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death.”<sup>12</sup> Collective and rooted in power structures reproduced by the state, racism quite literally determines group life chances. The logic of white supremacy is also inherently gendered; for example, slave masters required Black women’s reproductive labor to birth more slaves and the US state’s campaign of genocide against Native peoples depended upon massacres of indigenous women and children.<sup>13</sup>

Rodríguez theorizes extensively about white supremacist unfreedom and defines this term through narrative but does not share a concise definition. I use white supremacist unfreedom to highlight the racialized interdependence between freedom and unfreedom. Professor of History at the University of Washington Stephanie Smallwood explains how freedom and slavery were mutually constituted in a US context, thus racializing conceptions of freedom:

Among the most trenchant interpretive interventions regarding the relationship of freedom to slavery has been the suggestion that the former was produced by the latter. It was no accident that the leading authors of a North American revolutionary theory of freedom were men whose experience of individual autonomy derived from slavery...The elite planter, middling proprietor, and poor tenant were “equal in not being slaves”—equal, that is, in being white. The new republic’s universal freedom was marked by color from its inception.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Ruth Wilson Gilmore, *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 28.

<sup>13</sup> Rodríguez, *Forced Passages*, 5.

<sup>14</sup> Stephanie Smallwood, “Freedom,” in *Keywords for American Cultural Studies*, edited by Bruce Burgett and Glenn Hendler, (New York: New York University Press, 2014).

<sup>10</sup> Rodríguez, *Forced Passages*, 12.

<sup>11</sup> *ibid.*

Here, Smallwood unsettles the universal rhetoric of the US nation-state’s founders; freedom was constructed as possessive and individualist, was understood as the ability to claim either symbolic or physical property, and materially was only accessible to white propertied men.<sup>15</sup> Today, unfreedom characterizes the bodily state of 2.4 million people imprisoned and the over 7 million people living under carceral control i.e. parole, probation, or incarceration in jails or prisons in the United States.<sup>16</sup> Scales of unfreedom exist outside the prison regime, driven by deep inequity in material and social well-being due to systems of domination. However, I use unfreedom in this paper specifically to distinguish between people who are caged and those of us on the outside in the alleged “free world.”

I use prison regime in my paper instead of the more narrowly delineated prison or the broader prison industrial complex. In using this language, I hope to simultaneously articulate how the experiences of imprisoned people are localized, while also naming how prisons work to disseminate white supremacist logics of criminality/citizenship, and white mobility/Black, brown, and indigenous social death. Rodríguez shares his analytical framing of the prison as a regime:

to conceptualize [the prison] as a dynamic state mediated practice of domination and control, rather than as a reified ‘institution’

---

<sup>15</sup> See Cheryl Harris’s foundational article titled “Whiteness as Property” (1993) for further reading on how whiteness functions as a legally protected form of property. See David Roediger’s *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (1991) for an analysis of the construction of white working class racial identity in opposition to blackness. See both volumes of Theodore Allen’s *The Invention of the White Race* (1994 and 1997) for an analysis that argues the construction of whiteness is a tool of ruling class social control.

<sup>16</sup> “Criminal Justice (Adult),” Justice Policy Institute, accessed April 2, 2015, <http://www.justicepolicy.org/research/category/35?PageSize=25&PageIndex=2>.

or ‘apparatus’...as a specific mobilization of (state) power that relies on a particular reified institutional form (“the prison”) while generating a technology of domination that exceeds the narrow boundaries of that very same juridical-carceral structure.<sup>17</sup>

Rodríguez thus argues for language that encourages versatility in scale in our scholarship. He calls for research that incorporates both the specificities of imprisonment while also considering the broader logics sustained by the regime, such as white supremacist unfreedom. I use prison regime instead of prison industrial complex (defined by abolitionist organization Critical Resistance as “a term used to describe the overlapping interests of government and industry that use surveillance, policing, and imprisonment as solutions to economic, social and political problems”<sup>18</sup>) because of the analytical rigor present within the framework proposed by Rodríguez. For the most part, I use the terms imprisoned radical intellectual and formerly imprisoned radical intellectual instead of prison intellectual. Taking guidance from Rodríguez, I seek to shy away from naturalizing the social and institutional formations of the prison regime; imprisoned as an adjective describes the condition of those who are caged, whereas prisoner assigns an identity category to people who are imprisoned that does not question the legitimacy of the prison regime’s existence.

I use the term subjectivity to mean how individuals understand themselves as subjective beings in the world (their individual consciousness tied to larger collective identities, situated knowledges, and lived experiences). Agency is closely tied to subjectivity; people’s responses to power structures that subject them inform understandings of the self. While rooted in Western

---

<sup>17</sup> Rodríguez, *Forced Passages*, 40.

<sup>18</sup> “The Prison Industrial Complex,” Critical Resistance, accessed April 2, 2015, <http://criticalresistance.org/about/not-so-common-language/>.

epistemology, the definition I use departs from intellectuals who assert the existence of objective truth and disregard how the subject cannot be separated from broader systems of power. Subjectivity can also be used as a framework for uncovering the processes of how people become subjects, for historicizing the subject and de-normalizing power structures. Tavia Nyong'o, Associate Professor of Performance Studies at New York University, explains the relationship between history, subject formation, and resistance:

Subjectification bears a history...how we are formed as subjects-- how we live or die, what rights we possess or lack, what we know or are kept ignorant of--...inform who we feel ourselves to be in our “innermost selves” and how we are entangled in our most objective and immediate environment. They form the ground on which we stand, when and if we take a stand.<sup>19</sup>

The relationship between subject formation, understandings of the self, and responses to power structures is critical to understanding the theory of imprisoned radical intellectuals. One violent tactic used by agents within the prison regime is to render humans as objects, and thus deny subjectivity to imprisoned people. My scholarship wholeheartedly rejects such tactics and hopes to counteract such violence in a small way by centering the knowledge production of a formerly imprisoned intellectual, Okwute Ekwensu. See the methods section of my paper for further analysis on subjectivity and the prison regime.

I define radical prison praxis using the scholarship of Angela Davis, Paulo Freire, and Dylan Rodríguez. Formerly imprisoned Black intellectual Angela Davis states, “radical simply means ‘grasping things at the root.’” Thus, being radical means addressing the root cause of

problems in order to transform or dismantle oppressive social formations. I draw on Brazilian educator Paulo Freire’s definition of praxis: “reflection and action on the world in order to transform it.”<sup>20</sup> Taken together, radical prison praxis means two things: the development of ideas that reject the prison regime and instead address root problems of social harm (i.e. political development in which an imprisoned person politicizes their experiences in relation to power structures), and the implementation of these ideas into action to transform society. Rodríguez deepens this explanation by highlighting the material conditions of imprisoned radical intellectuals and the central role these conditions play in theorizing. He defines radical prison praxis as “an active current of political-intellectual work shaped by a condition of direct and unmediated confrontation with technologies of state and state-sanctioned (domestic) warfare.”<sup>21</sup> Here, Rodríguez characterizes imprisonment as a form of low-scale warfare within US borders, highlighting the absolute violence required to cage people, and identifies radical prison praxis as an active, dynamic response to this formation. He digs into further detail, writing,

Radical prison praxis is fundamentally an...insurgent or insurrectionist formation of critique, dissent, and rebellion that (1) elaborates a conception of political subjectivity...specific to the formation of the prison as a particular regime of power; (2) conceptualizes praxis through the terms with which it is organically linked and historically ‘belongs’ to, a lineage of imprisoned radical intellectuals; and (3) shifts the presumptive political geography of praxis by examining its formation at the site of imprisonment.<sup>22</sup>

---

<sup>19</sup> Nyong'o, Tavia, "Subject," In *Keywords for American Cultural Studies*, edited by Bruce Burgett and Glenn Hendler (New York: New York University Press, 2014).

---

<sup>20</sup> Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, (New York: Continuum, 2000), 51.

<sup>21</sup> Rodríguez, *Forced Passages*, 2.

<sup>22</sup> *ibid*, 76.

Thus, Rodríguez provides a multi-layered, contextual, and politically charged definition I hope informs understanding of Okwute Ekwensu’s narrative in the findings and analysis section of my paper. With an explanation of the terminology I use covered, I will now move to a history of the prison regime.

### *A Condensed History of the Prison Regime*

In the words of Pinoy scholar-activist Dylan Rodríguez, “Fatal unfreedom, historically articulated through imprisonment and varieties of (undeclared) warfare, and currently proliferating through epochal technologies of human immobilization and bodily disintegration, form the grammar and materiality of American society.”<sup>23</sup> Today, the prison regime structures the physical status of bodies, their relationship to property, and their ability to move unhindered by state directives within the United States. The allegedly universal social contract— defined as (1) the formal protection of constitutional rights, (2) mediated protection via the legal system and police, and (3) “the everyday presumptions of individual and collective bodily integrity”<sup>24</sup>— is only accessible to normative white people. In material terms, white supremacist unfreedom forms US social formation for the vast majority. The prison industrial complex and the broader prison regime are not aberrant projects of racialized social control in need of reform, but instead continue “the socially constitutive American production of white life/mobility through black, brown, and indigenous death/immobilization.”<sup>25</sup> Such theorizing places demands for dismantling and abolition center stage within a radically reimagined US social formation.

Native scholar Andrea Smith details the historical formation of the anti-Black logic of slavery in “Heteropatriarchy and the Three Pillars

of White Supremacy.”<sup>26</sup> She focuses on the integral role the 13<sup>th</sup> amendment played in shifting the spatial terrain of unfree labor from the plantation to prison. Smith is not alone in drawing such connections. Rather, she condenses scholarly arguments made in previous decades by Angela Y. Davis in her “From the Prison of Slavery to the Slavery of Prison: Frederick Douglass and the Convict Lease System,” who herself draws on W.E.B. Du Bois’s scholarship on Reconstruction and the Black Codes. By abolishing slavery *except for those convicted of a crime*, the 13<sup>th</sup> amendment provided the intellectual and legal means for the continuance of equating Blackness with enslavability. Thus, Smith asserts, “we can actually look at the criminalization of Blackness as a logical extension of Blackness as property.”<sup>27</sup> The death laden racialized labor relations of Southern slavery were thus transferred to the North as prisons across the United States dramatically shifted in racial composition. Post-emancipation, the mechanism of Black people’s captivity and exploitation was transferred from the private albeit state sanctioned and legally codified property owner, to quite literally the domain of the capitalist state. Thus, with the 13<sup>th</sup> amendment “the state...gained the ability to determine the contours of freedom and unfreedom.”<sup>28</sup>

While this legal grounding was in place post-1865, the prison industrial complex did not mushroom into its current massive proportions until the 1980s. In 1975, 380,000 adults and juveniles were in prison, jail, or police lockups.

---

<sup>26</sup> Andrea Smith, “Heteropatriarchy and the Three Pillars of White Supremacy,” In *Color of Violence: the Incite! Anthology* (Cambridge, Mass: South End Press, 2006), 66-73.

