Introduction

The prison cannot be victorious because walls, bars, and guards cannot conquer or hold down an idea.

On November 3, 1970, prisoners at California's Folsom State Prison launched a work strike. For the next nineteen days, more than twenty-four hundred men—almost the entire prison population—refused to leave their cells or participate in any way in the routine functioning of the prison. At the outset, the men released a "Manifesto of Demands and Anti-Oppression Platform" that amounted to an auspicious challenge to the prison as an institution. "We the imprisoned men of Folsom Prison seek an end to the injustice suffered by all prisoners, regardless of race, creed, or color," the statement began. The platform consisted of thirty-one demands covering a wide range of issues from daily conditions to the structure of confinement itself. The manifesto's demands pertained to individual liberties (access to adequate legal representation, medical care, and reading material); political reform (fair parole policies, an end to the rampant and racist abuse of prisoners, payment and union representation for prisoner labor); the right to organize; freedom for political prisoners; and prisoners' ability to offer financial support to their family members.¹

In challenging "the fascist concentration camps of modern America," these prisoners connected everyday life in prison to the pursuit of social justice. Seeing the strike as a dramatic step in a larger campaign against the prison as an institution that shaped the United States as a whole, the Folsom Manifesto sought to claim space for the right and ability to organize. It concluded with a nod to the prisoners' global consciousness, insisting that prisoners deserved the constitutional rights of American citizenship as well as the fundamental human rights ostensibly guaranteed by the United Nations if not a higher power. "In our peaceful efforts to assemble in dissent as provided under the nation's United States Constitution, we are in turn murdered, brutalized, and framed on various criminal charges because we seek the rights and privileges of all American people. In our efforts to keep abreast of the outside world,
through all categories of news media, we are systematically restricted and punished by isolation when we insist on our human rights to the wisdom of awareness."

The manifesto and the strike that accompanied it exposed the political radicalism that had for years been circulating inside American prisons. The document also revealed a set of tensions within the country's prison system animated by a fundamental contradiction. Prison may restrict physical mobility, but it is also based on movement: the state moves people from their home communities into the criminal justice system—a forced migration that typically runs along an urban-to-rural axis—and it moves them from prison to prison. Prisoners bring their knowledge, connections, and passions from one place to the next, and they continue to consume media despite their confinement. Further, physical movement often generates social movement as people press to better their conditions and achieve more control in the face of powerlessness. As prisoners are moved from unit to unit and facility to facility, they trade information and build or tap into networks of solidarity. The prison is not nearly as remote and impenetrable as it may seem. The strategies of state control undermine the prison's presumed stasis. As officials transfer "difficult" prisoners to other facilities as punishment, they can create the conditions for ideas to spread across the otherwise hermetic seal of confinement. Even a forced migration of people and ideas can make possible a global eros and ethos of rebellion.

Such was the case with the Folsom strike. What became known as the Folsom Manifesto originated in the restrictive B section of San Quentin, California's oldest prison, located two hours from Folsom. Earlier in 1970, a multiracial collective of prisoners in B section—men whom prison officials had labeled troublemakers—drafted a document outlining their common grievances against the prison system. Then they went on strike and destroyed their cells. The men worked hard to craft demands that would appeal to a wide cross-section of prisoners challenging the administration. In their plea for unity, they excluded demands that did not at least potentially apply to all prisoners, including a demand for combs to use on Afros. Though black prisoners as well as Latino prisoners aligned with them bore the brunt of institutional violence and were the key strategists against it, the black radicals in B block wanted the entire prison population to strike. That meant building coalition with the many white and some Latino prisoners who were more invested in racial distinction than class struggle. They did so by creating venues for prisoners to express their collective grievances against the system as a whole.

