Prisons, Race, and Masculinity in Twentieth-Century U.S. Literature and Film

Caster, Peter

Published by The Ohio State University Press


For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/27911
This book organizes its study of the representation of criminality and imprisonment from 1931 to 1999 through a set of texts that emphasize the tensions between imagination and history. Faulkner's *Go Down, Moses* focuses on crime and punishment in reconstructing the racial past of the Old and New South. The novel begins with the chase for an escaped slave and ends four generations later with a black man imprisoned and executed in Chicago, his body returned to his native Jefferson, Mississippi—a narrative trajectory scarcely noted by Faulkner’s many admirers, but a dominant structural pattern in a novel often suggested to lack one. Faulkner suggests that the character’s criminality is part of a pattern of racial inequity perpetuated through a genealogical span, beginning with Southern slavery and progressing through jim crow to 1940.

Not courthouses nor even churches but jails were the true records of a county’s, a community’s history, since not only the cryptic forgotten initials and words and even phrases cries of defiance and indictment scratched into the walls but the very walls themselves held [...] the agonies and shames and griefs.

—William Faulkner, *Intruder in the Dust*
In *Soul on Ice*, Cleaver operates in various registers, sometimes, like Mailer, observing himself watching the time of his time, commenting on contemporary events and popular culture, though in his case with a prison-cell view. Cleaver’s account of a black man’s “becoming” in prison at times resembles social criticism and, at other times, mythmaking, with his description of crime, imprisonment, race, and gender. A decade later, Mailer’s *The Executioner’s Song* claims to be a “true life novel” in its subtitle and narrates the history of its present, excerpting news clippings, interviews, and other materials that provide a texture of historical documentation to the narrative of Gary Gilmore’s crimes, trial, and execution. Mailer demonstrates the role narration plays in telling history as he documents the media circus surrounding Gilmore’s case, which involves lawyers playing the part of reporters, reporters shaping popular opinion, and movie producers contributing to the outcome of events.

Similarly, the three films and two performances surveyed in this book all variously situate themselves in actuality. *American History X* offers a code of realism, its characters spouting incarceration statistics to substantiate its truth-value. *The Hurricane* draws from past events and incorporates a cinema verité style and even occasional news footage, while *The Farm* is a full-fledged documentary. The play *Jury Duty* is based on a true story, and the activist demonstration “Live from Death Row” protests the death penalty and is thus a historical event only addressed here as a performance.

Despite their differences of genre and media, these are all representations of crime and punishment shaped by imagination, but invested in operating in historical terms, drawing relationships between fiction and actuality. This first chapter establishes the book’s methodology of textual analysis, incorporating tactics of psychoanalysis with the larger strategy of historically accounting for the production and reception of these books, films, and performances. It next offers a brief history of U.S. imprisonment, describes the cultural imagination as popular representations of varying truth-value, and proposes the category “prisoner” as an index of identity, an important matter given the prevalence of incarceration and the relative scarcity of literary and cultural criticism of prison representation.

These books, films, and performances are addressed foremost as a part of a historical record, telling a type of truth in their various adherences to frameworks of fiction and nonfiction. I situate their representations of imprisonment with respect to two other means of
knowing actual past prison practice and policy: first, in the anonymous exactitude of statistics as accounted by historians, sociologists, and the U.S. Department of Justice; and second, in registers ranging from praise to polemic to declarations of policy and academic research as offered in the annual proceedings of the nation’s foremost organization of prison administrators, by turns the National Prison Association, the American Prison Association, and the American Correctional Association. These representations receive greater texture by drawing upon U.S. historiography to demonstrate that prison history is central to national history. The effort in each chapter is to offer theoretically inflected explorations of the mutually informative relationships of actual imprisonment and its representation, wherein the depictions of prisons and prisoners are held in tension between imagination and history.

The historical expanse of the study and the many genres and media show the degree to which incarceration, a concealed practice, proliferates in the language and images of the twentieth-century United States. The descriptive analysis at times is offered in broad strokes because the picture is large, but it is drawn in finer detail to describe the prison history shaping these books, films, and performances. That variety demands a range of critical approaches sensitive to the ways in which different works operate while attendant to the historical contexts from which they are inseparable. Texts that are literary, bureaucratic, theoretical, documentary, and ephemeral function differently, but bringing them together is necessary both to demonstrate and to interrogate the unacknowledged pervasiveness of imprisonment in the popular imagination and in historical actuality—and to show how each has affected the other. That approach involves multiple strategies of investigation, including close analysis of the works themselves that is sensitive to their various media, to the historical and cultural moments of their production and original reception, and to the texts’ implication in individual and collective psychoanalytic models.

That combination of efforts conducts this book’s proposition that the history, literary and otherwise, of the United States is indivisible from that of its prisons. First, imprisonment is a condition of human experience that shapes the identity of those incarcerated and the national identity of the state that imprisons. Second, the history of racial incarceration in the nation tacitly criminalizes black masculinity in the cultural imagination, in effect if not in intent a strategy
Chapter 1

of racial containment, which many of these texts render visible and often contest. Third, the texts under discussion generally offer a tactic of resistance in an expanded model of personal identity, a social subjectivity emphasizing an engagement with history and a collective sense of the self in that history at odds with the American ideal of autonomous individualism. Historically, incarceration has been a place of struggle between forces that would isolate the prisoner and the efforts to demonstrate the social and historical contingencies of imprisonment.

The degree to which these books, films, and performances implicate themselves in their respective histories complicates the approach of historical contextualization that has been the dominant trend in U.S. literary criticism since the 1980s. Such historicism incorporates fiction, documentary evidence, and historiography as a way of making sense of history, literary and otherwise. The presumption of that methodology is that history can be understood as a social unconscious, its direct access unavailable after the fact, and therefore mediated through its textualization and subsequent interpretation. John Sloop makes such a point in his study of the representation of prisoners in nonfiction periodicals: “[T]he weight of past narratives and characterizations of the prisoner work as social forces in shaping the depiction and motives of the prisoner of the present and hence force the issues of race and gender. Because the public has a memory of the discourses concerning prisoners, however ephemeral, all new constructions of the prisoner begin with past characterizations as a base.” Representations with claims to the real play an important part in defining the shape of what might be understood as the cultural imagination, the pages and screens of thought and belief in which people recognize themselves and others.

The “real” of history is fleetingly experienced, lastingly available only in its textual narration, and the stories which tell that history are inflected by the circumstances of their own making. These descriptions of cultural production and historical process are not solely the domain of theorists and critics, but are part of popular culture itself. As Rage Against the Machine frontman Zack de la Rocha describes such historical narrativization in the song “Testify,” opening the band’s 1999 album: “Who controls the past now / Controls the future / Who controls the present now / Controls the past / . . . Now testify!” This book, then, renders a history of imprisonment in order to contribute to the imagination of a different future.
The confluence of the personal, the cultural, and the historical in the constructions of character in books, films, and performances invites historically and, at times, psychoanalytically nuanced approaches. The texts that are widely or highly regarded (or both) at particular historical moments can be understood as meeting some need, fulfilling some lack or expectation in their representations. This book therefore makes occasional use of psychoanalytic terms to describe how these books, films, and performances function, the ways they operate in helping shape the cultural imagination. Incorporating such an interpretative framework does not fulfill an ahistorical theoretical imperative. Instead, doing so responds to the degree to which the texts surveyed regularly implicate both individual and social accounts, and challenge the distinctions between the personal and cultural past and between imagination and history—what might be remembered, known, believed, and recorded to be true. The works surveyed traffic back and forth between historical and imaginative fields of discourse, and each is shaped by and contends with social expectations informed, in part, by the layered representations of the cultural imagination. The analysis conducted, then, tracks among various discursive registers of theoretically inflected and historicized readings to demonstrate how works making a claim to the real tell their own sort of truth.