<sup>27</sup> Incite! Women of Color Against Violence, *Color of Violence: the Incite! Anthology*. (Cambridge, Mass: South End Press, 2006), 62.

<sup>28</sup> Kim Gilmore, “Slavery and Prison -- Understanding the Connections,” *Social Justice: a Journal of Crime, Conflict & World Order* 27, no. 3 (2000): 198.

---

<sup>23</sup> *ibid*, 1.

<sup>24</sup> *ibid*, 2.

<sup>25</sup> *ibid*, 14.

Today, that number exceeds 2.4 million.<sup>29</sup> Some scholars place the rise of the prison industrial complex in a partnership between the War on Drugs and the creation of urban ghettoization. Racialized apartheid was built via redlining, restrictive housing covenants, employment discrimination, exclusion from GI bill benefits and de facto Jim Crow segregation partnered with deindustrialization and economic restructuring due to globalization. Some of the public intellectuals whose work pushed elements of this frame include French sociologist Louis Wacquant, legal scholar Michelle Alexander, and American Studies professor and geographer Ruth Wilson Gilmore. Other scholars see the rise of the prison industrial complex as an effort to repress the direct challenge to US empire posed by the Black and Chicano power, Puerto Rican Independentista, Native sovereignty, and white anti-imperialist movements of the 1960s. Dylan Rodríguez asserts that the militarized rhetoric of the War on Drugs and its accompanying politics of law and order can be characterized as a second White Reconstruction. During this period, he asserts, technologies of surveillance, policing, caging, and exterminating were refined in order to contain a “gathering storm of dissidence,” notably in the FBI’s criminalization and murder of social movement activists such as militant Black organizer Fred Hampton via COINTELPRO and massive federal spending to militarize domestic police forces.<sup>30</sup>

Political rhetoric at this time exposed a heightened white popular anxiety as citizens faced the potential of their society’s disarticulation in the face of revolutionary demands for self determination and national liberation. In the wake of Vietnam, the white supremacist media and politicians, President Ronald Reagan chief among them, constructed low-income urban communities of color as “jungles”— foreign, chaotically violent

spaces where the “assumptions that rationalized colonialism [could be applied] to the urban poor.”<sup>31</sup> The law and order paradigm reflected in such rhetoric fueled the passage of punitive drug policy. Rockefeller drug laws made drug sale and possession legally on par with first-degree murder while the Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1986 classified drugs as a national security concern.<sup>32</sup> In the past thirty years, inequality has increased in the United States due to the gutting of social welfare programs, the stagnation of wages for the working class, corporate offshoring of jobs to the Global South where extreme labor exploitation produces greater profit margins, and the consolidation of finance capital. A product of late stage global capitalism, austerity has become the dominant policy frame. Such structural adjustments diminish life chances for working class people, particularly poor Black and brown people. Used to justify such marginalization are the very same white supremacist law and order frames that criminalize bodies of color, with racialized Black bodies positioned as the most undeserving and incorrigible.

#### *Minnesota’s Prison Regime*

The origins of Minnesota’s prison regime can be traced back to its inception as a settler colonial state. Settler colonialism is a form of colonialism in which settlers claim indigeneity in order to destroy Native claims to sovereignty, dispossess Native people of their lands, and justify genocidal campaigns in an attempt to erase Native presence. Andrea Smith conceptualizes two other pillars of white supremacy beyond the anti-Black logic of Slavery/Capitalism discussed previously; one is Orientalism/War, and the other is Genocide/Colonialism.<sup>33</sup> Andrea Smith explains that

<sup>29</sup> Loic Wacquant, "Class, Race & Hyperincarceration in Revanchist America," *Daedalus* 139 no. 3 (2010): 75.

<sup>30</sup> Rodríguez, *Forced Passages*, 23.

<sup>31</sup> Stephen J. Hartnett, *Challenging the Prison Industrial Complex: Activism, Arts, and Educational Alternatives*, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2011), 48.

<sup>32</sup> *ibid*, 91.

<sup>33</sup> Smith, “Heteropatriarchy and the Three Pillars of White Supremacy,” 67.



the logic of genocide requires indigenous peoples to always be disappearing. Smith explains,

Through this logic of genocide, non-Native peoples then become the rightful inheritors of all that was indigenous—land, resources, indigenous spirituality, and culture. Genocide serves as the anchor of colonialism: it is what allows non-Native peoples to feel they can rightfully own indigenous peoples’ land.<sup>34</sup>

The origins of Minnesota’s prison regime lay in this logic of genocide, as outlined by the Minneapolis-based Justice for Fong Lee Committee. Fong Lee was a Hmong teenager murdered by Minneapolis police officer Jason Anderson in 2006. The Justice for Fong Lee Committee formed in response and created a racial profiling/police brutality timeline for Minnesota as an educational tool in their community work. Juliana Hu Pegues, American Studies Graduate Fellow at Macalester College, was an active member of the Fong Lee Committee. She shared this reflection on the timeline the committee created:

It begins with the 1862 hangings death of 38 Dakota men by the U.S. and the internment of 1,600 Dakota people at Fort Snelling, which was followed by a government-sanctioned mass expulsion, violent military/police actions that were foundational to white settlement and the creation of the state of Minnesota...our aim is to understand these violences as a constellation that maps a white-supremacist and colonialist [prison] regime: historic, systemic, and foundational.<sup>35</sup>

<sup>34</sup> Andrea Smith, “Indigeneity, Settler Colonialism, White Supremacy,” *Global Dialogue* 12, no. 2 (Summer-Autumn 2010).

<sup>35</sup> Juliana Hu Pegues, "The Case of Fong Lee: Racial Profiling, Police Brutality, and Asian American Movement Organizing," Paper presented at Out of the Margins: Asian American

While outside the scope of my paper, understanding the roots of Minnesota’s prison regime in settler colonialism is crucial to building transformative politics and movement organizing from an anti-racist and decolonial perspective.<sup>36</sup> While the prison regime rests on the anti-Black logic of slavery, the ongoing legacy of settler colonialism today can be seen in disproportionate imprisonment rates for Native peoples.<sup>37</sup>

Minnesota’s prison regime boomed post-1980, particularly criminalizing Black bodies but impacting people of color and indigenous people more broadly. Mirroring trends nation wide with the dissemination of the white supremacist rhetoric of the War on Drugs and its influence on public policy, Minnesota lawmakers restructured Sentencing Guidelines in 1982. This reform made first-degree drug crimes (e.g. 10-gram sale or 25-gram possession of cocaine or methamphetamine) comparable to crimes that cause great bodily harm and death, implementing policy far more punitive than other states in the region.<sup>38</sup> With 10:1 disparities in drug related arrests between Black people and whites despite evidence of comparable use rates, Minnesota led the nation for several years in the 1990s for the greatest racial disparities.<sup>39</sup>

The Minnesota Department of Corrections identifies over one third (34.6 percent) of Minnesota’s prisoners as Black while only 5.2 percent of Minnesota’s population identifies as such according to the 2010 Census. That amounts to, in the calculations of Dr. Rose Brewer, Professor of African American and African Studies

---

Movement Building Conference, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI, March 26, 2011.

<sup>36</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> See *What Does Justice Look Like?: The Struggle for Liberation in Dakota Homeland* (2008) by Waziyatawin for more scholarship on settler colonialism in Minnesota.

<sup>38</sup> Council on Crime and Justice, *Justice, Where Are Thou?*, 15. See Minnesota State Statute 152.021 (2014) at <https://www.revisor.mn.gov/statutes/?id=152.021> for further information on what constitutes a first degree drug crime in Minnesota.

<sup>39</sup> *ibid.*, 11.

at the University of Minnesota, an imprisonment rate for Blacks that is 26.8 times that for whites.<sup>40</sup>

In Minnesota, many youth of color and indigenous youth are pushed out of school and into the criminal injustice system. Curriculum that erases marginalized peoples and discourages critical thinking, inadequate funding reliant upon standardized test performance, harsh disciplinary policies that include militarized police in schools; these conditions produce what scholar-activists deem the school to prison pipeline.<sup>41</sup> Once youth experience initial contact with the criminal injustice system the likelihood they will experience imprisonment greatly increases. While the tentacles of the school to prison pipeline have expanded capturing more and more young people, the juvenile injustice system has simultaneously shifted towards a punishment-based model. In the 1980s and 1990s, the number of offenses for which youth could be tried increased dramatically, the policies within juvenile court shifted to closely resemble adult court, and Extended Juvenile Jurisdiction (EJJ) was introduced, a process by which youth are sentenced in juvenile court but receive stayed adult sentences.<sup>42</sup>

In 2001, Hennepin County published a report outlining vast racialized disparities in the juvenile injustice system. Black youth were 13 percent of the population but 45 percent of those referred for “detention” i.e. caging.<sup>43</sup> This report substantiated what was already deeply intimate knowledge for Black community members and catalyzed the creation of a Juvenile Justice Racial

---

<sup>40</sup> *ibid*, 110.

<sup>41</sup> For more on the school to prison pipeline see *The School to Prison Pipeline: Structuring Legal Reform* (2010) by Catherine Kim, Daniel Losen, and Damon Hewitt. For more on the gendered impacts of this system, see “Black Girls Matter: Pushed Out, Overpoliced, and Underprotected,” A Report from the African American Policy Forum (2014) by Kimberlé Crenshaw and *Punished: Policing the Lives of Black and Latino Boys* (2011) by Victor M. Rios.

<sup>42</sup> *ibid*, 13.

<sup>43</sup> Council on Crime and Justice, “An Analysis of Racial Disproportionality in Juvenile Confinement,” (Minneapolis: Council on Crime and Justice, August, 2006), 8.

Disparities Committee. In 2005, this committee contracted with the Annie E. Casey Foundation to launch a Juvenile Detention Alternative Initiative to expand the use of community-based alternatives to caging youth. While this initiative produced lower overall imprisonment rates for youth from 2002-2004, the proportion of Black youth caged actually increased.<sup>44</sup> In Hennepin County in 2007, Black youth constituted over 60 percent of Juvenile Detention Center admissions and over 70 percent of those eligible for adult certification or extended juvenile jurisdiction.<sup>45</sup>

The deinstitutionalization of people with mental health issues out of state hospitals, the increasing psychiatrization of non-normative social behavior, the lack of funding for community based treatment, and the use of the prison regime to cage people labeled as mentally ill and/or disabled also play a role in Minnesota’s prison boom. The prison regime in Minnesota mandates that the vast majority of prisoners assessed for mental illness and/or chemical dependency-- 80 percent in 2008-- complete treatment programming.<sup>46</sup> However, the alleged benefits of such programming and the assumptions they operate within warrant questioning. Activist-scholars have challenged the medical model of madness-- “the idea that madness is something that is experienced individually and internally...neutral or value-free, and rooted in our biology”<sup>47</sup>-- instead arguing that who gets labeled mad cannot be divorced from classed, racialized, and gendered systems of domination. For example, while imprisoned white people have higher rates of reported “mental

---

<sup>44</sup> *ibid*, 2.