In response to their strike, a federal judge condemned B section, ordering that no prisoners could be housed in that unit until it was repaired. As officials
had to move the dissident prisoners throughout the facility, their manifesto made its way to the general population. Soon, prisoners on the mainline launched their own strike against the prison. To break that strike, prison authorities transferred several of the men involved to Folsom. One of them, Steve Kumasi Simmons, brought with him a copy of the document first drafted in San Quentin's B section, and he soon found other radicals. The insights he gleaned from San Quentin combined with the political fervor that had already been developing at Folsom brought about the November 1970 strike.

Though the document originated at San Quentin, it became known as the Folsom Manifesto. It provided a rough draft for the demands that dissident prisoners would use in strikes across the country—most famously, in the statement released as part of the four-day rebellion at New York's Attica Correctional Facility in September 1971. The Attica Brothers borrowed from the Folsom rebels the form as well as the content, labeling their statement a "Manifesto of Demands and Anti-Depression Platform."5

The Folsom strike, its origins, and its afterlife illustrate a larger field of prison organizing. While prisoners were a central element of the civil rights and Black Power movements, their organizing was less a claim to expand rights than it was a critique of rights-based frameworks. Prisoners were dead before the law, excluded from juridical rights or public compassion. As prison rebellions informed one another, they became woven into the larger fabric of the era's radicalism. Against the backdrop of a massive outpouring of books and articles from incarcerated people, these strikes and uprisings were the product of larger circulations of radicalism that characterized the three and a half decades after World War II. In that time, diverse social movements, spearheaded domestically by the black freedom struggle, challenged a variety of American institutions and mores, including the idea of "America" itself. Their efforts, then, point less toward securing rights than toward a critique of the state. Their organizing called for reconsiderations of freedom, dignity, and empathy beyond what the U.S. state could imagine or would allow.6

To call this period the "civil rights era" is not to separate it from its global context but to emphasize what anchored this spirit of global revolt inside the United States. Around the world, this project of social change called itself the Third World: a political, social, and cultural assertion of independence emerging from the colonized world. As various Marxist and nationalist revolutionaries passed through the prison gates of empires and military juntas, the anticolonial project became at some level an anticarceral one. Around the world, prison organizing spoke a shared language of humanity and socialism rooted in an antiracist critique of colonialism. In the global revolutionary imagination

*Introduction* 3
of the postwar years, dissident prisoners were counterintuitive symbols of political possibility.

Revolutionary movements since at least the French Revolution have tended to reach a stage during which their critique of the ancien régime emphasizes the prison as a site of state repression. In the prison, they see a place where the oppressive system has incarcerated and tortured its dissidents that therefore comes to symbolize the larger corruption of such regimes. Long an aggregator of inequality, the prison comes to stand in for bigger structures of violence, and the prisoner becomes a symbol whose freedom marks a step toward larger, collective liberation. The revolutionary currents of the post–World War II years continued this historical tendency: from Cuba and Vietnam to South Africa and Northern Ireland and all points in between, the experience of colonization or military rule was bound up with that of confinement.7

Through the prison, activists asserted that black lives matter. Prisoner rebellions spoke the language of Black Power revolt, and several prisoners or former prisoners became leading spokespersons for black militancy through their published works and involvement in organizations such as the Black Panther Party and the Republic of New Afrika. The study of prison radicalism also reveals the broader arc of the Black Power movement: it lasted longer and affected more places than is often recognized. Captive Nation studies the prison as both a strategic metaphor and a structuring institution of black life. Prisoner efforts at exposure were the first to reveal an abiding truth about racism in an age of formal legal equality: antiracism has needed to overcome the relative invisibility of racial oppression after the dissolution of Jim Crow. Part of what has made the new racial landscape so challenging is the popular idea that contemporary injustices are individual or cultural rather than historical and structural. The prison’s geographic remove and racial disparities made it a strategic testing ground for engaging the new racism. In their writings and actions, radical prisoners identified the paradox of postmodern racial capitalism, where racism is seen as impolite but remains constitutive. They worked to expose the workings of racism from behind steel and concrete.