Such study unites various theoretical approaches, whether historicizing, psychoanalyzing, or emphasizing differences in the performances of and limits to cultural identity. This book makes use of various vocabularies and methods (most explicitly those of Freud, Lacan, and Deleuze and Guattari, and, more implicitly, Foucault, Jameson, and de Certeau) in order to clarify aspects of texts that might otherwise escape notice. These matters are many, but related: the social unconscious of Faulkner’s imagined Jefferson, Mississippi; the misrecognition of blackness as criminality; the “Negro” crimes and sentences of *Light in August*, *Soul on Ice*, *The Hurricane*, *The Farm*, and “Live from Death Row”; the community accountability for crime and punishment in *Go Down, Moses*, *Soul on Ice*, *The Executioner’s Song*, and virtually all of the films and performances; schizophrenia as described in *Soul on Ice*, *The Executioner’s Song*, and *The Hurricane*; and the resistance to individual autonomy and support for social identity in many of the texts. Psychoanalytic terminology describes the representation of character and agency in narrative, because such depictions offer a literary mirror of subjectivity. Lacan’s theorization of identification provides a powerful tool for understanding how characters in books,
films, and performances are situated within symbolic orders, as well as how audiences and producers of texts misrecognize themselves in them. However, Deleuze and Guattari also prove useful in their rejection of the primacy of that “I” and of the investments in personal history that psychoanalysis makes. They instead emphasize social context and place, nicely encapsulated in their claim, “A schizophrenic out for a walk is a better model than a neurotic lying on the analyst’s couch.”

However, this study works to guard against the seduction of those theoretical discourses. In the effort to better illuminate cultural functions of prisons as they are projected on page, screen, and stage, such application can shine so brightly as to obscure the representations themselves. At one extreme, criticism wholly in one vein or another can inadvertently treat the theoretical discourse as a closed symbolic order, the self-substantiating name-of-the-father. At the other, working with a variety of models can lead to muddied or specious application or appropriation, poaching and name checking. To avoid these pitfalls, I have foregrounded accounts of the texts themselves, incorporating terms and approaches and thereby hoping to clarify rather than cloud how imprisonment and the identity of the prisoner function in different ways over time. I balance theoretical reading with an account of the diverse interests producing and receiving books, films, and performances—writers, directors, producers, and audiences demonstrating varying levels of disinterest, dismay, and desire regarding black men in prison—to bring together the mechanics of production with the various responses of theorists, critics, and general readers and viewers.

The effort here is to apply various theoretical vocabularies bridged by shared participation not only in the topic of imprisonment, but also through the historicist imperative to relate these texts to the contexts from which they are inseparable. Indeed, I hope to demonstrate that any particular lens of this or that theory attentive to what these texts do, what they produce, always is implicated in history and its narration. “The history of now”—my phrase to suggest the effort to think critically about the present as both a set of consequences and a site of struggle—is at once the product of what has already happened, and the process of a cultural imagination recreating that past in its own terms, thereby laying a blueprint for future images and imaginings. The historical and material overwriting of prisoners in the United States has limited dramatically their ability to participate in
that process. The right of habeas corpus in the court of public opinion is not one constitutionally upheld, and the reiterative projections of imprisonment shape documentary and other aspects of the historical record that then reinforce mainstream imaginations of imprisonment. Scholars, therefore, must make a greater effort to return prisoners to history, to recognize the changes through time in what it means to be imprisoned, a demarcation of human experience that carries tremendous cultural force.

In the opening epigraph of this chapter, a provocative passage from *Intruder in the Dust* (1948), Faulkner imagines the history of Yoknapatawpha County scratched into the walls of its jail in a nearly illegible graffiti of identities and indictments—a linguistic reversal, as the accusations are offered by those themselves convicted and imprisoned. The novel itself is not among the author’s most heralded, and even his avid readers may be unfamiliar with its narrative. However, one of its characters is very familiar, Lucas Beauchamp, a name recognized from *Go Down, Moses*, where he plays alternately trickster and tragic hero, a black sharecropper who repudiates the wealth but not the pride of his white McCaslin grandfather. In *Intruder in the Dust*, Beauchamp spends almost the entire novel in jail, anticipating his lynching by the family of a white man he is said to have killed, until he convinces the nephew of the county attorney to undertake the role of detective, exhuming the corpse of the murdered man to prove his innocence. Readers see in Lucas a black man awaiting execution by mob or jury, a figure with a lineage extending back in history and in fiction to Nat Turner and William Wells Brown’s George Green of *Clotel* (1853). (Coincidentally, Nat and George are also the names of Lucas’s daughter and her husband in *Go Down, Moses.*) Turner’s actual death sentence and Green’s fictional one are both pronounced in response to slave rebellion, while the threat of lynching for a murder he did not commit hangs over Beauchamp. Various characters remark that he is actually punished for his pride—conveyed from his white ancestor—and his repeated refusal to “be a nigger.” In the eyes of the townspeople of Jefferson, sitting behind bars is the first time Lucas looks like a black man.

The past imagined in the walls of the jail in *Intruder in the Dust* is not written in the novel, and readers must turn to *Go Down, Moses* for a richer sense of how crime and punishment shape cultural history—to read, in effect, the “agonies and shames and griefs” in the prison walls. That writing on the wall toward which Faulkner gestures
in *Intruder in the Dust* is actually recorded in the well-known ledger section of “The Bear” in the earlier novel, though the “cryptic forgotten initials and words and even phrases” there conduct a record of slavery rather than imprisonment. In Faulkner’s fictional nineteenth- and twentieth-century South, there is not necessarily much change among various practices of racial social control. The opening episode of *Go Down, Moses*, for instance, is a vignette featuring Beauchamp’s father, a slave, whereas the next section depicts the jim crow Mississippi of an elderly Lucas, who asks if he will be plowing the crops of Parchman Farm, a prison, instead of his tenant farm. The sense is that there would be little difference.¹⁰

Unlike other Yoknapatawpha landmarks, Parchman Farm is a matter of historical fact, and David Oshinsky, in his book *“Worse Than Slavery”: Parchman Farm and the Ordeal of Jim Crow Justice* (1997), demonstrates that antebellum strategies of racial containment were perpetuated in such prisons. The degree to which Southern racism informed incarceration in the years following Reconstruction appears in the claims of prison officials of the time. A South Carolina chair of a prison’s board of directors in 1888 declared that prisons in the state existed to house freed slaves: “After the emancipation of the colored people, whose idea of freedom from bondage was freedom from work and license to pillage, we had to establish means for their control. Hence came the penitentiary.”¹¹ The same year, an Alabama prison administrator blamed a 250 percent greater mortality rate among black prisoners on their weak constitutions.¹² However, prison history in the United States cannot be collapsed to the racism of jim crow—when black men were imprisoned for hazily defined and variously enforced crimes such as mischief and vagrancy, prison administrations stood to make small fortunes leasing black and white convicts as contract labor, and conditions proved so inhumane that five to ten years effectively mandated a life sentence. The history of incarceration extends both before and after jim crow.