<sup>45</sup> Council on Crime and Justice, *Justice, Where Are Thou?*, 13.

<sup>46</sup> Okwute Ekwensu, “Moral and Intellectual Authority in the Prison Industrial Complex,” unpublished article shared with author, 2014. See Addendum A for full article.

<sup>47</sup> Liat Ben-Moshe, Chris Chapman, and Allison C. Carey, eds, *Disability Incarcerated: Imprisonment and Disability in the United States and Canada*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 141. Read this anthology for scholarly perspectives on the relationship between madness and imprisonment.

health problems” than imprisoned people of color and Native people, Black men are labeled “seriously mentally ill” more often than their white counterparts.<sup>48</sup>

Furthermore, the concept of providing treatment concurrent to imprisonment ignores the prison regime’s practices of domination and disarticulation. A central demand by psychiatric survivors in the mad movement continues to be the right to have control over one’s body and a voice in one’s treatment; advocating for patient controlled alternatives to standard psychiatric care remains integral.<sup>49</sup> The prison regime clearly does not allow for imprisoned people to practice such agency in accessing care. In addition, treatment mandates fail to consider the psychic trauma produced by caging itself, and the ways physical and emotional stress can trigger madness. See the heading titled “*Resisting the DOC’s Construction of the Criminal*” in my findings and analysis section for further discussion on the specific ways the Minnesota Department of Corrections uses treatment programs to further its ideology.

While beyond the scope of my paper, the popular conception that only cisgender<sup>50</sup> men face imprisonment erases the particular struggles of imprisoned cisgender and trans women.<sup>51</sup> This idea also disregards the grave reality that Black women make up the fastest growing population of imprisoned people in Minnesota.<sup>52</sup> Imprisoned women’s illegibility to the public stems from a variety of reasons; one cause may be that resistance against the prison regime operates differently based on gendered experiences of

oppression. A 1999 study by the Department of Justice found women were three times more likely than men to have been physically or sexually abused prior to imprisonment,<sup>53</sup> and two thirds of imprisoned women are mothers to children under the age of 18 (many of whom are single parents).<sup>54</sup> Thus, individual and collective organizing can mean fighting to retain custody of children, coordinating transportation for family visitation, fighting against cycles of sexual violence furthered by prison guards, and prisoner generated literacy and health care programs.<sup>55</sup> All this is not to say imprisoned women do not also engage in more legible forms of resistance such as work strikes and riots. However, such resistance has been actively erased from historical memory. According to activist Victoria Law, “while male prisoners can draw on the examples of George Jackson, the Attica uprising and other well-publicized cases of prisoner activism, incarcerated women remain unaware of precedents relevant to them.”<sup>56</sup>

Histories of resistance against Minnesota’s prison regime include the case of Black trans woman CeCe McDonald criminalized for defending herself and surviving a transphobic racist attack. After Hennepin County prosecutors chose to pursue charges against her and won their case, CeCe was held captive in a men’s prison, denied gender affirming hormones, and placed in solitary confinement. Despite facing such violence, CeCe regularly shared analysis and words of hope with her supporters, refusing to be silenced. Her story garnered national attention and catalyzed discussions of the criminalization and

<sup>48</sup> *ibid*, 145.

<sup>49</sup> *ibid*, 152.

<sup>50</sup> Cisgender means that the gender a person was assigned at birth corresponds to how that person perceives their own gender identity.

<sup>51</sup> See Beth Ritchie’s *Arrested Justice: Black Women, Violence, and America’s Prison Nation* (2012) and Vikki Law’s *Resistance Behind Bars: The Struggles of Incarcerated Women* (2009) for two informative texts on the subject.

<sup>52</sup> Council on Crime and Justice, *Justice, Where Are Thou?*, 110.

<sup>53</sup> Victoria Law, *Resistance Behind Bars: The Struggles of Incarcerated Women*, (Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2009), 2.

<sup>54</sup> Victoria Law, “What’s gender got to do with policing and prison?” *Waging Nonviolence*, June 5, 2014. Accessed April 1, 2015. <http://wagingnonviolence.org/feature/whats-gender-got-to-do-with-policing-prison>. The majority of imprisoned cisgender men are also parents. However, they are more likely to have networks of support to care for children during their incarceration than imprisoned women and thus less likely to lose custody to the foster care system.

<sup>55</sup> Law, *Resistance Behind Bars*, 14.

<sup>56</sup> *ibid*, 6.

imprisonment of low-income trans women of color surviving at multiple axes of oppression. Today, CeCe speaks out against the prison industrial complex nationally and has been a prominent advocate for abolition.<sup>57</sup>

If we adhere to a theory of change that centers those facing multiple systems of oppression with the fewest resources, then the analysis of cisgender and trans Black women need to be shared. In the words of scholar-activists Morgan Bassichis, Alexander Lee, and Dean Spade, “The changes required to improve the daily material and spiritual lives of low-income queer and transgender people of color would by default include large-scale transformation of our entire economic, education, healthcare, and legal systems.”<sup>58</sup> Thus, while my paper does not center an analysis of heteropatriarchy or transphobia in relation to the prison regime, we must value the voices of people caged due to multiple intersecting systems of domination in our organizing.<sup>59</sup> I will now turn to a discussion of the theories developed in the academy and among organic imprisoned intellectuals concerning the prison regime.

### *Theorizing on the Prison Regime from the Academy and Imprisoned Intellectuals*

With the emergence of the post-1970s prison regime, intellectuals have grappled with how to contextualize and interrogate the role of

---

<sup>57</sup> See the CeCe McDonald Support Committee website at <http://supportcece.wordpress.com> and Barnard Center for Research on Women’s video series *No One is Disposable* featuring conversations on trans activism and prison abolition with Reina Gossett, Dean Spade, and CeCe McDonald.

<sup>58</sup> Eric Stanley and Nat Smith, eds, *Captive Genders: Trans-Embodiment and the Prison Industrial Complex*, (Oakland, CA: AK Press, 2011), 30.

<sup>59</sup> For further scholarship, see *Queer (In)justice: The Criminalization of LGBT People in the United States* edited by Joey Mogul, Andrea Ritchie, and Kay Whitlock (2011), *Captive Genders: Trans-Embodiment and the Prison Industrial Complex* edited by Eric Stanley and Nat Smith (2011) and Dean Spade’s *Normal Life: Administrative Violence, Critical Trans Politics, and the Limits of Law* (2011).

prisons in reproducing US social formations. Michel Foucault, in *Discipline and Punish*, used the panopticon as a metaphor for surveillance, the policing of non-normative behavior, and regimes of power within the disciplinary society. Foucault’s theorizing within the academy demanded increased attention be paid to the prison *regime*. As discussed previously, Foucault argued prisons are more than the localized experiences of prisoners and state agents; they constitute a broader logic of the capitalist state. Although Foucault’s failure to move away from universalized conceptions of the human (read: European) subject mark deep failures to consider the racialized nature of white supremacist unfreedom, Foucault introduces two concepts useful to consider in interrogating the prison regime. *Dominium*, or absolute ownership in tangible things, helps to conceptualize the relationship of captive bodies to the state who are both “abstracted legal property/obligation and intimate bodily possession.”<sup>60</sup> The concept of capillary power theorizes how power flows and materializes at its extremities and outer limits, in opposition to being centrally located within specific state institutions.

Outside the academy there is a rich tradition of scholarship produced by Black, Native, Puerto Rican, Chicano, Arab, and anti-imperialist white political prisoners and politicized social prisoners during their captivity. This is particularly true in the last four decades given the expanded use of the prison regime as a means to silence dissent and disrupt social movement organizing, as mentioned previously. Radical Black prisoners such as George Jackson, Angela Davis, Mumia Abu-Jamal, Jalil Abdul Muntaqim, Sundiata Acoli, Mutulu Shakur, Marshall Eddie Conway, Huey Newton, Assata Shakur and many others have produced works that should be understood as a social and intellectual movement, as argued by Dylan Rodríguez. Black feminist, public intellectual, and

---

<sup>60</sup> Council on Crime and Justice, *Justice, Where Are Thou?*, 110.

African American Studies scholar Joy James edited two anthologies that highlight the work of these imprisoned intellectuals, namely *The New Abolitionists: (Neo) Slave Narratives and Contemporary Prison Writings* and *Imprisoned Intellectuals: America’s Political Prisoners Write on Life, Liberation, and Rebellion* and Angela Davis’s *Are Prisons Obsolete?* remains one of the most widely read abolitionist texts to date.

### *George Jackson and Radical Prison Praxis*

George Jackson will play a central role in this paper because his collection of letters *Soledad Brother* and less read but no less incisive *Blood in my Eye* remain monumental texts in Black radicalism and analysis of the prison regime. In Rodríguez’s words, both “emerged as ‘literatures of combat,’ serving the dual capacities of theoretical texts and mobilizing tools.”<sup>61</sup> Jackson’s scholarship politicized Black prisoners across the United States and his co-founding of the Black Guerrilla Family prior to his assassination began a tradition of militant organizing inside California’s prisons. Eric Cummins documents this influence in his text *The Rise and Fall of California’s Radical Prison Movement*, focused primarily on San Quentin State Prison in which he discusses the role of numerous political study groups, an underground newspaper, and clandestine efforts at organizing a prisoner union. Jackson’s influence contributed to prison uprisings throughout the 1970s, most notably with the Attica rebellion that began on September 9, 1971, and his impact can be seen today in California today. Prisoners organizing against solitary confinement and Special Housing Units staged mass hunger strikes in 2011 and 2013.<sup>62</sup> Members of the Black Guerrilla Family facing retaliation for their “gang affiliation,” as defined by the California Department of

Corrections, played an active role in this organizing.

Key positions Jackson pushed in his scholarship and organizing were the need for ideological and political unity among prisoners across racial divisions and the central role the prison regime plays in reproducing social formations within the capitalist state. To unify imprisoned people, he called for prisoners to recognize their shared struggles and proposed methods of survival for living under the prison regime. In the words of sociologist Avery Gordon, Jackson promoted “a sophisticated humanism designed to throw off the effects of ‘institutions of authoritative inhumanity,’ and to ‘comprehend on a feeling level an existence contrary to violence.’”<sup>63</sup> Jackson also used his complete rejection of the prison regime’s legitimacy to unify imprisoned people behind one ideological stance. Rodríguez describes Jackson’s writings: “[he] advocates a form of political rupture that defies the possibility of rehabilitation, a conception of social justice that requires the extermination of the existing order...[he] reveal[s] a fervent belief in the regenerative potential of a politics of refusal.”<sup>64</sup>

The influence of George Jackson and the Black liberation movement resulted in increasing militancy in Minnesota’s prisons in the 1960s and 1970s. In 1960, 100 prisoners staged a sit-down strike and 40 prisoners in segregation staged an uprising at Stillwater prison.<sup>65</sup> In 1966, 186 prisoners staged a strike and were met with tear gas volleys and two hundred National Guardsmen with bayonets when they refused to concede their demands at St Cloud Prison.<sup>66</sup> In 1969, 9 prisoners at Stillwater prison—5 of whom were Black and 3 of whom were Native American—were tear gassed, stripped naked, placed in solitary confinement, and left in their cells for several days following an

<sup>61</sup> Rodríguez, *Forced Passages*, 119.