Captive Nation investigates how the black freedom struggle made use of the prison. In particular, the book emphasizes how prisoners made sense of freedom from positions of confinement. Black activists thrust the prison into public view, established prisoners as symbols of racial oppression, and conceptualized confinement as a persistent feature of black life woven throughout the American racial landscape. One of the most striking things about black prison organizing was its ability to connect the prison to other sites of black activism,
whether the public housing project, the struggle against police brutality, or the anticolonial revolutions around the world. Indeed, black radicals expanded the prison from a singular institution of repression to a central node in the reproduction of social struggle. This connectivity formed the scaffolding of prison radicalism. The history of the prison is simultaneously the history of postmigration black politics as it developed outside of but in relation to the U.S. South as well as the history of black politics in the final years of a political order sensitive to civil rights demands.

The United States has been a leader in carceral violence both because of its roots in settler-colonial racism and its egalitarian distrust of state power, which paradoxically upholds degrading punishment over beneficent state action for those deemed "criminals."8 Race, especially antiblack racism, has been the primary modality through which this pairing of colonization and confinement has transpired in the United States. Forcible confinement haunted black life from capture in Africa through the Middle Passage and sale in the Americas. Chattel slavery initiated a racial regime rooted in confinement: plantation slavery was as much a carceral force as the early penitentiary.9 Enslaved people routinely likened their condition to imprisonment, describing the slave as "a prisoner for life" and the plantation as "just the same as we was in jail."10

The abolition of chattel bondage was the birth of prison bondage: passed in 1865, the Thirteenth Amendment outlawed slavery "except as punishment for a crime."11 The amendment provided the legal rationale establishing the prison and the wider criminal justice system as institutions central to sustaining racial oppression. Beginning with the Black Codes enacted at the end of slavery and expanding exponentially with the dismantling of Reconstruction, the primary institutions of American society—the government, the academy, the media—have largely defined blackness in and through criminality.12 The age of Jim Crow was one of confinement, experienced as a continuation of carceral life begun under slavery. W. E. B. Du Bois opened his classic 1903 book, The Souls of Black Folk, by objecting to "the prison-house closed round us all." In Black Reconstruction, his magnum opus published thirty-two years later, Du Bois described antebellum society as an "armed camp" and decried the "caged human being" that was the black condition after the Civil War.13 Throughout American history, the idea of criminal justice has been bound up with antiblack racism: black communities have been disproportionately harassed, policed, arrested, tried, convicted, confined, killed, and generally thought to be deserving of punishment.

The prison adds complex structures of classification that reproduce subordination through race and other social categories by means of diverse
administrative and disciplinary procedures. Race has been at the core of American imprisonment. The prison's structure reproduces the forms of racial rule: race has been both an indicator and a by-product of imprisonment, as well as a weapon of control and division within sex-segregated institutions. The prison operates through classification: it officially separates people by sex and criminal offense; it divides them further, if unofficially, by race, religion, political views, and sexual orientation or gender presentation. The prison catalogs people, often arbitrarily, and then decides the level of violence or isolation that corresponds to each category.

The prison is an odd institution, governed by the state yet not public in the way we normally understand the term. The prison is the place where state power is perhaps most forcefully expressed and publicly legitimized without being seen. In other words, the prison is an example of raw state power at its most violent extreme as well as an example of the ways that power cloaks itself in invisibility.

Further, organizing around prisons is difficult: they tend to be far away from population centers, deeply stigmatized, and maintained through complex political processes. While resistance may be routine, organized movements in and against prisons are rare. To surpass the physical isolation of confinement, prison organizing after World War II pursued what I call a strategy of visibility. With limited mobility, prisoners relied on diverse means to reach people outside of prison. Riots, writing, and collective rituals were the building blocks of prison radicalism, and they were orchestrated to make the prison and especially its captives visible to people around the world. Antiprison activists, whether incarcerated or not, hoped that their interventions in the public sphere would render confinement ineffectual and therefore unnecessary. They challenged the prison as an incubator of violence: a place that buries alive its captives, a place that responds with overwhelming violence to the uprisings it provokes.