Walnut Street Jail was established in Philadelphia in 1776 and became the nation’s first prison in 1790. Walnut Street represented a fundamental change in punishment, a shift from the bodily abuse of stocks, whipping, and execution to confinement and discipline. The most prominent proponent of such a system was an ardent abolitionist and the nation’s preeminent medical doctor, Benjamin Rush, who signed the Declaration of Independence alongside Benjamin Franklin and presented a proposal for a penitentiary model in the
latter’s living room in 1787. That plan emphasized reform, prevention, and deterrence through “bodily pain, labour, watchfulness, solitude, and silence.” Rush’s description, informed by Enlightenment ideals of justice and Protestant imperatives of discipline and work, was endorsed by Thomas Jefferson, who made further revisions, including offering changes to the criminal code as well as to architectural drawings. The jail, which held prisoners until their sentencing or for very brief durations, became the prison, where confinement was the punishment. Many of those confined at Walnut Street were African-Americans, overrepresented by a factor of more than seven when compared to whites, primarily serving sentences for property crimes such as theft. The rapid expansion of incarceration led to overcrowding at the downtown Philadelphia facility, and Pennsylvania’s Eastern State Penitentiary at Cherry Hill was built to replace it in 1829. It was the largest building in the United States at the time. Prisoners in the Pennsylvania model of isolation almost never left their cells, laboring, sleeping, and eating in close to absolute isolation for the duration of their sentences.

An alternate model of congregate imprisonment developed at Auburn Penitentiary in New York, built in 1819, where prisoners slept in separate cells but worked together in silence enforced by frequent whipping. Out of favor as a punishment per se, whipping remained accepted as a means of discipline within prisons. The Auburn model typically proved more profitable than the Pennsylvania system, and debates over the relative merits of the two resulted in a battle of pamphlets whose rhetorical volume approached that of contemporary arguments for and against slavery.

Both models maintained at least the idea of rehabilitation of the individual as a component of Jacksonian democracy, and their construction and practices proliferated throughout the United States, attracting international attention and emulation. Alexis de Tocqueville’s journey through the nation in 1831, which led to his Democracy in America (1835), was originally intended, in part, to inspect the prison system in order to provide a model for the French government. The system lost esteem, however, as attention shifted away from reform in the 1850s, and prisons increasingly holding African-Americans and new immigrants received less money for construction and maintenance. Ballooning numbers made the isolation and silence of the Pennsylvania and Auburn models no longer tenable due to overcrowding and insufficient staffs, negative factors compounded
by the lack of sanitation and health services, as well as by harsh labor conditions.\textsuperscript{17} Even any intention of reform faded in the subsequent decades, until the deplorable conditions surveyed by an examining committee and the urgency to organize and professionalize correctional policy led to the formation of the National Prison Association in 1870. Rutherford B. Hayes, the U.S. president from 1877 to 1881, was the organization’s first president, in 1870, and thereafter from 1883 until 1892, a tenure twice as long as any other head of the association. Aspects of a proto-Progressive platform appear in his keynote address at the NPA congress in 1888, which links criminality and its attendant imprisonment not to deficient character but to socioeconomic factors such as unemployment.\textsuperscript{18} A reverend speaking after Hayes cites a warden’s view that one-third of prisoners do not belong in prison, one-third should be there forever, and one-third should have in-and-out privileges.\textsuperscript{19}

However, all the prisoners \textit{were} there, and the renamed American Prison Association renewed its commitment to reforming prisoners on its sixtieth anniversary, in 1930, without more substantively addressing the consistently deleterious conditions of the nation’s prisons. What approaches might prove rehabilitative and reduce recidivism remained up for debate, and experiments in education conducted by Zebulon Brockway at Elmira Reformatory and elsewhere in the 1880s and 1890s gave way to a medical model of treatment. Doctors and administrators advocated psychological classification and individualized remedies, but budgets did not provide the resources for the implementation of those practices. There were also growing challenges to the labor that typically accompanied imprisonment. Abuses of convict leasing had decreased, but even the possibility of humane work came under legal attack by organized labor and industrial interests concerned about marketplace competition, culminating with the Hayes-Cooper Act (1935) and the Ashurst-Sumner Act (1940), which sharply prohibited productive inmate work, making occupation for prisoners increasingly rare.

Even as the APA again changed its name in 1955 to the American Correctional Association to emphasize the imperative to reform, it was a gesture more conciliatory to aspiration than actuality. However, the \textit{Brown v. Board of Education} decision the year earlier had laid the basis for subsequent improvements in prison conditions in the 1960s. National movements organized around the struggle for racial equality led to the Civil Rights Act in 1964, which drew from laws that
Imprisonment in U.S. History

were written in the years after 1865 to protect the rights of former slaves and then served as a constitutional basis against discrimination a century later. By extension, the Civil Rights Act also provided for prison reform, as did the expansion of the writ of habeas corpus, the guarantee of appearance in court, one of the rights suspended by the British government, thus precipitating the Declaration of Independence, which Rush signed. These expanded applications of federal law reversed the “hands off” policy that had previously relegated prison oversight entirely to states. In 1970 many jails and prisons—largely in the South—were declared practices of cruel and unusual punishment for operating little better than slavery.²⁰ Derrick Bell and other legal scholars and historians of critical race theory link such disregard sustained over the subsequent decades directly to the overrepresentation of people of color in prison, thus deeming it a consequence of racism.²¹ In 2005, thirty-five years later, lethally inadequate medical treatment for prisoners in California, the nation’s largest system, sent prison health care into receivership after a lengthy legal battle. U.S. prisons have shifted from international admiration in the early nineteenth century to global condemnation at the beginning of the twenty-first. In many ways, then, U.S. prison history is national history.

There is more of the story to tell, but an obvious question remains: what does prison history have to do with U.S. literature? Certainly there is Beauchamp in the Jefferson jail throughout most of Intruder in the Dust, and careful historical study of Mississippi imprisonment practices through the first half of the twentieth century might demonstrate the degree to which the narrative account does or does not match actual incarceration practices of the place and time. However, I am less interested in Lucas Beauchamp than I am in the people of Jefferson who want, who need to see him behind bars. That history of desire and fear is much longer and more complex. It is a matter of cultural expectation constituted in the tension between imagination and historical actuality; the real of the latter is mediated, accessed through representations and narrations of all shapes and sorts. Books, films, performances, and other forms of discourse emerge from, are inflected by, and transform the diverse sets of social practices and participatory spectatorship that make up culture. Their historically specific analysis provides a valuable instrument by which to gain a sense of the tenor of time and chart its change. Furthermore, the texts of this book cue themselves to be read as telling a sort of truth, as
they traffic back and forth between actual and imagined histories of what audiences want, need, and fear to be true of incarceration.