<sup>62</sup> See the Prisoner Hunger Strike Solidarity Coalition’s website at <https://prisonerhungerstrikesolidarity.wordpress.com> for further information, including writings from imprisoned people who participated in the strikes.

<sup>63</sup> Gordon, “Seize the Time,” 17.

<sup>64</sup> Rodríguez, *Forced Passages*, 121.

<sup>65</sup> Denise S. Hesselton, “Crisis and Reform at Minnesota’s Stillwater prison, 1960-2000,” (PhD diss., University of Minnesota, 2007), 78.

<sup>66</sup> *ibid*, 81.

uprising.<sup>67</sup> In November 1970, in response to policies that singled out Native and Black prisoners, ten Black prisoners came to dinner “wearing white sweatshirts with black panthers stenciled on the back...[and] feathers to ‘free the Indians’ locked in segregation” and a confrontation ensued when these same prisoners staged an uprising in their cell block.<sup>68</sup> On Christmas Day of 1970 protesters outside Stillwater prison chanted “We wish you a revolution,” and “Free Angela Davis.”<sup>69</sup> All of these events point to the politicization of Minnesota’s prisoners in this movement era, countering the myth that Minnesota’s prisons have never been hotbeds for dissent and resistance.

### Methods

My primary method was to conduct an oral history interview with former Minnesota prisoner Okwute Ekwensu. He identifies as having developed intellectually and politically while imprisoned through individual reading, writing, and informal conversations with other imprisoned people. Okwute Ekwensu and I initially met through attending organizing meetings with a recently founded Minneapolis community group. We are developing strategies to address policing and prisons through an abolitionist lens; as a collective, we see these systems resulting primarily from white supremacy and capitalism but we are always deepening our analysis. Ekwensu’s incisive critiques and vocalizing of his own politicization while imprisoned shape our organizing in notable ways and need to be shared with a wider audience. After going through an Institutional Review Board Process to ensure any potential harm was minimized, I conducted a loosely structured 90 minute interview with Okwute Ekwensu. I prepared questions prior to the interview while giving agency to my interviewee to direct the conversation.

<sup>67</sup> *ibid*, 86.

<sup>68</sup> *ibid*, 93.

<sup>69</sup> *ibid*, 98.

I chose to conduct a loosely structured oral history as a method for a number of reasons. As argued in *Telling Stories: The Use of Personal Narratives in the Social Sciences and History* by Mary Jo Maynes, Jennifer L. Pierce, and Barbara Laslett, personal narrative analyses “introduce marginalized voices into the record,...[can provide] sources of counter-narratives to undermine misleading generalizations,...[and] provide entrées into the black box of subjectivity by exploring its psychological as well as social dimensions.”<sup>70</sup> In sharing Ekwensu’s words, I hope to contribute to counter-narratives that disrupt the official discourse of individualized constructions of the criminal void of the broader context of white supremacy and capitalism.

Within the academy, oral histories have been used to center “history from below,” “to challenge official histories, as well as uncover and attest to individuals and group oppression.”<sup>71</sup>

I also hope to elucidate more about the relationship between conceptions of selfhood, subjectivity, agency-- defined as “resistance to structurally determined oppressions”<sup>72</sup>-- and social action in relation to historically specific institutions and complex socio-historical processes as demonstrated by Ekwensu’s radical prison praxis within the prison regime. In doing such research, I hope to depart from social science research that simplifies individuals into the sum of social variables or identities, that “treats [social actors] as if they had little or no individual history, no feelings or ambivalences, no self knowledge.”<sup>73</sup> Oral history scholarship holds the “potential to theorize and investigate a more complex and interesting social actor- constructed through social relations, embodied in an individual with a real history and psychology, and living and changing through

<sup>70</sup> Mary Jo Maynes, Jennifer L. Pierce, and Barbara Laslett, *Telling Stories: the Use of Personal Narratives in the Social Sciences and History*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008), 9.

<sup>71</sup> *ibid*, 40.

<sup>72</sup> *ibid*, 22.

<sup>73</sup> *ibid*, 16.

time.”<sup>74</sup> Given the violent denial of human subjecthood to prisoners by the prison regime, oral history’s affirmation of self and agency becomes theoretically more urgent. Oral history speaks back to and refutes the prison regime’s operational logic in which “there are no individuals...only sub-categories of punishment and classification that evaporate the individual into her or his condition of existence.”<sup>75</sup>

Oral history can illuminate the power of counter narratives to building an individual’s subjectivity and unearth dynamics that speak to broadly held social experiences. Maynes, Pierce, and Laslett theorize how “self narratives pitted against official or hegemonic narratives” can play a central role in the building of subject positions.<sup>76</sup> Identifying himself as shifting from a criminal identity opposed to the logic of the prison regime to that of a revolutionary grounded in Black radicalism and anarchism while imprisoned, Ekwensu’s understanding of selfhood fills the above description. In addition, oral history narratives have the potential to speak to not only the unique experiences of particular individuals, but also to illuminate how one individual’s story may speak to broader social experiences. They may be used as a lens onto larger structural forces while simultaneously holding particularities that are not generalizable. Maynes, Pierce, and Laslett assert, “Some personal narrative analyses build toward what we call sociological generalizations. Sociological generalizations based on personal narrative evidence are claims that a given personal narrative illuminates a particular social position or social-structural location in a society or institution or social process and that it illustrates how agency can operate at this locus.”<sup>77</sup> I will cautiously make conjectures about how elements of Ekwensu’s life experiences, political development and radical

prison praxis can teach us larger lessons about prisoner subjectivity within the prison regime.

Through using oral history as a means to articulate history from below, illustrate relationships between selfhood, subjectivity, agency, and social action, and construct a complex social actor whose experiences are mediated through larger power structures and historical processes, I seek to reject the racialized othering of human beings inherent to the prison regime. The prison regime denies agency and subjecthood in order to justify criminalization and punishment. Stated differently, “Structuring the alleged order and coherence of imprisonment is the constant disintegration of the writer’s body, psyche, and subjectivity- the fundamental logic of punitive incarceration is the institutionalized killing of the subject.”<sup>78</sup> In an attempt to adhere to the above political commitments, I will include sizable quotes from my interview with Okwute Ekwensu framed by quotes from George Jackson seminal works’ *Soledad Brother* and *Blood In My Eye*.

I aspire in some sense to conjure a conversation between Jackson and Ekwensu, inspired by the format of Avery Gordon’s “Seize the Time:’ an interview with Stephen Jones” whose title I echoed in a nod to George Jackson. In this article, Gordon draws on Pulitzer prize winning author and radio broadcaster Studs Terkel and his process of narrative construction. Gordon edits a lengthy interview with formerly imprisoned radical Black intellectual Stephen Jones down into one single-voiced narrative interspersed with quotes from George Jackson.<sup>79</sup> While I summarize elements of the interview and provide limited analysis, I seek to center the theorizing of Jackson and Ekwensu. However, I chose which sections of the interview to summarize versus using direct quotes and thus played a significant role in producing the narrative with which readers will engage. I made these editing decisions through an intuitive process of teasing out themes I saw in

<sup>74</sup> *ibid*, 41.

<sup>75</sup> Rodríguez, *Forced Passages*, 36.

<sup>76</sup> Maynes, Pierce, and Laslett, *Telling Stories*, 63.

<sup>77</sup> *ibid*, 129.

<sup>78</sup> Rodríguez, *Forced Passages*, 85.

<sup>79</sup> Gordon, “Seize the Time,” 15.

both Jackson and Ekwensu’s narratives, reflecting upon what felt politically essential to include, and tuning into what resonated most strongly for me.

*Soledad Brother* was the first political text Ekwensu read; his self determined political-intellectual development began with George Jackson. Thus, by placing these two imprisoned and formerly imprisoned radical Black intellectuals in conversation, I hope to evoke the process of Ekwensu’s own political development through a Studs Terkel inspired form. While engaging with Ekwensu and Jackson’s words, I encourage readers to consider how imprisoned people’s knowledge stems directly from the lived and embodied experience of being caged. I encourage readers to consider how knowledge produced by imprisoned and formerly imprisoned people such as Okwute Ekwensu and George Jackson holds transformative possibility for imagining a world beyond prisons. While we are all implicated in the prison regime, our diverse social locations give each of us varied perspectives, responsibilities, and means for action. I hope readers reflect upon this in the process of reviewing this paper.

### Positionality

My relationship with this research paper is a fraught one. As a white cisgender woman born into socioeconomic class privilege, I inhabit social locations that the white supremacist prison regime seeks to distance from its violence. I embody identities constructed in opposition to Black criminality, that is white female vulnerability and its twinned discourse of white safety used to justify punishment.<sup>80</sup> In both performing this research and engaging in activism, I am mindful of the particular ways my childhood self was taught to avoid neighborhoods in the cityscape inhabited largely by low-income people of color due to implicit messaging about danger and criminality. With this scholarship, I hope to disrupt and resist these childhood narratives, recognizing my own liberation as deeply tied to dismantling white

supremacy and capitalism. Oakland based Catalyst Project organizers share a perspective that resonates with me in expressing, “racism deforms the humanity of white people by enlisting our participation in violence and by distorting our ability to understand ourselves and people of color outside of a lens of superiority and inferiority.”<sup>81</sup>

My own politics have been deeply informed by women of color feminist scholars such as Andrea Smith, Angela Davis, Elizabeth Martinez, Audre Lorde, and Kimberlé Crenshaw who developed the concepts of intersectionality, embodiment, coalitions across difference, and the pillars of white supremacy. I was first introduced to many of these scholars by Juliana Hu Pegues who taught a course titled “the Theory and Culture of Women of Color Feminisms” in Fall 2013. The Catalyst Project also draws from these activist-scholars when they share:

If intersectionality is a framework for recognizing the ways in which oppressions are wrapped up together and structure society, then collective liberation is a corresponding framework for looking at how we organize to transform those relations of power. Collective liberation is an approach to organizing that recognizes that our liberation as white people is wrapped up with and dependent on the liberation of communities of color who are living on the front lines of racial and economic oppression... With collective liberation as our goal, we seek to create a society where everyone has access to human rights, food, dignified work, housing, education, and health care.<sup>82</sup>

---

<sup>81</sup> Chris Crass, *Towards Collective Liberation: Anti-Racist Organizing, Feminist Praxis, and Movement Building Strategy*, (Oakland: PM Press, 2013), 252.

<sup>82</sup> *ibid*, 255-257.

---

<sup>80</sup> Hu Pegues, “The Case of Fong Lee,” 1.