Alongside their experiences of literal imprisonment, black activists and artists have used the prison as a metaphor for describing their confrontations with the American state. Indeed, the history of black radicalism can be thought of as a long opposition to confinement. The prison reproduces a form of race consciousness and racial identification that has, at certain historical junctures, produced radical antiracist movements. As scholar-activist Angela Davis noted in 1971 when she was a political prisoner, "The disproportionate representation of the black and brown communities, the manifest racism of parole boards, the intense brutality inherent in the relationship between prison guards and black and brown inmates—all this and more causes the prisoner to be confronted daily, hourly, with the concentrated, systematic existence of racism."
To expose the cruelties occurring outside public view, dissident prisoners and their supporters developed what literary scholar Houston Baker has called the “black public sphere of incarceration.” This furtive public sphere exemplifies the fugitive freedom of black radicalism. Black activists have always found and forged freedom amid confinement. The struggle against the racialization of “crime” is but a more concentrated example of the continual reanimation of this freedom dream throughout time.

The period between 1955 and 1980 was remarkable not only for the expanded criminalization and state punishment of black radicalism, practices that long predated this period and grew dramatically at the end of it. More notable was the way in which black activists turned prisons into, as a common refrain of the time put it, schools of liberation: training grounds and battlegrounds in larger struggles against racism in the form of state violence. While some prisoners have worked together to achieve a modicum of personal power—typically in the form of sex, supplies, or the intimidated respect of other prisoners—prison organizing during the civil rights era took on the political tone and style of black radicalism.

Dissident prisoners worked to understand their imprisonment in a larger historical and structural context—that is, in relation to the prevailing structures of political economy that disproportionately refused to hire but arrested, tried, imprisoned, and killed black youth. Further, they sought to make political connections between prisoners and those “outside” of both the prison and the United States. Prison radicalism displayed an internationalism that is stunning given the circumstances of its origins.

Both self-consciously and coincidentally, black prison organizing utilized strategic frameworks similar to those used by nineteenth-century slaves and their progeny. These frameworks included the central role of “kinship, labor, and circuits of communication and education.” Radical prisoners asserted their humanity in a myriad of ways, and in each case, their opposition to the prison was a strike against the racializing nature of confinement. While treated as narrowly self-interested by race and as the latest example of a black menace to white civilization, black prison radicalism sought broad coalitions against larger structures of domination. Indeed, the shape and structure of black prison organizing involved whites, Latinos, and others. As they challenged prison conditions, prison organizers advanced a radical critique of what might be called rightlessness, a state-sponsored deprivation of group rights and political action. Indeed, organizers defined not just the prison but racism itself as the structural reproduction of rightlessness.

During a period of heightened activism, this connection facilitated a united front on prison issues. Members of this short-lived coalition did not agree on
the larger political critiques, including whether prisons should be reformed or abolished, yet the demands of prisoner struggles proved elastic enough to sustain an alliance of liberals and radicals for several years. Those involve understood that people organized through the means at their disposal, which meant that prisoners had different tools for challenging authority than those who were not incarcerated. Yet these different groups united to expose the misery of prison conditions and work for humane resolutions to the crisis of confinement.

What I am calling black prison organizing took place in prisons as well as on the streets. Much as black politics in slavery revolved around the peculiar institution even for those who were not enslaved, so, too, did the prison look large in the popular imagination of the civil rights era. Dissident prisoners became a metaphor for freedom itself for a growing number of people frustrated by alienation and violence in postwar American society—not just in black communities but among other constituencies. In a 1972 letter written at San Quentin, prison organizer David Johnson summarized the hopeful identification that diverse radical and racialized groups then made with prisoners: "If this system we are the nightmare that won't go away. . . . Our presence marks their end and the people's beginning."