The books, films, and performances studied in this book either foreground or vividly repress how race shapes practices and patterns of imprisonment. W. E. B. DuBois declared in 1903 that the “problem of the twentieth-century is the problem of the color line,” and Martin Luther King III quotes this line as well before the American Correctional Association in 2001: “I submit to you that our problem is still the color line.” The racial division sees its starkest enactment in U.S. prisons, where, a century after DuBois, rates of imprisonment for black men drastically outpace those for white. That overrepresentation in actual numbers both emerges from and contributes to the phenomenon of conflating black masculinity and criminality. In Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Black Man (1997), Henry Louis Gates Jr. offers an anecdote of a black male professor mistaken for a criminal and writes, “I don’t know a black man who doesn’t have at least one [of these stories] to tell.” The novels, memoirs, feature films, documentaries, and performances surveyed in this book tell more of these stories. In Light in August the murder of Joanna Burden prompts the townspeople of Jefferson to hope, to know a black man did it. Dale Pierre is a background character in The Executioner’s Song, but he is a black man whose defense costs a district attorney hopeful’s chance at election, because that defense lawyer has come to believe the man was innocent, “convicted by the Jury because he was black.” The arrest of Rubin Carter and John Artis initiating their imprisonment in The Hurricane begins with their being pulled over; when an officer tells them that the police are looking for two black men, Carter responds, “Any two will do?” In “Live from Death Row,” Jody Lee Miles, a white man, testifies on the raced nature of the death penalty from the vantage point of death row. This misrecognition of blackness as criminality serves as the focal point of analysis.

The structural design of this project draws attention to the pervasive nature of imprisonment in a variety of twentieth-century U.S. texts. To focus on a single medium or genre, or to read synchronically and survey a set of contemporaneous texts, or to scan diachronically and track through time the writing of a single author such as Faulkner would localize the degree to which the imagined prisons have saturated U.S. cultural production. This book thus broadens its scope and reads at a slant in cutting across culture and through history to demonstrate the proliferation of images of incarceration. The three periods
bracketed by the texts surveyed offer rates of change from 1929 to 1942, 1968 to 1979, and 1980 to 1999. The first period demonstrates how Faulkner’s view of raced crime and punishment and the social responsibility for it evolved, when both his fiction and the historical record suggest an equation of lynching and execution in the South. The second charts the possibilities of understanding imprisonment as a historical and political phenomenon in 1968, and the disappearance of that definitional context by 1979; between Cleaver and Mailer there are diminishing possibilities for situating prisoners in history. The third period involves an unprecedented increase in imprisonment. The films and performances of 1998 and 1999 show how the fascination with imaginary prisons at the brink of the twenty-first century obscures their concrete actuality, a tendency resisted in more-marginal productions, such as The Farm, discussed in chapter 7, and the drama and demonstration described in chapter 8.

All of these representations foreground incarceration in a manner that literary and cultural critics largely have missed. Humanities and social sciences scholarship of the past quarter century increasingly has organized its inquiry through matters of identity, of gender, race, class, ethnicity, and sexuality—differences constituted in, and themselves shaping, history. Increasingly, identity has been addressed not as a stable ontological categorization, but as a culturally situated struggle among competing groups, enacted by individuals through socially coded performances. A definitional statement made by the American Prison Association provides a point of entry into the performative character of criminalization and its attendant incarceration. The first of the NPA’s Declaration of Principles, established in 1870 with the organization’s founding and revised and reaffirmed sixty years later in 1930, lists a set of definitions: “Crime is a violation of duties imposed by law, which inflicts an injury upon others. Criminals are persons convicted of crime by competent courts. Punishment is suffering inflicted upon the criminal for the wrong done by him, with a special view to secure his reformation.”

The organization renewed those principles yet again, sixty years later, in 1990. Crime, then, is an act against written law with its own effect: injury. A person becomes a criminal, however, not in committing the act of a crime, but through declaration by the court; criminality is a determination by a judge or jury. Criminalization is thus a jurisprudential process, not coincident with the commission of the crime but, rather, an effect of conviction.
That can seem a matter of linguistic hairsplitting until one considers the number of laws broken regularly in virtually all social segments of the United States: stock market insider trading, exceeding the speed limit, the at times lethal negligence of pharmaceutical companies and other corporate failures, the battery and aggravated assault of spousal and child abuse and acquaintance rape, driving while intoxicated, illegal drug use (and the attendant sale)—whether by professional athletes, right-wing polemicists such as Rush Limbaugh, or the inner-city populations he regularly demonizes—or any number of infractions that are part of the texture of everyday life as it is practiced and imagined in culture. According to the APA Declaration, the cynical maxim “It’s not a crime if you don’t get caught” is framed more accurately in terms of the process of criminalization rather than the commission of crime. A person is not born a criminal and does not become one in breaking the law, but only through a court’s conviction.

That determination has consequences, such as in the 2000 U.S. national election, when the definition and deployment of the categories of “prisoner” and “probable felon” as well as the interpretation of those identities helped shift the outcome of the presidency. The purging of voter rolls during the highly contested 2000 U.S. presidential election in the state of Florida illustrates the tense interplay of blackness and the identity of prisoner. Florida was one of thirteen states that at the time prohibited former offenders from voting unless granted particular clemency, even after their sentences were completed. The names of thousands of men and women were on waiting lists to have their rights reinstated, and the delay at the office of Governor Jeb Bush, George W. Bush’s brother, was two to three years. At the time, black men and women outnumbered white by 3.3 in Florida prisons. More than 30 percent of the black men in Florida could not vote because of previous convictions, and black voters in the state voted for Democratic candidates typically by a margin of nine to one. Therefore, a tremendous number of potential voters, many of them black men, already were removed from the democratic process due to state law and bureaucracy.

In addition to the people already on record as ineligible to vote due to a prior conviction, a list of more than fifty-seven thousand names of “probable felons” was assembled and distributed to the county voter-registration boards in order to facilitate their removal from the catalog of eligible voters. The list featured ten times the
number of names generated for previous elections, an increase the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights attributed to gross extrapolation of the data, such as close but not precise matches of names and dates, and outright mistakes, such as a woman being mistaken for her sister, an ex-offender, and a man barred from voting in 2000 for a conviction alleged to have occurred seven years in the future.  

Such disenfranchisement illustrates how criminality is an identity historically subject to categorization, description, and definition to the extent that it transforms “persons” to “felons” whose very delinquency follows and defines them even after serving their sentences or in the absence of any offense at all. The practice of surveillance and strategic reading of the voter rolls in this case effectively produced criminals in the absence of any actual crime or injured party before the assignment of the “probable felon” status, which itself constituted its own injury in the loss of voting rights. The list and its use illustrate Michel Foucault’s claim that “prison, and no doubt punishment in general, is not intended to eliminate offences, but rather distinguish them, to distribute them, to use them; that it is not so much that they render docile those who are liable to transgress the law, but that they tend to assimilate the transgression of the laws in a general tactics of subjection.”