Their articulation of what collective liberation means resonates with me, and affirms my belief in intersectional organizing as the means to reach collective self determination for all peoples. The theories developed by these women of color feminists shape my organizing and my scholarship.

My own activist lineage against the prison regime owes much to my sister Emily Lawson. Our friendship catalyzed the beginnings of my consciousness concerning the prison regime and its impacts on prisoners’ loved ones. Due largely to her and another friend/mentor Maya Pisel’s guidance, I began working with former prisoners three years ago referring people to community resources upon re-entry. The same year I participated intermittently in peace circles held by Maya with Macalester peers, and by Black elder Russel Balenger from St. Paul’s Rondo community. Mid-year I participated in an intensive course with abolitionist and trans scholar-activist Dean Spade titled *Justice and Imprisonment*, while volunteering inside a jail for children in Seattle. I deepened my political education the following summer by co-facilitating an experimental college course on the Prison Industrial Complex with a former Minnesota prisoner and friend, largely drawing on the scholarship of Angela Davis. The following fall I worked to collect the stories of people impacted by unjust hiring practices that exclude people with criminal records to advance a legislative campaign. In the spring of 2014, I took a course taught by American Studies scholar Juliana Hu Pegues titled “The School to Prison Pipeline.” Currently, I organize with a Minneapolis based community group connecting policing and prisons through an abolitionist lens.

While my politics largely align with Okwute Ekwensu, I hope to be mindful of the erasures produced by my social location and identities both in the interview process and as I work to analyze and translate Ekwensu’s theorizing and knowledge production. I also hope to be mindful of my own discomfort and hesitancy to engage in this work as a white cisgender woman with class privilege, while firmly believing that white silence is

complicity and Ekwensu’s theorizing needs to be shared if we are truly committed to collective liberation. This commitment is one reason I chose to include Ekwensu’s article “Moral and Intellectual Authority in the Prison Industrial Complex” as an addendum to my paper, hopefully to secure wider readership of his scholarship.

I struggled with the implications of writing this paper using an academic tone and including a heavy emphasis on theory; what does it mean that many of the imprisoned Black intellectuals about whom I write have not had access to a formal education, and thus may find my writing inaccessible? I hope to share more widely the findings and analysis section of my paper that centers the words of Jackson and Ekwensu, as well as drafting a condensed and simplified version of the theory and context I provide to frame their discussion. I also grappled with the many erasures my paper reproduces by focusing on the resistance politics evoked by George Jackson to the exclusion of other scholar-activists. I sought to counteract some of this silencing through extensive footnoting to refer readers to other scholarly work I find valuable in developing an analysis of the prison regime, but that falls outside the scope of my paper.

### **Findings and Analysis**

Okwute Ekwensu grew up in a northwestern suburb of Minneapolis that straddles the Northside, a predominantly African American neighborhood. He self identifies as Igbo, an oppressed nationality in southeastern Nigeria who engaged in armed resistance in the late 1960s in the hopes of creating an independent state. In our interview, he reflected upon the tensions produced by growing up biracial in a predominantly white neighborhood with a white mother and West African father. He noted how his experiences early in elementary school taught him he was not white, speaking to how race is inscribed upon bodies from birth onwards. His experience also reflects deeply ingrained histories of white supremacy’s obsession with racial purity; while light skinned,

Ekwensu would never be read as white, and more importantly self identifies as Black. While his family history does not reflect the deep trauma of enduring the middle passage, chattel slavery, Jim Crow laws, convict leasing, mass lynching, or other such horrors of American apartheid, he shares the experience of direct bodily confrontation and immobilization as a former captive in the prison regime with many working class Black cisgender men in the United States today. However, there is tension here too, as he described identity contestation with Black peers who read his suburban upbringing, light skin, and speech as an attempt “to be white.”<sup>83</sup> Being caged as a youth prompted his political identification with Blackness and his construction of this identity as oppositional to white supremacist power structures. “I realized it didn’t matter if I...had a white mother, that I was perceived to be Black in this society...I started to definitely identify as Black and identify as, I couldn’t necessarily articulate it, but say that I don’t like this system.”<sup>84</sup>

Imprisoned both in his youth and early 20s as a result of his participation in criminalized drug economies, Ekwensu developed into a revolutionary directly as a result of his efforts to mentally resist the authoritarian prison regime and its dominium over the body. Strongly influenced by Black radicalism, particularly the writings of radical imprisoned intellectual George Jackson, Ekwensu developed an analysis of the prison regime while inside. Expressing the influence of Jackson on his politics, Ekwensu articulated,

George Jackson was the first political stuff that I ever read. First, in juvenile I read *Soledad Brother* and then in the adult system I read *Blood in My Eye*...reading George Jackson’s critique of the prison system and of imperialist capitalist society...was really huge in my

development. And coming from somebody that was incarcerated at the time that they wrote that...That was actually my first exposure to actual radical politics...understanding that wow, I can use this time to make myself what I could be...An important way to look at dealing with incarceration going in is how you’re going to use your time.<sup>85</sup>

This self determined political education allowed Ekwensu to resist the Department of Corrections’ ideological apparatus and implement radical prison praxis while subjected to the Challenge Incarceration Program (CIP). He described engaging in conflict mediation and advocating for prisoner unity; from his perspective, these processes made living conditions more bearable for him and other state captives.

I will now draw out themes from the oral history interview with Ekwensu that map out his development as an imprisoned intellectual from his youth to the movement work he engages with today. I will introduce each theme with a quote from George Jackson in an effort to build dialogue into the structure of my paper. I will summarize Ekwensu’s points not included because of space constraints, and attempt to contextualize Ekwensu’s knowledge production within the theoretical considerations I outlined previously. See the Methods section of my paper for a more detailed reflection on this process. The themes I will cover include: (1) Ekwensu’s experiences as a youth with education, policing, and imprisonment that undermined assumptions of bodily and psychological integrity, (2) narratives on criminality he received from the Department of Corrections, particularly through their treatment programs, (3) his reflections on political conversations with fellow (neo)slave’s in Minnesota’s prison industries, (4) his identity transformation from criminal to protoradical to revolutionary via political readings that theorized morality and authority, (5) his

<sup>83</sup> Okwute Ekwensu, in person interview with the author, November 30, 2014, 2.

<sup>84</sup> *ibid*, 8.

<sup>85</sup> *ibid*, 7.

implementation of radical prison praxis, and (6) the movement work Ekwensu engages with today.

*Challenges to Bodily and Psychological Integrity as a Youth*

The very first time, it was like dying. Just to exist at all in the cage calls for some heavy psychic readjustments. Being captured was the first of my fears...It is the thing I've been running from all my life. When it caught up to me in 1957 I was fifteen years old and not very well-equipped to deal with sudden changes. The Youth Authority joints are places that demand complete capitulation; one must cease to resist altogether or else.<sup>86</sup>

Ekwensu described his initial participation in criminalized drug economies as resulting from a desire for independence, a youthful repudiation of wage labor, and expectations communicated to him by community figures. He described predominantly white teachers having lower expectations for him in comparison to white peers, and his process of internalizing negative messaging of his own self worth. He voiced, “I feel as though my early times of getting into the streets, was not as much out of an economic need, like it is for many oppressed people, but more about this is what my community expected of me.”<sup>87</sup> In tandem with vocalizing the process by which he internalized white supremacist oppression, Ekwensu noted the militarized threat police posed to his own bodily integrity as early as 12 years old:

My first contact with police were mostly incidents of harassment and brutality...from having dogs let out on us to having tasers

and guns pointed at us to being cuffed for no reason and things of that nature...the roots of my pretty deep hatred for cops [lies in these experiences]...[I learned] police are not your friends, they're not here to help you. They're here to hurt you and they might kill you.<sup>88</sup>

Such testimony speaks to police terrorism against Black communities across the country. The Malcolm X Grassroots Movement study “Operation Ghetto Storm” notes how Ekwensu’s experience is by no means isolated or anomalous. This report documents the police occupation of Black communities and exposes how police, vigilante, and private security workers murdered a Black person every 28 hours in 2012 in the United States.<sup>89</sup> Ekwensu’s expressions of fear and anger towards agents of state violence speak to the systemic nature of police stealing Black lives.

After his incarceration at 16 for his participation in criminalized economies, Ekwensu was caged both in the Minneapolis Juvenile Detention Center before being transported to a youth prison outside Philadelphia. He described the initial shock of imprisonment, echoing Jackson’s description of his initial capture, his subjection to intense physical and psychological violence, and the group consciousness he built with other imprisoned youth out of shared experience:

Getting adjusted to being confined, it takes quite some time...I think incarcerated people pay more attention to days and weeks and months and counting time than people on the streets do. Time seems to really slow down. All the people you meet, and realizing like who these people are that are being incarcerated...it’s definitely majority Black people...A lot of things start to stick out. And just getting the shock,

<sup>86</sup> George Jackson, *Soledad Brother: the Prison Letters of George Jackson*, (New York: Coward-McCann, 1970), 13.

<sup>87</sup> Ekwensu, Interview with author, 4.

<sup>88</sup> *ibid*, 3.

<sup>89</sup> Arlene Eisen, “Operation Ghetto Storm,” Malcolm X Grassroots Movement, Accessed April 1, 2015, <http://www.operationghettostorm.org>.

every time you move or have to adjust to a new facility or a new unit...you have to readjust your routine and it takes a couple days or weeks to get oriented. So, a lot of it people trying to maintain psychologically and cope with their incarceration any way they can...[It was] a pretty extreme environment by Philadelphia...[It] hardened me as an individual being that we were subject to just constant fear and beating from the staff and things of that nature were just subject to everyone. I don't think anyone passed through that placement without being beaten at least once... we all talked about how police did this to me or did that to me...I realized that my experiences were not uncommon and that other people shared the same views...they do understand that the cops...are more likely to stop you or more likely to arrest you if you're Black.<sup>90</sup>

After his incarceration Ekwensu described his alienation from peers who had not experienced imprisonment. He identified as a criminal who followed a code of ethics determined by the street. He was eventually captured by the adult system on gun charges again resulting from his participation in criminalized drug economies.

*Resisting the DOC's Construction of the Criminal*

The textbooks on criminology like to advance the idea that prisoners are mentally defective. There is only the merest suggestion that the system itself is at fault...investigation of anything outside the tenets of the...system itself is futile...All other lines of inquiry would be like walking backward. You'll never see where you're going.<sup>91</sup>

---

<sup>90</sup> *ibid*, 6.

<sup>91</sup> Jackson, *Soledad Brother*, 30.