During these years, a coterie of black prisoners, young men and women inspired by Third World revolutionary movements, turned the prison into a node of struggle within the wider black freedom struggle. The most prominent black political organizations of the era participated in this movement, including the Black Panther Party, the Nation of Islam, the NAACP, the Republic of New Afrika, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, and the US organization. A large number of other progressive and leftist organizations representing different constituencies could be added to this list. These groups, along with a host of smaller organizations, ad hoc coalitions, and defense campaigns, served as breeding grounds for prison organizing, places where those with more political savvy served as mentors for less experienced activists both in and out of prison. Organizations provided a bridge across levels of experience and geographies of confinement. But the prison movement was larger than any one organization or set of organizations.

The racial consciousness developing in prison during the civil rights era most often took the form of revolutionary nationalism. This development owed debts both to the national liberation movements of the time and to the structure of the prison itself. Many people held in cages looked with great interest on formerly colonized countries defeating regimes only recently thought
to be invincible. Nationalism helped prisoners imagine themselves as part of a collective force strong enough to challenge the totalizing authority of the prison. Specifically, revolutionary nationalism helped black prisoners contest white domination in prison—domination both by the almost all-white staff of guards and by white prisoners—by appealing to an imagined community that extended well beyond the prison and beyond the American nation-state.

Through nationalism, prisoners identified their struggle with long-standing black resistance to slavery. Black prison nationalism connected a savvy understanding of the prison structure, where nationalism often served as the framework for group identification, with a sophisticated understanding of the politics beyond the prison, where revolutionary nationalism had global currency. The development of nationalism in prison was, therefore, both organic to the prison and part of the Black Power movement on the streets. Black prison nationalism shared many of the ambiguities of other nationalist forms, and these issues were exacerbated by the structure of prison life: a propensity for violence, a rigid approach to politics, and a masculinist framework of political action. Yet nationalism also provided a useful means for prisoners to oppose white supremacy as part of a larger collective, even if they could not physically access it.24

Revolutionary nationalism emerged from and in response to feelings of captivity. Thus, prisoners spoke of captivity as itself constituting nationality. Prisoners used the notion of national captivity to pursue justice as both prisoners and racial subjects in the United States. They described themselves as part of a captive nation to name their relation to the country. By invoking the prison, black activists critiqued the racialization of punishment by the U.S. state. Revolutionary nationalism joined opposition to the state with calls for alternative forms of affiliation and a hybrid form of socialism. In practice, this notion of national captivity also referred to prisoners’ attempts to reach the public. Their power as a social movement, through books and strikes, used captivity in both senses: they sought a captive audience to help set free the captive nation. By challenging captivity, radical prisoners spoke to widespread cultural anxieties. Those concerned with shifts in the experience of race and gender, with changes in the world political economy, or with any number of other phenomena found solace in prisoner demands for freedom. The poignancy of the prison as a metaphor for alienation and exploitation helped a generation name, if not make sense of, epochal change.

The prison exacerbated preexisting gender and class tensions. The incarceration of large numbers of working-class black men offered an alternate politics of respectability to the one traditionally advanced by the black middle
class, with its emphasis on racial uplift and consumption. Radical prisoners describing their individual "guilt" as the problem of an oppressive larger system, called into question guilt itself. And to the extent that middle-class activists also found themselves imprisoned or supporting those in prison, they had support from the larger prison movement. Seeing righteousness in those defined as guilty, the prison movement identified blackness as "guilty" in all the right ways. This embrace of the guilty was a stunning rebuke to upward mobility and middle-class notions of integration. It opposed the authority of the prison guard, the president, and the preacher. It was a coalition of the unruly. Yet this idea of respectability had a conservative gender politics attached to it. The prison's sex segregation indelibly shaped how opposition to imprisonment emerged. On a basic level, it meant that prisoners worked directly only with those of the same sex. This reality influenced relationships between prisoners and others, especially when some male prisoners sought the romantic affections of women supporters. The prison provided another layer of taboo to the historic American fear of sexual contact between black men and white women.