The “probable felon” list produced criminality where there often was none, and to profound political effect. A common criticism leveled against Foucault, that he mistakenly equates intent with effect, seems similarly applicable in this situation with regard to whether Florida’s effort in this instance was intentionally racist. However, the Voter Rights Act (1965) is explicit on the matter that intent and effect need not be coincident to determine that voters have lost their constitutional right to vote. In the executive summary of the findings of the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights’ investigation of the 2000 election in Florida, the Commission determined, “The VRA does not require intent to discriminate. Neither does it require proof of a conspiracy. Violations of the VRA can be established by evidence that the action or inaction of responsible officials and other evidence constitute a ‘totality of the circumstances’ that denied citizens their right to vote.” That “totality” includes “voting procedures and voting technologies and [ . . . ] the laws, the procedures, and the decisions that produced those results, viewed in the context of social and historical factors.” The Voter Rights Act provides powerful leverage to the analysis of the historical practices of incarceration identified in this book: the question of
racist intent, in other words, is not the point in the overrepresentation of black men in prison. The effect is the key, as becomes clear in the American Correctional Association’s official endorsement in 2001 of the “restoration of voting rights” to former felons after the completion of a sentence: “Disenfranchisement,” the ACA argues, “disproportionately affects segments of the population,” and fulfills no corrective purpose. Nonetheless, states continue to disenfranchise, demonstrating that imprisonment produces a particular identity, the prisoner and former prisoner—and the possibility of being misrecognized as a “probable felon.”

Criminalization is thus a matter of interpellation, of being named. The term invokes Louis Althusser and his claim of subjects as hailed into being. He offers the example of a policeman’s call, “you there!,” which implies both the threat and the psychoanalytic guilt presumed in such a naming, and he describes that hailing as the entry of the subject into history. That singular interpellation as identity formation is nicely exemplified with regard to race and gender in such noted examples as Frantz Fanon’s “Look, a Negro!” and Judith Butler’s “It’s a girl!” Like those interpellations, the identity of the criminal, and subsequently the prisoner, has its presumably straightforward cause, originary and singularly definitive: the person is black and not white; the newborn child has these sexual parts and not those; the accused is guilty rather than innocent. However, as with other indices, the facticity of criminalization and the incarceration with which it has become increasing equivalent are not always so straightforward. The black and white of race is particularly vexed, at times denoting a perception of skin color and thus far more a psychological and cultural matter than one of biology, in other instances signifying ethnicity or ideology.

The identity of prisoner differs from race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and other matters of human difference in that it is not determined through one’s genealogy or culturally encoded behaviors, not necessarily written on the body or its willful performances. Imprisonment occurs through processes in which a subject’s agency varies, from extensive, as in the conscious decision to commit a serious felony, to none at all, as in innocence or accident. It can occur at virtually any point in one’s life, a seemingly sudden ontological transformation wherein a person becomes an alleged criminal, then a convict and felon, accompanied by a set of legal ramifications ranging from registration to incarceration to execution. Given that anyone
can become a prisoner—though, of course, some are far more likely than others to do so—incarceration in part resembles the category of disability. Disability studies has emerged as a crucial category of human experience in the humanities and social sciences since the Americans with Disabilities Act (1990). The comparison between imprisonment and disability perhaps invokes immediate responses of a naïve ethical equivalency, but even a glance at history, literary or otherwise, demonstrates how each has been treated as a sign of moral failure. The clearest example of this phenomenon in U.S. letters is Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter* (1850) and the titular mark Hester Prynne bears in her community after completing her sentence. The narrative indicts the culture that punishes her, even as it signifies Roger Chillingworth’s moral decrepitude through his increasing physical deformity, a bodily disfigurement and disability equated in the novel with evil. Those associations of disability have faded as our culture has grown more knowledgeable regarding the many sorts of physical and mental difference and their many causes; it is past time for us to gain a clearer sense of the many variations of criminalization and their own multiple causes.

I describe the category of prisoner as a matter of identity, because identity serves as the hinge between *I* and *we*, the axis between psychoanalytic and historicizing approaches so attuned to single and plural, the individual subject and the social body. The books, films, and performances addressed in this book all are invested deeply in matters of human agency and the sense of its possibility with regard to criminality and imprisonment. Those investments invite different ways of reading, particularly psychoanalytic and historicizing, two approaches often understood as occupying opposite poles. The difference can be understood as one of scope. Psychoanalytic approaches offer a microphysics of authority focused on the individual subject, wherein the origins of character can be traced to an uneasy combination of difference and universality: idiosyncratic personal history organized through the cross-cultural and transhistorical terms of psychoanalysis that describe human experience.

In contrast, historically nuanced study offers a macrophysics of power and its operation over time in cultural terrain split along fault lines of human difference: race, gender, ethnicity, sexuality, class, and other engines of history. This is part of the reason that most attempts to bridge the perceived gap between the two approaches have located themselves in the study of race—psychoanalysis largely defined by
Freud and Lacan, after all, already was organized by gender and sexuality. Some critics and theorists bridge this gap, though given the prevalence of historical study, such efforts can sometimes seem an offering by apologists, or an attempt to leverage the cachet of history. Cultural critics and theorists working in the register of psychoanalysis might object to this description, but even the most fully developed dual approaches often open with an apology regarding psychoanalysis’s traditional emphasis on individual and family dramas. The question so famously posed by Carolyn Porter, “are we being historical yet?,” continues to ring among critics bridging theoretical vocabularies. Rather than pretending to offer any unifying theory, this book traffics between the micro- and macro- approaches, as these texts themselves do in their accounts of the individual and social forces that shape criminalization and its attendant imprisonment.

While *prison*, *race*, and *masculinity* are the key terms of this book, I sometimes employ a fairly uncomplicated treatment of the latter two, foregrounding incarceration. As prison studies becomes more central to historical, literary, and cultural studies, then analyses that are more specifically inflected will continue to appear to emphasize how imprisonment shapes gender and sexuality. For example, patriarchy as man-is-dominant engages prisoners in a subordinate role to “the man” who keeps them down; within that hierarchy, male prisoners subordinate one another, sometimes in violent rituals of male prison rape wherein the victim consequently may be perceived as homosexual while the perpetrator is not. Nevertheless, this study largely treats incarceration as the primary variable in the cultural function of imprisonment, and while its purpose and practice change historically, it remains linked to race.