The ideological messaging of both the Minnesota Department of Corrections and its backing in the academy within the field of criminology rest on individualized constructions of crime devoid of discussions of white supremacy or capitalism. Ekwensu shared his position on this dehumanizing narrative and its effect on fellow prisoners stating,

When we reduce it to [individual responsibility], you know prosecuting and caging people can be justified because this individual took it upon themselves to do anti-social acts (5)...The criminal justice system will...try their best to equate law with morality...that what's illegal is immoral and what's legal is what's right to do. And that we're harmful to the society, that we're an expense to the state because...it costs them to incarcerate us, that we're supposed to want to reform. That they're somehow rehabilitating us...So, there were people in prison that really internalized that message and really believed that they deserved to be incarcerated and that they were the only problem.<sup>92</sup>

He described during his incarceration as a youth internalizing some of this narrative and pursuing bible study as a means to better himself. However, after his release and before his imprisonment as an adult, Ekwensu both became an atheist and positioned himself in opposition to the capitalist state in self identifying as a criminal who took pride in adhering to street codes. His take on criminality was markedly different than the narrative proposed by the DOC, in that he saw himself and his peers as adhering to a value system of protecting your own, resisting state violence executed by police, and surviving within an illegitimate system. This set the stage for his own development of resistance during his second imprisonment. As a protoradical, he was “committed to insurrection and rebellion against

---

<sup>92</sup> Ekwensu, Interview with author, 10.

structures of domination, though in the absence of a formal ideological system.”<sup>93</sup> His politics were rooted in his lived experience and the bodily and psychic confrontation with the state holding him captive. He described,

It was now knowing that the system was illegitimate but not having a political analysis of it...my only determination was that I’m not gonna conform to it. That I know it’s not right. I know their laws are not actually morality...I didn’t internalize the messages the second time around which was a positive step for me for my mental health but at the same time could have been destructive had I not come to have a political ideology to understand the why I thought things were so wrong.<sup>94</sup>

Upon his second incarceration, Ekwensu was mandated to complete chemical dependency treatment despite not having struggled with addiction or mental illness. While access and public funding for quality and effective treatment for those who do struggle with chemical dependency and mental illness is crucial, the concept that these services could be provided within prisons flies in the face of ethical consent standards, holistic healing practices, and any understanding of the prison regime’s practices of domination and disarticulation. As described in Ekwensu’s article “Moral and Intellectual Authority in the Prison Industrial Complex,” mandated treatment programs for chemical dependency and criminal thinking are a central means through which the DOC disseminates their ideology. They push religious ideology, undermine prisoner solidarity, serve to maintain prison’s rehabilitative image, and, perhaps most relevant to my project, push prisoners to internalize their oppression. In Ekwensu’s words, these programs,

place firmly in the minds of all who pass through... they are the sole cause of their painful situation...they are in the wrong and the system is in the right...Looking at the macro scale functioning of society is discouraged. This creates a negative self-image and also prevents inmates from educating themselves.<sup>95</sup>

In addition, such programs prevent prisoners from banding together to better their conditions, instead encouraging prisoners to psychologically distance themselves from each other. Ekwensu described,

What they identified to be the criminal code, which is the policy of not snitching...they really attacked that...because I think it has power... the units where you live during treatment are worse than other ones because it sets the inmates against each other and its like I’m gonna save myself by getting through this program and that’s gonna happen at the expense of people around me. So, it really undermines some of the camaraderie that could be built among people in prison. To see themselves as I’m trying to change and I’m different. I’m in here among the rest of these people who are criminals but I’m trying to be positive. And so it’s like if everybody sees themselves in that way it’s an even worse environment than one where we’re just confined.<sup>96</sup>

Thus, mandated treatment programs serve as a form of psychological violence that emphasize the capillary power of the prison regime in circulating specific ideologies and disrupting potential for group consciousness. Ekwensu pointedly states how divisive and harmful these programs are to

---

<sup>93</sup> Rodríguez, *Forced Passages*, 5.

<sup>94</sup> Ekwensu, Interview with author, 10.

---

<sup>95</sup> Okwute Ekwensu, “Moral and Intellectual Authority in the Prison Industrial Complex.”

<sup>96</sup> Ekwensu, Interview with author, 13.

building community and coalitions that could challenge the oppressive power structure.

*Laboring inside, neoslavery, and politicizing conversations*

I know that few blacks over here have ever been free. The forms of slavery merely changed at the signing of the Emancipation Proclamation from chattel slavery to economic slavery. If you could see and talk to some of the blacks I meet in here you would immediately understand what I mean, and see that I'm right. They are all average, all with the same backgrounds.<sup>97</sup>

While imprisoned, Ekwensu worked in MinnCorps, Minnesota's prison industries that contract prisoner labor out to private companies. His starting wage at Faribault prison was 50 cents per hour, half of which was taken away for his gate fee (money returned to you upon release) and for what the DOC deems costs of confinement. He described how work either in industry or for the prison is mandated, and refusal to work results in write-ups. Write ups can prevent prisoners from being transferred to lower security levels and decrease chances for parole. While he voiced a lack of visible organizing inside, he described conversations with other prisoners who shared an analysis of prison labor as neoslavery:

Working in industry and talking to other people about how they're making money off of us and how little they're paying us and how many millions of dollars they must be making and that this is like slavery. We had those conversations on a daily basis. People talked in industry and talked about that. So it's not some far off concept to people that are incarcerated. They feel like that already.<sup>98</sup>

<sup>97</sup> Jackson, *Soledad Brother*, 68.

<sup>98</sup> Ekwensu, Interview with author, 11.

Here, Ekwensu speaks to the chattel logic of the prison regime and prisoners instinctual theorizing of prison labor's connection to the racialized labor exploitation of slavery. In the absence of access to “expert” literature, prisoners developed an understanding of the oppressive domination to which they were subjected on a feeling level.

*“I'm not the problem:” Radical Political-Intellectual Development, Identity Transformation, and Subjectivity*

You know our people react in different ways to this neoslavery, some just give in completely and join the other side...Then they are those who resist and rebel but do not know what, who, why, or how exactly they should go about this...Believe me, when I say that I begin to weary of the sun...The buffets and blows of this have and have-not society have engendered in me a flame that will live, will live to grow, until it either destroys my tormentor or myself.<sup>99</sup>

Developing an ideological grounding in Black radicalism allowed Ekwensu to resist the dehumanization the prison regime intends for its captives. This intellectual journey began on the streets of the Northside, when he was exposed to Black nationalism. He talked about being mentored in this ideological vein by an individual who intentionally spent time teaching him on a one to one basis. He described the formative influence reading *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* had on his conception of militant resistance politics and white supremacy. Even more influential however, was his engagement with the scholarship of George Jackson. Inspired by Jackson's example, Ekwensu developed an understanding that he could use his time physically confined to develop mentally as an imprisoned radical intellectual through self determined political education. He

<sup>99</sup> Jackson, *Soledad Brother*, 56.

described undergoing a “rapid phase of personal development” like many prisoners who’ve “mentally been freed up to develop as individuals” in contrast to the struggle of survival as working class people on the street. In doing so, Ekwensu connected himself to a lineage of radical intellectuals and revolutionaries who developed their politics while imprisoned.<sup>100</sup>

The three bodies of work he described as being integral to his political development while incarcerated were George Jackson’s *Soledad Brother* and *Blood In My Eye*, anthropology texts, and a text on the prison industrial complex from an anarchist perspective. From Jackson he described gaining an appreciation for tactics beyond nonviolence, and grasping the “concept of revolution...of not only rejecting the system’s values just to be an individual criminal but a rejection of the system’s values in order to identify oneself as a militant.”<sup>101</sup> He described gaining an understanding of white supremacist unfreedom and its undeclared low scale warfare on Black communities through Jackson, stating, “we’re at war with [this] system whether we decide we [are] or not or whether we know we [are] or not.”<sup>102</sup> Jackson’s emphasis on humanism designed to throw off institutions of authoritative inhumanity resonate here. Through the anthropology texts, he described gaining an understanding of European imperialism and global political economy, both of which were central to his rejection of white supremacy and its valuation of the European subject as more fully human than Black and brown peoples. Finally, he described his engagement with a book titled *The Struggle to be Human* about prisons and incarceration from an anti-capitalist and anti-state analysis. He described,

It was articulating how prisons are a direct combination of white supremacy, capitalism, and the state and how they’ve

been used as a method of social control of Blacks since the beginning of this country. So, and then it let me understand the development of modern day fortress prisons from the slave patrols, the inmate leasing programs, and onward. And then the post 70s prison boom with the war on drugs and all that stuff. So, it made me understand that there was a specific economic interest in building the prison industrial complex into what it is today... that was very important to me, to be like, it’s not this thing it’s this whole system.<sup>103</sup>

Gaining an understanding of how prisons play a central role in reproducing social formations in the capitalist state, allowed Ekwensu to position himself in opposition to this regime of white supremacist unfreedom. He discussed self-determination and a socialist mode of production as central to building liberatory social formations, and how the principles he gained from this anarchist study of prisons-- solidarity, mutual aid, direct democracy-- set the stage for his ongoing political development after his imprisonment. Discussing the intimate psychological impact this political development had on him, Ekwensu shared,

I think it did a lot for me...I started to understand oh this is a whole thing,...I finally understand it and I really actually believed then that I was not the problem. But I also knew that I wasn’t one of those individuals that committed my crimes out of economic necessity so I still knew that there’s an element of personal responsibility for some of us more privileged people. But that’s just not always the case and most [of the time is not]. My second term of incarceration was where I developed, the beginning of where I developed the politics that I have today...it did a lot for me in not internalizing the way

<sup>100</sup> Ekwensu, Interview with author, 7.

<sup>101</sup> *ibid*, 11.

<sup>102</sup> *ibid*, 11.

<sup>103</sup> Ekwensu, Interview with author, 14.

that the DOC wanted me to think of myself, which is pretty big.<sup>104</sup>

Here, Ekwensu recognizes his own social location as differentiated from some of his fellow prisoners who participated in criminalized economies out of a struggle to survive as opposed to playing out the expectations society held for him. However, he also notes the central role that radical intellectualism played in his own psychological well being while subjected to the deep violence of imprisonment.

*Implementing Radical Prison Praxis: Prisoner Unity and Conflict Mediation*

The men of our group have developed as a result of living under a ruthless system a set of mannerisms that numb the soul. We have been made the floor mat of the world, but the world has yet to see what can be done by men of our nature, by men who have walked the path of disparity, of regression, of abortion, and yet come out whole. There will be a special page in the book of life for the men who have crawled back from the grace. This page will tell of utter defeat, ruin, passivity, and subjection in one breath, and in the next, overwhelming victory and fulfillment.<sup>105</sup>

Having developed as an imprisoned radical intellectual allowed Ekwensu to implement radical prison praxis while subjected to the Challenge Incarceration Program (CIP) via conflict mediation and advocating for prisoner unity, in effect making living conditions more bearable for him and other state captives. The Challenge Incarceration Program is a militarized boot-camp that drills twelve-step ideology into prisoners, and uses

similar tactics to the mandated treatment programs described earlier.<sup>106</sup> Ekwensu explained,

At the end of my sentence when I was most political was also when I was in a place, the CIP program, the boot camp program, where you can really not express any type of politics at all. So the limited role that I played was...questioning [my counselor's] 12-step ideology...I did a lot of conflict mediation between other people, other inmates...My line was that we should resolve our problems between each other, regardless of how you decide you need to do that, but that we should not go to the corrections officers for conflict resolution because we both lose when we do that. So, that was something I was known for...So it was very anti authoritarian in nature, kind of the ideas that I was promoting...my little section of the barracks was pretty much all on the same page as far as how we related to each other and how the way that we interacted made the program easier for all of us. And I was definitely attacked for that in treatment. [My counselor] got a sense that I was saying, we're all in this together and that we can't tell on each other.<sup>107</sup>

Putting anti-authoritarian and self determined politics into practice through organizing his fellow prisoners to resist treatment staff's directives and resolve disputes among themselves, Ekwensu sought to build power against the prison regime. Mindful of the severe constraints he was operating under within the CIP program, he found ways to subvert the prison regime's ideological authority and implement beneficial changes among prisoners. While limited in scope, Ekwensu's

<sup>104</sup> Ekwensu, Interview with author, 14.