The prison—and the larger strategy of governance rooted in policing, surveillance, and incarceration that scholars have dubbed the "carceral state"—also exacerbated the conservative idea that black activism needed to restore or establish black patriarchy. Men's prisons witnessed far more violent rebellions and escape attempts than did women's prisons. The statements of male prisoners in revolt routinely insisted on their manhood. "We are men, not beasts, and we will not be driven or treated as such," the Attica Brothers famously declared in 1971. The passionate declarations of masculinity that accompanied such uprisings gave the false impression that men were more resistant than women. Certainly, the dominant representatives of prison organizing were largely men. Although men were and are disproportionately incarcerated, the focus on male prisoners was not just a numbers game. The focus on men in resistance obscured women prisoner struggles outside of the feminist and gay liberation movements as well as the fact that prison organizing in general consists primarily of work that is, as historian Rebecca Hill writes, "typically gendered female." The work of prison organizing is "supportive, reproductive, and, despite its importance for the shaping of revolutionary consciousness, often defined as secondary to and diversionary from 'real' struggles over material issues."28

The "women's work" of prison organizing was well pronounced in struggles involving men in prison. Prison organizing is designed to protect safety, maintain networks among disparate individuals, and catalyze public action by the pain of state violence. Yet because the prisoner in these years reached public consciousness largely through dramatic actions that were more likely to be
taken by men, and because the state treated men as more serious political actors, masculinity emerged as the normative basis of prisoner resistance even as women did much of the organizing work to keep prisoners in the public eye. Further, black prison organizing adopted the tropes of the antilynching movement that emphasized the violence done predominantly to black men. Such gendered divisions have a deep history in American politics and were generally exacerbated by the growing number of young black men incarcerated by the expanding carceral state during the mid-twentieth century.  

*Introduction* 11
INTRODUCTION

1. Ronald Berkman, Opening the Gates, 64; Frank Browning, “Organizing behind Bars,” in Atkins and Glick, Prisons, 132-39. The full manifesto is reprinted in Ronald Berkman, Opening the Gates, 183-86, and Angela Y. Davis et al., If They Come in the Morning, 65-74. The version in If They Come in the Morning lists twenty-nine demands; Berkman lists thirty-one yet redacts two demands concerning freedom for “condemned prisoners, avowed revolutionaries, and prisoners of war” as well as for certain “celebrated and prominent political prisoners.” Those two demands, 16 and 19, appear in Davis et al., If They Come in the Morning, 72.
2. Quoted in Davis et al., If They Come in the Morning, 74.
4. David Johnson, interview.
6. Dayan, Law Is a White Dog; Rodríguez, Forced Passages; Cacho, Social Death.
7. There is, as far as I know, no global comparative history of imprisonment and its relationship to either colonial regimes or social movements, though Harlow takes up this question in regard to literature in Barred. For other interdisciplinary examples of different national studies that address this subject, see Feldman, Formations of Violence; Buntman, Robben Island.
11. Dayan, Law Is a White Dog; Angela Y. Davis, Are Prisons Obsolete?
12. For overviews, see Blackmon, Slavery by Another Name; Muhammad, Condemnation of Blackness.
13. Du Bois, Souls of Black Folk, 16; Du Bois, Black Reconstruction, 12, 701. For the carceral experiences of enslavement, see Paton, No Bond; Angela Y. Davis, “From the Prison of Slavery to the Slavery of Prison,” in Angela Y. Davis Reader, 74-95; O’Donovan, “Universities of Social and Political Change.”
16. Beth Ritchie argues in Arrested Justice that such metaphors are explicitly suited for black women’s engagements with domestic violence and state violence.
17. Angela Y. Davis, “Political Prisoners, Prisons, and Black Liberation,” in Angela Y. Davis Reader, 47.
20. Larry Weiss, interview.
22. Rodríguez, “Social Truth”; Ruth Wilson Gilmore, Golden Gulag; Cacho, Social Death.
25. Higginbotham, Righteous Discontent; Gaines, Uplifting the Race; Summers, Manliness and Its Discontents; Joy James, Transcending the Talented Tenth.
29. Ibid.; Raiford, “Photography.”