The development of *The Heath Anthology of American Literature* offers a means to trace how, since the 1970s, identity and the politics of identity have grown to be understood as the fault lines of cultural history and the fundamental organizing principles for humanities and social sciences. As the most prominent of the collections organized to emphasize the multicultural nature of U.S. literary history, the anthology offers one commonplace to address the attention to cultural difference as well as the relative scarcity of the discussion of incarceration. The self-professed genealogy offered in the collection’s preface traces its origins to discussions challenging the national canon in 1968 and then the 1979 project titled “Reconstructing American Literature,” which led to the so-titled 1982 conference at Yale and to a text of the same name providing pedagogical strategies for
reformulating national literature courses. Early participant Richard Yarborough later became the associate general editor of the anthology, which in its 2005 edition includes a section on prison literature. In a 2003 lecture Yarborough addresses representation of black masculinity in “recent U.S. historical cinema.” He calls attention to the trend of the Europeanization of black masculinity in these films, each of which is a historical drama leveraging the cachet of being “based on a true story.” However, he does not point out that his selection of *Amistad* (1997), *Rosewood* (1997), and *The Hurricane* includes representations of the early-nineteenth-century revolt, a massacre, and an unjust imprisonment, an arc that follows the historical telos of slavery, jem crow lynching, and the raced incarceration of black men—the history that underwrites this book. Yarborough’s oversight is no pernicious disavowal of a nation’s raced corrections history. Instead, he overlooks imprisonment, quite literally “sees over” the phenomenon I describe: pervasive imagination’s concealment of the history of imprisonment, where almost one of every three black men and one out of every twenty-three white men are likely to be imprisoned at some point during their lives.

Given that human cost and the proliferative representations of imprisonment, it is curious that there has not been more of a corresponding discourse in film or literary studies. Bruce Crowther’s *Captured on Film: The Prison Movie* (1989) is an encyclopedia rather than an analysis of movies set in prison; Nicole Rafter’s *Shots in the Mirror: Crime Films and Society* (2000) includes a provocative chapter focusing on prison films, but it also emphasizes breadth rather than depth. Though many books make prisons both marginal and central to their narratives and settings, there is insufficient analysis focusing specifically on representations of imprisonment in U.S. literature. H. Bruce Franklin’s *Prison Literature in America* and Dennis Massey’s *Doing Time in American Prisons: A Study of Modern Novels* (1989) are critical entries in the field, as is Auli Ek’s *Race and Masculinity in Contemporary American Prison Narratives* (2005). While Ek and I engage some of the same imaginative works and some of the same critics and theorists, we differ in scope and method. The scope of her book is largely a present not specifically linked to past practices. The basis for that presentism is probably indicated when she suggests that the prison films she critiques “resist the postmodernist mode of examining the complexity of concept and values.” I am skeptical that only postmodernism studies such matters, which simply could be called careful analysis. Furthermore, that “mode” is generally suspicious of historical periodization
in particular and continuity in general, but archival work and other historical evidence demonstrates constancies of racial control within corrections. Nevertheless, Ek rightly demonstrates that “the image of the criminal serves symbolic social and cultural needs” inextricably linked with racial difference.48

Such study has proven marginal to the more developed area of law and literature, in which prisons appear scarcely, if at all.49 These works sort the differences and dependencies between the two discourses of law and literature, twin fields focusing on the uses and effects of language. Their paired study addresses the literary representation of law as agonistic inquiry, the courtroom as stage and place of contest, the function of the tropes of jurisprudence in literature, and the application of literary examples and methodologies to law. In addition to such texts that focus primarily on the depictions of trials, David Guest offers a critique of U.S. fiction representing the death penalty in Sentenced to Death: The American Novel and Capital Punishment (1997).50 However, much lies unexamined in the space between trial and execution, and death is not the only sentence. The limited critical enterprise drawing attention to the narratives of imprisonment offered in U.S. literature reproduces the larger invisibility of imprisonment for those not themselves in prison.

That absence of more-critical comment on representations of imprisonment occurs, in part, because of the evolution of the term prison. The semantic shift from a condition of captivity to a place of punishment reflects the crux of Foucault’s argument in Discipline and Punish, in which he charts the shift of punishment of the body to discipline and individuation. The legitimacy of the historiographical method of Foucault’s Discipline and Punish has received significant criticism.51 Though it is written as critical theory and a “history of the present,”52 it still does draw primarily from eighteenth- and nineteenth-century prison history—if to illustrate its points rather than serve as their basis. In addition, some subaltern studies, the analyses of power’s sedimentation of culture, have been informed by prison practice. For example, it is difficult to conceive of Gramsci’s rich description of hegemony not inflected by his situation of writing within prison walls. Dick Hebdige draws heavily from Gramsci in his definitive Subculture (1979),53 and he frames his argument with the prison writing of Jean Genet. Therefore, some of the critical theory formative of historically nuanced cultural study has been shaped by actual and imagined incarceration. However, theoretically informed
analyses of literature typically employ prison to mean a general sense of confinement, rather than a specific material condition. Such figurative use likely has been informed both by Foucault’s emphasis on the organization of power (for which imprisonment is largely a metaphor) and by Jameson’s use of the term in his critique of formalism in The Prison-House of Language (1972). Jameson and Foucault drew titular attention to prisons even as the first, in his argument, and the second, in his employment by subsequent critics, made imprisonment figurative, a metaphor for the limits of formalism and the operation of power, respectively. Jameson’s and Foucault’s work proved valuable for analyses of cultural production attendant to historical conditions, but the shift to prison as an abstraction overwrites what is itself a material circumstance, a bait and switch of the literal and the figurative that reproduces the gap between actual and imagined prisons.

This book certainly relies on Foucault’s work on prisons in addition to his formulation of history as a genealogy of discourse, power, and discursive authority, as well as on Jameson’s emphasis on historicity and the embedded politics of texts. However, prison as a metaphor causes a slippage, since academics writing about images of imprisonment as punishment end up writing about an existential state. For example, Martha Duncan’s Romantic Outlaws, Beloved Prisons (1996), in examining fiction from Aeschylean tragedy to twentieth-century fiction through the lenses of political science and law, flattens or effaces the cultural and historical contingencies of the texts she reads, and writes a sense of the popular at the expense of the complexity of historical actuality as it might be understood through various records and textualities. In analyses such as these, prison becomes a trope.

That trope making is not unexpected, as “prison” provides a powerful and polymorphous sign. For Frederick Douglass, there is the “prison-house of slavery,” while race itself is such a state in DuBois’s description of whiteness as a “prison-house closed round about us all.” Richard Wright describes America as “a black sprawling prison full of tiny black cells,” and for James Baldwin there is the “sunlit prison of the American dream.” To Malcolm X, whose own experience made prison more than a metaphor, “our color became to us like a prison.” Given the power of the image, it should not come entirely as a surprise that imprisonment becomes a metaphor for the racial operation of power. Nevertheless, the focus in this book remains on prison not as a metaphorical state or a feeling of being confined, but
as a real and imagined place of bodily confinement within wire and concrete.

The distinction is important. For instance, at his best Ioan Davies in *Writers in Prison* (1990) makes salient points regarding how prison writers counter strategies of domination; at his worst, Davies commits solipsistic excesses in claims such as “the metaphoric prison and the real prison are ultimately one and the same,” and “Death Row becomes the land that we all inhabit.” 58 Something is lost when imprisonment becomes primarily a metaphor, either for the circuitry of force in societies or for a bleak perception of a psychological or philosophical condition. There are rhetorically powerful reasons for challenging the distinctions between those in and out of prison. Indeed, the lack of widespread concern regarding imprisonment practices can be attributed, in part, to the lack of identification, of mutual recognition between those imprisoned and those not. However, any such challenge to definitions of criminality and practices of imprisonment must be grounded in the specificity of material, cultural, and historical conditions.