<sup>105</sup> Jackson, *Soledad Brother*, 86.

<sup>106</sup> For more information on twelve-step ideology, see Ekwensu's article titled "Moral and Intellectual Authority in the Prison Industrial Complex" included as an addendum to this paper.

<sup>107</sup> Ekwensu, Interview with author, 15.



articulation of the potency of radical prison praxis seeds liberatory possibilities for imprisoned radical intellectuals in the future.

*A revolutionary’s movement work today*

Just to stay alive is an ordeal, but I see something better. It is vague, and is a possibility at best, but I know a place, a refuge where people love and life...The holds are fast being broken. Men who read Lenin, Fanon, and Che don’t riot, ‘they mass,’ ‘they rage,’ they dig graves.<sup>108</sup>

Today, Ekwensu participates in a variety of movement organizing while also producing political writings. He is a member of a class struggle anarchist organization and on the organizing committee of a national network working to create a union for prisoners to collectively combat the exploitation they experience. Ekwensu is also part of a Minneapolis based community group developing strategies to address policing and prisons through an abolitionist lens. He described his outlook on this organizing, expressing,

I believe that labor organizing is the most effective way to combat the prison system because it attacks both the means and the motive for the prison industrial complex which is capitalism, which is surplus value, profit. I also think that labor organizing could be the biggest unifying factor in getting different racial and organizational formations within prisons to work for a common goal. Because doing that is a big hurdle and sometimes I think labor organizing can make people understand that everybody in a facility could benefit from having the type of power that you can get when you stop production. That’s the

type of prison organizing that I’m most excited about.<sup>109</sup>

In these politics we hear echoes of George Jackson’s advocacy for prisoner unity against the prison regime, and a desire for joint struggle reflected in prisoner organizing throughout the US. While narrowly focused on labor organizing, Ekwensu articulates a means by which he envisions collective power could be taken back by imprisoned people in order to produce concrete material change.

**Conclusion**

Ekwensu is one voice among many imprisoned and formerly imprisoned radical Black intellectuals. More of their intellectual theorizing needs to be centered as movement activists and scholars build demands for abolition of white supremacist unfreedom and its articulation in the prison regime of the United States. Theorizing from imprisoned and formerly imprisoned Black women and trans people such as CeCe McDonald must play a central role too, particularly in understanding how the prison regime furthers gender based oppression. As the nation witnesses an upsurge of dissent and uprisings nationally in the wake of extrajudicial and state sanctioned murders of Black people every 8 hours in 2015,<sup>110</sup> as Black led organizing blossoms in countless cities under the Black Lives Matter banner created by queer Black women Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi, we must remember the many

<sup>109</sup> Ekwensu, Interview with author, 17.

<sup>110</sup> “Killed by Police 2015,” Accessed April 1, 2015, <http://killedbypolice.net>. Statistics regarding police murder are fraught. Regardless of specific numbers, US policing is structured upon the state sanctioned murder of Black, Native, and Brown people. The federal government fails to comprehensively track police murders; the FBI, CDC, and Bureau of Justice statistics differ widely each year and the FBI’s data excludes many cases. The citizen run website cited above compiles articles from corporate news reports, and is referenced by Black Lives Matter organizers.

<sup>108</sup> Jackson, *Soledad Brother*, 25 and 31.

Black prisoners currently subjected to the death laden web of the prison regime.

While I do not nor should I claim leadership in building what liberation looks like for Black communities, I believe we all have a stake in dismantling the current social formations sanctioning both the murder and caging of Black, Native, and Brown peoples. From my social location as a white radical I believe collective liberation means centering the knowledge production and political analysis of imprisoned radical intellectuals. In the words of Black lifer in Minnesota Vava Kuaddafi regarding current movement activity, “the young people yes they can make change, and they will make history tell the story, [and] a lot more stories need to be told.”<sup>111</sup> I believe building intersectional movements to dismantle capitalism, white supremacy, colonialism, heteropatriarchy, and ableism will require the “earthquake fantasies of liberation and freedom”<sup>112</sup> articulated by imprisoned radical intellectuals.

As demonstrated by Okwute Ekwensu in his testimony, the prison regime does not address social harm but instead cages people, demanding bodily immobilization and disintegration. Simultaneous to this localized oppression of imprisoned people within the site of the prison, the regime disseminates white supremacist logics of citizenship/criminality, and white mobility/Black, brown, and indigenous social death. Thus, the prison regime acts to reproduce social formations rooted in systems of domination. However, the very violence that constitutes the prison regime informs and provokes radical imprisoned intellectuals. These intellectuals practice a politics that emerges out of direct confrontation with the state, a qualitatively different politics.<sup>113</sup> What can movements learn about building liberatory social formations from their voices? We must listen as

the crisis of the prison regime threatens to silence this intellectual “political lineage at war with its own disappearance.”<sup>114</sup> In the words of George Jackson, we must seize the time.

---

<sup>111</sup> Vava Kuaddafi, in personal correspondence with author, November 30<sup>th</sup>, 2014.

<sup>112</sup> Rodríguez, *Forced Passages*, 1.

<sup>113</sup> Rodríguez, *Forced Passages*, 37.

---

<sup>114</sup> *ibid.*, 1.

## Bibliography

- Alexander, Michelle. *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*. New York: New Press, 2011.
- Allen, Theodore. *The Invention of the White Race*. London: Verso, 1994.
- Ben-Moshe, Liat, Chris Chapman, and Allison C. Carey. *Disability Incarcerated: Imprisonment and Disability in the United States and Canada*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014.
- CeCe McDonald Support Committee. “About the Case: Background.” Accessed April 1, 2015.  
<https://supportcece.wordpress.com/about-2/background/>
- Council on Crime and Justice. *Justice, Where Are Thou? A Framework for the Future*. Minneapolis: Council on Crime and Justice, 2007. Accessed April 1, 2015.  
<http://www.crimeandjustice.org/researchReports/FINAL%20REPORT%2010.4.07.pdf>.
- Council on Crime and Justice. “An Analysis of Racial Disproportionality in Juvenile Confinement.” Minneapolis: Council on Crime and Justice, August, 2006. Accessed April 1, 2015.  
<http://www.crimeandjustice.org/researchReports/Racial%20Disproportionality%20in%20Juvenile%20Confinement.pdf>
- Crass, Chris. *Towards Collective Liberation: Anti-Racist Organizing, Feminist Praxis, and Movement Building Strategy*. Oakland: PM Press, 2013.
- Crenshaw, Kimberlé, with Priscill Ocen and Jyoti Nanda. “Black Girls Matter: Pushed Out, Overpoliced, and Underprotected.” New York: African American Policy Forum and Center for Intersectionality and Social Policy Studies, 2014.
- Critical Resistance. “The Prison Industrial Complex.” Accessed April 2, 2015.  
<http://criticalresistance.org/about/not-so-common-language/>.
- Cummins, Eric. *The Rise and Fall of California's Radical Prison Movement*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994.
- Ekwensu, Okwute, in person interview with the author, November 30, 2014.
- Ekwensu, Okwute. “Moral and Intellectual Authority in the Prison Industrial Complex.” Unpublished article shared with author, 2014.
- Eisen, Arlene. “Operation Ghetto Storm.” *Malcolm X Grassroots Movement*, Accessed April 1, 2015.  
<http://www.operationghettostorm.org>.
- Frase, R.S. "What Explains Persistent Racial Disproportionality in Minnesota's Prison and Jail Populations?" *Crime and Justice* 38 (2009): 201-280. Accessed April 1, 2015.

Freire, Paulo. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. New York: Continuum, 2000.

Gilmore, Kim. 2000. "Slavery and Prison -- Understanding the Connections." *Social Justice: a Journal of Crime, Conflict & World Order* 27, no. 3 (2000): 195-205.

Gilmore, Ruth Wilson. *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007.

Gomez, A.E. "Resisting Living Death at Marion Federal Penitentiary, 1972." *Radical History Review* 96 (2006): 58-86.

Gordon, Avery. "“Seize the time”: an interview with Stephen Jones." *Race and Class* 53, no. 2 (2011): 14-27.

Gossett, Reina, Dean Spade, and CeCe McDonald. "No One is Disposable: Everyday Practices of Prison Abolition." *Barnard Center for Research on Women* video, co-sponsored by the *Sylvia Rivera Law Project*. February 7, 2014. <http://bcrw.barnard.edu/event/no-one-is-disposable-everyday-practices-of-prison-abolition/>

Hames-Garcia, Michael. *Fugitive Thought: Prison Movements, Race, and the Meaning of Justice*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004.

Harris, Cheryl. "Whiteness as Property." *Harvard Law Review*. 106, no. 8 (1993): 1709-1791.

Hartnett, Stephen J. *Challenging the Prison-Industrial Complex: Activism, Arts, and Educational Alternatives*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2011.

Hesselton, Denise S. "Crisis and Reform at Minnesota's Stillwater prison, 1960-2000." PhD diss., University of Minnesota, 2007.

Hu Pegues, Juliana. "The Case of Fong Lee: Racial Profiling, Police Brutality, and Asian American Movement Organizing." Paper presented at Out of the Margins: Asian American Movement Building Conference, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI March 26, 2011.

Incite! Women of Color Against Violence. *Color of Violence: the Incite! Anthology*. Cambridge, Mass: South End Press, 2006.

Jackson, George. *Soledad Brother; the Prison Letters of George Jackson*. New York: Coward-McCann, 1970.

Jackson, George. *Blood in my Eye*. New York: Random House, 1972.

James, Joy. *The New Abolitionists: (Neo) Slave Narratives and Contemporary Prison Writings*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005.

- James, Joy. *Imprisoned Intellectuals: America's Political Prisoners Write on Life, Liberation, and Rebellion*. Lanham, Md: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003.
- Justice Policy Institute. “Research: Criminal Justice (Adult).” Accessed April 2, 2015. <http://www.justicepolicy.org/research/category/35?PageSize=25&PageIndex=2>.
- “Killed by Police 2015.” Founded May 1, 2013 and Accessed April 1, 2015. <http://killedbypolice.net>.
- Kim, Catherine Y., Daniel J. Losen, and Damon Hewitt. *The School to Prison Pipeline: Structuring Legal Reform*. New York: New York University Press, 2010.
- Law, Victoria. *Resistance Behind Bars: the Struggles of Incarcerated Women*. Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2009.
- Law, Victoria. “What’s gender got to do with policing and prison?” *Waging Nonviolence*, June 5, 2014. Accessed April 1, 2015. <http://wagingnonviolence.org/feature/whats-gender-got-policing-prison>.
- Maynes, Mary Jo, Jennifer L. Pierce, and Barbara Laslett. *Telling Stories: the Use of Personal Narratives in the Social Sciences and History*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008.
- Minnesota Department of Corrections. “Adult Inmate Profile- 2015.” Accessed March 30, 2015. <http://www.doc.state.mn.us/pages/index.php/about/statistics>.
- Mogul, Joey L., Andrea J. Ritchie, and Kay Whitlock. *Queer (in)justice: the Criminalization of LGBT people in the United States*. Boston: Beacon Press, 2011.
- Nyong'o, Tavia. "Subject." In *Keywords for American Cultural Studies*, edited by Bruce Burgett and Glenn Hendler. New York: New York University Press, 2014. Retrieved from <http://search.credoreference.com.ezproxy.macalester.edu/content/entry/nyupacs/subject/0>
- Olson, Joel. *The Abolition of White Democracy*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004.
- Prisoner Hunger Strike Solidarity Coalition. “Voices from Inside.” Accessed April 1, 2015. <https://prisonerhungerstrikesolidarity.wordpress.com>.
- Richie, Beth. *Arrested Justice: Black Women, Violence, and America's Prison Nation*. New York: New York University Press, 2012.
- Rios, Victor M. *Punished: Policing the Lives of Black and Latino Boys*. New York: New York University Press, 2011.
- Rodríguez, Dylan. *Forced Passages: Imprisoned Radical Intellectuals and the U.S. prison Regime*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006.
- Roediger, David R. *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class*. London: Verso, 1991.

- Smallwood, Stephanie. "Freedom." In *Keywords for American Cultural Studies*, edited by Bruce Burgett and Glenn Hendler. New York: New York University Press, 2014. Retrieved from <http://search.credoreference.com.ezproxy.macalester.edu/content/entry/nyupacs/freedom/0>.
- Smith, Andrea. "Indigeneity, Settler Colonialism, White Supremacy." *Global Dialogue* 12, no. 2 (Summer-Autumn 2010). Accessed at <http://worlddialogue.org/issue.php?id=44>.
- Smith, Andrea. "Heteropatriarchy and the Three Pillars of White Supremacy." In *Color of Violence: the Incite! Anthology*. Cambridge, Mass: South End Press, 2006.
- Spade, Dean. *Normal Life: Administrative Violence, Critical Trans Politics, and the Limits of Law*. Brooklyn, NY: South End Press, 2011.
- Stanley, Eric A., and Nat Smith. *Captive Genders: Trans Embodiment and the Prison Industrial Complex*. Oakland, CA: AK Press, 2011.
- Wacquant, Loic. "Deadly symbiosis: When Ghetto and Prison Meet and Mesh." *Punishment & Society* 3, no. 1 (2001): 95-134.
- Wacquant, Loic. "Class, Race & Hyperincarceration in Revanchist America." *Daedalus* 139 no. 3 (2010): 74-90.
- Waziyatawin. *What Does Justice Look Like?: The Struggle for Liberation in Dakota Homeland*. St. Paul, Minn: Living Justice Press, 2008.

by Okwute Ekwensu

Prisons play a greater role in society than just warehousing people for social control and profit. While all incarceration is violence, physical confinement is also an opportunity to carry out psychological violence. This manufactured stress is not merely a result of sadism carried out by individuals in authoritarian positions like in the Stanford Prison Experiment. I see the purpose as being an attempt to legitimize state violence imposed on incarcerated people by backing it with moral and intellectual authority. In order to maintain control, the prison industrial complex and its administration must maintain legitimacy in the eyes of inmates. If a radical analysis of the prison system were to become popular among prison populations, a vastly greater amount of resources would be needed to maintain control, if control could be kept at all. The same is true for the public. Law enforcement would be rendered almost entirely ineffective without the faith and cooperation of communities. In the Minnesota Department of corrections, all newly committed offenders are assessed for substance abuse problems. In 2008, 80 percent of those assessed were directed to complete treatment programming. (MN-DOC, 2009 Report to the Legislature) Because of the vast number of treatment mandates, chemical dependency treatment has become the cornerstone for imposing an ideology that attempts to legitimize mass incarceration and mask the interests of capital and state that motivate the growing prison industrial complex. Treatment programs serve several key functions for the department of corrections:

1) Mandating Religious Ideology: The twelve steps have connections to the Oxford Group, a Christian organization that was most popular during the 1930's. Although there are positive aspects to the AA/NA communities, this is of concern. Especially when treatment is implemented involuntarily. Inmates who refuse or fail to carry out their

treatment mandates will have their parole delayed by 30 days and will miss out on opportunities to transfer to lower security levels. Changing the twelve steps by substituting “higher power” where they used to say god does not change the fact that these programs are highly suggestive. While nothing is wrong with an individual practicing the religion of their choice, courts or prison administrations mandating programs that have ideology rooted in organized religion is a violation of rights. This is not much different than if church or any other religious service were made mandatory. Imposing ideology of a religious nature instills a value system in which people are urged to display obedience to an external authority. These principles are mirrored within society. Instead of taking control of their lives, people place their fate in the hands of a ruler. The concept of the first of the twelve steps is powerlessness, and this sets the tone for the entire program.

2) Undermining Prisoner Solidarity: While participating in prison treatment programs, inmates live in areas with others going through the same program. These units are referred to as therapeutic communities. There are many arbitrary rules and prisoners are encouraged to confront and report behaviors in others that has been deemed to be negative by the administration. Inmates are also pressured to inform on others in guided group interaction. Collective punishment and favoritism for informants are common and highly effective control tactics implemented. Constant threat of program failure resulting in loss of parole time, work release or a reduction in security level is used to apply additional pressure and promote inmates giving up information on each other. This causes an environment of distrust among prisoners and essentially creates an inmate population that polices itself. As a result it is very difficult for prisoners in a unit to organize any resistance or express criticisms of the prison staff or program. Those who do not give up information

under pressure are said to be “upholding the criminal code” or “conspiring with negative behavior.” It is effective in creating a population of scared, competing individuals rather than a group of inmates with a sense of unity. Prisons, especially treatment units deliberately create environments that won’t allow prisoner solidarity to develop. This leaves inmates with options of being informants and collaborators with prison administrators or taking part of prison politics, which divides incarcerated people by race and gang affiliation. Neither snitch culture nor prison culture is a solution. Inmates need to realize that their power is in their numbers and prisoner solidarity is the only means by which a resistance can be carried out against the prison industrial complex.

3) Surveillance/Information Gathering: Treatment counselors working in prisons are mandated reporters. This means that they are required to report any crime that they have knowledge of. Inmates are asked extensively what kind of crime they are involved in during group sessions as well as in mandatory treatment workbooks. Refusing to answer questions would be considered to be uncooperative and could result in program failure. Counselors also take notes during group sessions about a variety of sensitive topics. Information regarding drug of choice, affiliation to any organizations deemed to be security threat groups and any other details administration finds to be relevant is gathered. This information is added to the file of each prisoner and is later used to aid law enforcement in future cases or by officers working on various supervised release programs. Conflicts between prisoners that could be resolved without intervention by officials often results in disciplinary consequences for one or all those involved. Incarcerated people should be cautious about the information they provide on themselves. Also, this can be used as an opportunity, to provide disinformation to confuse or guide law enforcement in the wrong direction.

4) Internalizing Oppression: There is an emphasis on personal responsibility in treatment programs

within the prison system. Although this appears to be a positive lesson, the actual purpose of this is to place firmly in the minds of all who pass through these programs that they are they are in the wrong and the system is in the right, that those found to be in violation of the law are diseased degenerates or lack the morality to function within society. This is not to say that individuals are not responsible for their own actions. The problem is that there is no room to question the social and economic factors that make poor people and people of color far more likely to enter the prison system. Looking at the macro scale functioning of society is discouraged. This creates a negative self-image and also prevents inmates from educating themselves and others about the way that our current society really works. I see this approach as extremely harmful, as it implies to incarcerated people that they are the sole cause of their painful situation. The root causes of crime and the incarceration rate must be identified as capitalism and white supremacy. Instead of insisting to punish the casualties of an unjust society, we should be looking to change the conditions so that individuals no longer have to commit crimes to meet their needs.

5) Maintaining Rehabilitative Image: The number of jails and prisons is only increasing. Calls for reform are becoming more common. People are beginning to recognize that prisons serve little more purpose than to warehouse the casualties of an unjust society. A very high number of inmates are incarcerated for the possession or sale of drugs. Many thefts and robberies are attributed to drug users. This is a largely stereotypical and inaccurate view, because it is not drug addicts to steal, but poor people. Rich white suburban and professional drug addicts do not steal. It is predominantly poor and working class drug users of color who are put in positions where there is any need to steal. Treatment programs allow for the argument that prisons provide rehabilitation for the individuals who pose a threat to public safety. This explanation for crime keeps the discussion



away from the social conditions that drive up the crime rate. It is an avoidance tactic that serves to divert us from questioning the legitimacy of the legal system itself and its purpose within capitalism and the state. With a closer look, the assumptions that crime are a result of immoral or diseased people, that prisons jails and law enforcement exist to protect innocent civilians from these people, and that through caging these people we can somehow rehabilitate them prove to be extremely simplistic and inaccurate. We should be adopting a mind state in which we are looking to do away with the elements of society that create a need for prisons. Recidivism rates refute the claims that prisons are rehabilitative. The criminal justice system is punitive, when it should be preventative. External policing of entire neighborhoods does not prevent crime. Only meeting the needs of the people and building security directly through communities can prevent crime.

I have no judgments against self-identified drug addicts who voluntarily participate the in AA/NA

programs ran by inmates that exist in every prison facility. It is commendable for individuals put in the work to overcome their substance abuse problems. I also have doubts about the effectiveness of drug treatment is it is not a voluntary, intrinsically motivated undertaking. If these groups exist, what is the need for another separate, staff run, regimented, high stress, coercive program? 12 step programs are now really nothing more than a branch of the prison industrial complex. My thought is that inpatient treatment programs within prisons are less about the well being of inmates struggling with their drug use. It seems that the main purpose of the treatment programs within the department of corrections is to serve the functions mentioned above. Prison treatment counselors are nothing more than specialized type of corrections officer. Prison treatment programs are a tool of the prison industrial complex used to push an ideology that legitimizes the slavery and brutality that is mass incarceration.