There is attention to such experience in examinations and collections of prison writing, the discursive work of prisoners themselves. Bell Gale Chevigny and Franklin, in particular, have addressed the constructed invisibility of prisons by focusing on prisoners’ texts. Franklin argues that the main lines of American literature can be traced from the “plantation to the penitentiary.” 59 His *Prison Literature in America* offers extended readings of the writing of captives, from slave narratives to writing of the mid-1970s. He shifts from reading these works to offering more of the writing itself in his collection *Prison Writing in 20th-Century America* (1998). That anthology and Chevigny’s *Doing Time: 25 Years of Prison Writing* (1999) both underscore that the wording of the Thirteenth Amendment effectively made racial incarceration a de facto extension of slavery. 60 They primarily emphasize the self-representations of prisoners themselves. Similarly, prison teachers and activists such as Robert Ellis Gordon and Kathleen O’Shea juxtapose prisoners’ stories with their own, writing themselves in the spaces between the prison writing they include in, respectively, *The Funhouse Mirror: Reflections on Prison* (2000) and *Women on the Row: Revelations from Both Sides of the Bars* (2000). 61

Such prison writing and its study—the prisoners, teachers, scholars, and activists producing and drawing attention to the writing describing prison from the inside, largely in an effort for social justice—are
excellent and necessary in their own right. This book has a different though related strategy and draws attention to the sheer pervasiveness of prisoners both real and imagined, written and screened from both sides of prison walls. The views from inside and out create dual vantage points from which to examine the degree to which those in prison and the nation that imprisons mirror one another, as such reflection proves a key trope for the growing body of prison writing. A poem printed in the prison magazine the *Angolite* in 1985 poses the matter this way:

Go ahead  
Lock us up  
Lock us all up  
Lock away the ones you see  
In the mirror while you’re shaving  
Because we’re all just reflections  
Of your world  
Of the world you think we’ve left behind.  

Like this poet, Chevigny claims that “prison reflects the state of society,” and Attica historian Tom Wicker argues that what happens inside the walls “inevitably reflects the society outside.” However, as Gordon’s titular “funhouse mirror” suggests, the reflection can distort and prove grotesque.

Such mirroring and the (mis)identification it implies require a closer look. While generally the imagination of prisons overwrites their actuality, this book also demonstrates that prisoners and the culture that incarcerates sometimes mirror one another, sometimes reflect on one another, and fundamentally alter one another. For example, Faulkner’s description of the cause of criminality in the early 1930s is the same as that offered by prison officials of the time. Cleaver writes a prison-cell view of domestic and international policy of the mid-1960s, and he and Mailer train their critical gazes on the absurdities on both sides of prison walls. However, the depictions back and forth not only represent history, but play a role in its development. Representation offering itself as “real” participates in the texture of that reality, changes the course of human events. Cleaver’s writing in 1968 made him a key figure in ACA discussions of the early 1970s. Mailer’s “true life novel” scrupulously (and sometimes less so) documents the events surrounding Gary Gilmore’s incarceration and execution in
Chapter 1

1976 and 1977, including how television producers, reporters, lawyers, and writers shaped the events they recorded. The documentary *The Farm* is at once part of the historical record and itself critically informed by prior imaginings of prison. The literature and film of the cultural imagination less reflect historical actuality than they play a dynamic role in it. What Richard Poirier writes of Mailer is true of many of writers and directors surveyed: “I would take his engagements with language as political rather than simply literary ones: they are a way of discovering how to hold together elements that perhaps by nature would tend to destroy one another, both in a political and in a literary structure.” Sorting the political, historical, and literary structures of these books, films, and performances makes their categorization difficult, as they all blur boundaries of fiction, history, and myth in their imperative to tell the “truth.”

The truth they tell, particularly with regard to racial oppression, often demonstrates undermined ideals of equality, at times imbuing these books, films, and performances with a rhetoric of dissent familiar in U.S. literary history. Such dissent has become associated not only with the self-representation of black men, but also with their representation by others, a rhetorical strategy often relating twentieth-century imprisonment to nineteenth-century slavery. For example, the films set in prisons in chapters 5, 6, and 7 all cite that racial history. Vexed as its depiction of black masculinity is, Kaye’s *American History X* closes its narrative of imprisonment and racist violence in the 1990s with an epigraph from Abraham Lincoln calling for racial harmony. *The Hurricane* draws verbatim from the autobiography of Rubin Carter written in prison, where he identifies “Carter” as the “slave name” from ancestors working fields in the South. The documentary *The Farm* chronicles the lives of six inmates, four of whom are black, in the slave plantation turned penitentiary. Furthermore, Faulkner’s *Go Down, Moses*, with its central conflict beginning in slavery in the antebellum South, ends more than a hundred years later in a chapter that shares the title of the book, drawn from a nineteenth-century spiritual. Not only Franklin and other critics, activists, and historians, but also directors and writers draw the comparison between slavery and incarceration, the latter as the extension of the former.

Nevertheless, Faulkner’s position in writing *Go Down, Moses* is not the same as that of Cleaver, in *Soul on Ice*, or Carter, in *The Sixteenth Round*, each telling his own history; there is no ethical equivalency or naive postmodern collapse of all distinction between novel and
autobiography. While meaningfully related, there remains a difference between the imprisoned character of Butch Beauchamp in a fictional 1940s and those actually in prison then. Mailer’s articulation of masculinity in the characterization of the “white negro,” though endorsed by Cleaver, does not equate to the blackness of Cleaver himself. I am not interested in discussions of authenticity as such, untethered from historical and cultural contingencies. However, critics such as Chevigny, Franklin, and Barbara Harlow usefully describe the literature of prisoners as prison writing, as opposed to prisons in writing, the representation of prisoners by those not themselves incarcerated. The selection for this book balances views from within and without prison walls. Faulkner writes and Kaye films from outside, but Cleaver is behind bars. The Executioner’s Song and The Hurricane both draw from prison writing, and the latter at times filmed on location inside Richmond Prison. The Farm is shot almost entirely within Angola State Prison, with one inmate, Wilbert Rideau, receiving directorial credit. “Live from Death Row” allows prisoners to speak for themselves, an effort Webster’s Jury Duty takes pains to re-create.

Prisoners’ self-representations and their depictions by others are joined in order to offer views from both the margin and the center, with an eye toward clarifying how the prisoners are defined from within and without. At the turn of the twentieth-first century, prisons are split between lived experience for an unprecedented number of U.S. citizens and a polymorphous sign in the cultural imagination. Describing the relationship between the history and the representation of incarceration requires historiographical approaches joined with ways of reading that illuminate and clarify evolving notions of criminalization, imprisonment, and the social responsibility for prisons and prisoners.

Chapters 2, 3, and 4 are organized around the five literary texts surveyed in this book, representations of imprisonment written from both sides of prison walls: Faulkner’s three novels from without, Cleaver’s account from within, and Mailer’s crossing back and forth. Chapter 2, “Literary Execution: Race, Crime, and Punishment in Three Faulkner Novels,” examines criminality in Sanctuary and Light in August, and more extensively in Go Down, Moses. All close with the deaths of characters condemned for murder; in the latter two,
the characters are of mixed race. The earlier novels treat criminality in psychoanalytic terms of family history and early childhood. It is a model that these early novels do not seem to trust but for which no other option seems available. The views of criminal cause correspond to those of prison officials of the time, who relied on records of personal history and psychological classification. In contrast, *Go Down, Moses* offers a social rather than personal history producing the criminal. Its narrative trajectory implies that twentieth-century incarceration is the inexorable conclusion of slavery and Jim Crow, a radical claim at the time. In the final pages of the novel, responsibility not for the crimes but for the condemned falls to the white male business community. The representation of incarceration and execution at times capitulates to assumptions of blackness, masculinity, and criminality, but in the end *Go Down, Moses* challenges its contemporary views of wardens and other prison officials as recorded in the transcripts of the American Prison Association.

Chapter 3, “*Soul on Ice*, Schizoanalysis, and the Subject of the Prisoner,” focuses on Cleaver’s engagement with autobiography and cultural critique. His description of imprisonment regularly shifts from personal experience to contemporary historical events. Cleaver disdains the emphasis on the individual in psychoanalysis, instead beginning a social analysis to sort the divisions of criminality, race, and gender. In 1968 he participated through direct involvement and writing in efforts of cultural change at a time when radical transformation seemed possible, not only to activists but also to American Correctional Association administrators of the time. Indeed, following the release and widespread acclaim for *Soul on Ice*—it sold two million copies and was the New York Times Book of the Year—prison officials responded to its critique in contradictory ways, from disdain to positive recommendation. Cleaver and ACA presidents viewed their historical moment as one at the cusp of revolution, facing a transformation in what counted as crime and punishment at a time when the nation was divided deeply with regard to the possibilities of youth movements and racial unity. Cleaver’s social analysis, while preparatory, self-serving, and contradictory, offers a powerful approach to accounting for what he considered a cultural hysteria.

Chapter 4, “*The Executioner’s Song* and the Narration of History,” tells a different story of a prisoner, and while similarly situated between personal and social, it appears after the revolt at Attica, after the dismantling of rehabilitation programs, after the Rockefeller drug
laws, and at the beginning of the precipitous rise in incarceration rates. The “true life novel” departs from social and cultural implications of raced criminality, offering instead a bleak account of seemingly inevitable, unexplainable, and race-neutral violence. Gilmore’s crimes as Mailer describes them are violent and intentionless phenomena, the individual action of a sociopath acting without cause or direction. Mailer offers his bleak account of Gilmore as a prisoner and Gilmore’s effort to maintain autonomy through ruthlessly pursuing his own death. However, Mailer maintains a narrative method sensitive to social interdependency and the unavailability of that very individual autonomy. In the effort to tell the truth—and leaving himself out of it—Mailer unravels Gilmore’s effort to opt out of history, even as he demonstrates how storytelling shapes the history it tries to tell.

Films are the focus of the three chapters thereafter. Chapter 5, “The Contradictions of ‘Documentary Realism’ in *American History X*,” demonstrates how the film’s many “authors” claim the real and the effects of that effort. Screenwriter David McKenna draws from his own experiences in Southern California to tell a story that Tony Kaye films in cinema verité style, and actor Norton cribs statistics from the governor’s office to add lines for verisimilitude. Critics have praised the film’s realism, and some teen audiences have questioned whether it is based on a true story. The film describes the incarceration of a white supremacist gang leader (Norton) and his subsequent repudiation of racism, a lesson that led to the film’s recommendation by Amnesty International and to broad screening in schools. However, the film’s editing in postproduction so emphasized the believability of the charismatic leader’s racism and disregarded the humanity of its black male characters that it leaves available an entirely different message: all black men are criminals, and prison redeems both black and white men to become the “better angels of our nature.” *American History X* overwrites its own anti–white supremacist tag line, “Some legacies must end”—accompanied by a skinhead’s swastika tattoo—in its whitewashing of racism’s causes and costs.

Chapter 6, “‘Based upon a true story’: *The Hurricane* and the Problem of Prison Redemption,” critiques another representation of racial tension and men in prison. Norman Jewison’s *The Hurricane* combines biographical and fictional elements, incorporating documentary footage in the feature film based on the imprisonment of professional boxer Rubin “Hurricane” Carter. The film demonstrates the risks of the “apprehension” of history, both the claim to the real and the
anxiety over its misrepresentation. Like *American History X*, *The Hurricane* offers racism not distributed through social structures but consolidated in particular individuals, as Yarborough and others have noted. More significant, the film’s condemnation of racial incarceration is undermined by its feel-good narrative, its “triumph of the human spirit” genre.

Chapter 7 is “The Farm: ‘This is no dream or nothing made up, this is for real.’” Realistic films become part of a mediascape helping to define the shape of a given reality. Fictional films set in prison thereby foster the expectations viewers have of what prison really must be like, shaping the production of a documentary set in prison and featuring actual prisoners. *The Farm*, more than *American History X* and *The Hurricane*, successfully represents contemporary raced imprisonment as a consequence of a history of racism. The filmmakers draw attention to the fact that the Louisiana State Prison is on the grounds of a former slave plantation and that the prison perpetuates some of the plantation’s practices. Nevertheless, at times it also fills a shape established by prior fictions, demonstrating how documentary can capitulate to the same popular expectations as would-be blockbusters. Narrative conceits of earlier fictional films set in prison shape the production of documentary.

Chapter 8, “Staging Prisons and the Performance of History,” turns from books and films to two performances from the fall of 1999, an activist demonstration and a play that both directly concern imprisonment. A staging of “Live from Death Row” offers a chance for dialogue between a community audience and prisoners. To hear them speak is an invitation to take a stand against the death penalty, as well as against raced incarceration practices. *Jury Duty* is a play based on a true story that was performed in one instance as a fundraiser for a social work program. Ken Webster’s drama draws from his experience on a criminal trial jury to recount, in a series of retrospective monologues, a white female character’s crime and trial, as well as the deliberations of members of the jury. The former demonstration emphasizes how race and class create the expectation of the criminality of black men and their consequent imprisonment, while the latter departs from the racial focus to point out how gender and sexuality inform cultural expectations of crime and punishment as well. They provide a sense of the immediacy and actuality of incarceration in their claims for a broader social responsibility for prisons and prisoners.

Critics, teachers, readers, and citizens must interpret the history of imprisonment as it has been represented in order to better understand
how and why incarceration currently operates as it does, locking up two million people, many for nonviolent offenses, a tremendous proportion of them black, most of them from poverty. What counts as a crime varies culturally and historically, and the United States is likely to maintain prisons to separate some individuals from the rest. Sigmund Freud argues in *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1930) that organizations of humanity such as nation-states quell internal discord through marking some group as “other” and reacting to that difference through violence and oppression, and we can view transhistorical, cross-cultural, and international examples of such phenomena. The United States of America is known popularly as the land of the free, and that definition may well depend on some of its citizens not being free, losing access to life, liberty, and their pursuits. However, massive increases in U.S. imprisonment in the past quarter century have not fostered peace, and while our society may well think that some people belong in prison, we cannot strive for a perfect union of “we the people,” and certainly cannot attain it, when so many are in prison in large part because they are black or Hispanic and often poor.