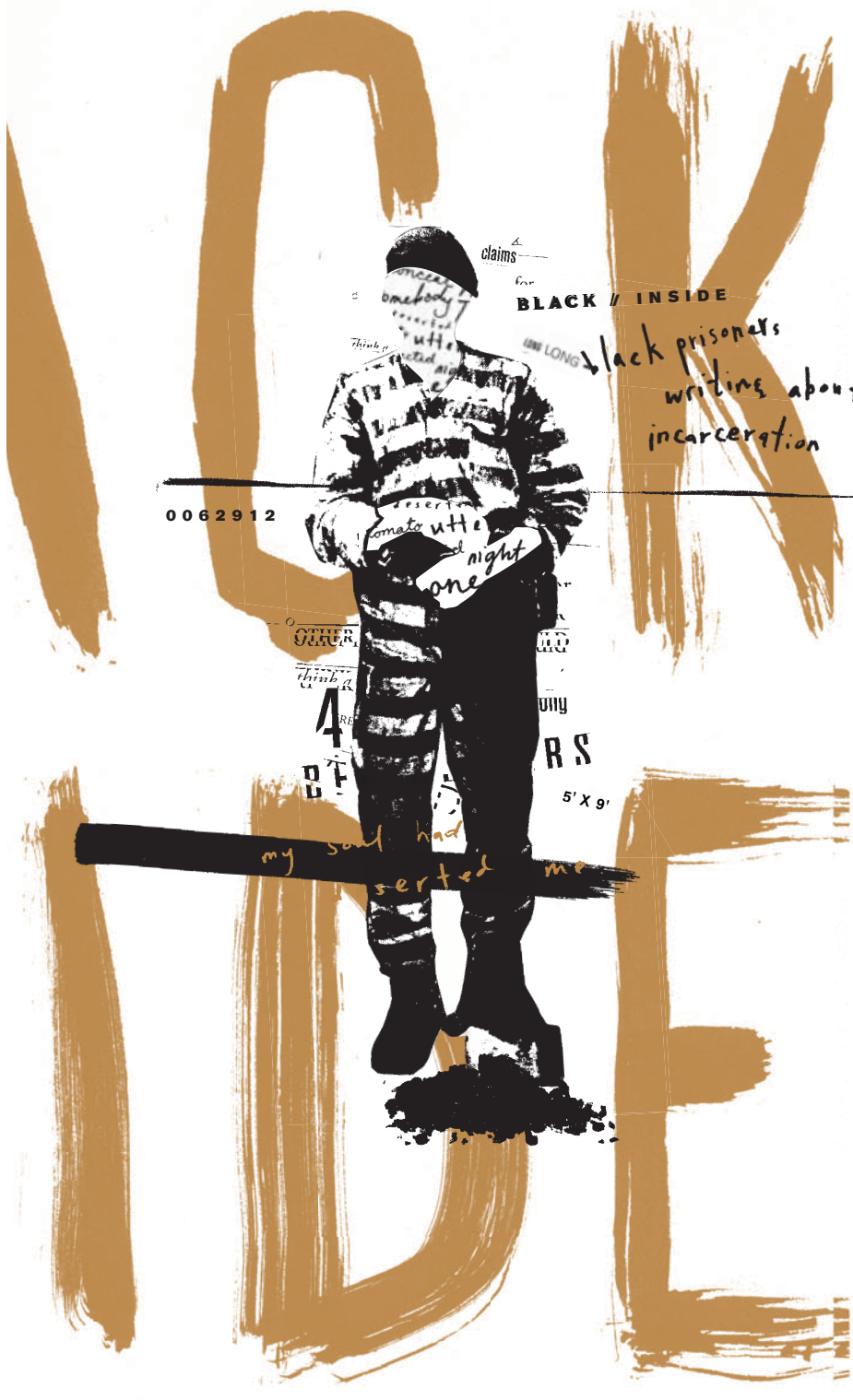




claims

BLACK // INSIDE

black prisoners
writing about
incarceration

0062912

OTHER

think a

4

RS

5' X 9'

my soul had
asserted me

Anu Murthy
Audrey Green
Ivan Alonso

This compilation was produced by Project NIA.
For more information, please visit our website
at www.project-nia.org.

SOLITARY CONFINEMENT WAS BRUTAL

I COULD
NOT SEE
THE
LIGHT

Now, not only was she confined to our home, but she was denied even the consolation of a telephone call from her husband. On the Sunday following our jailing, she decided she must do something. Remembering the call that John Kennedy had made to her when I was jailed in Georgia during the 1960 election campaign, she placed a call to the President. Within a few minutes, his brother, Attorney General Robert Kennedy, phoned back. She told him that she had learned that I was in solitary confinement and was afraid for my safety. The attorney general promised to do everything he could to have my situation eased. A few hours later President Kennedy himself called Coretta from Palm Beach, and assured her that he would look into the matter immediately. Apparently the President and his brother placed calls to officials in Birmingham; for immediately after Coretta heard from them, my jailers asked if I wanted to call her.

**AFTER THE PRESIDENT'S
INTERVENTION, CONDITIONS**

As we neared the downtown area, Bull Connor ordered his men to arrest us, and somebody from the police force leaned over and reminded Mr. Connor, "Mr. Connor, we ain't got nowhere to put 'em." Ralph (Abernathy) and I were hauled off by two muscular policemen, clutching the backs of our shirts in handfuls. All the others were promptly arrested. In jail Ralph and I were separated from everyone else and later from each other.

For more than twenty-four hours, I was held incommunicado, in solitary confinement. No one was permitted to visit me, not even my lawyers. Those were the longest, most frustrating and bewildering hours I have lived. Having no contact of any kind, I was besieged with worry. How was the movement faring? Where would Fred and the other leaders get the money to have our demonstrators released? What was happening to the morale in the Negro community?

I suffered no physical brutality at the hands of my jailers. Some of the prison personnel were surly and abusive, but that was to be

expected in Southern prisons. Solitary confinement, however, was brutal enough. In the mornings the sun would rise, sending shafts of light through the window high in the narrow cell which was my home. You will never know the meaning of utter darkness until you have lain in such a dungeon, knowing that sunlight is streaming overhead and still seeing only darkness below. You might have thought I was in the grip of a fantasy brought on by worry. I did worry. But there was more to the blackness than a phenomenon conjured up by a worried mind. Whatever the cause, the fact remained that I could not see the light.

When I had left my Atlanta home some days before, my wife, Coretta, had just given birth to our fourth child. As happy as we were about the new little girl, Coretta was disappointed that her condition would not allow her to accompany me. She had been my strength and inspiration during the terror of Montgomery. She had been active in Albany, Georgia, and was preparing to go to jail with the wives of other civil rights leaders there, just before the campaign ended.

*she had been my strength
my inspiration*



introduction / In 1963, Dr. King moved the site of the civil rights struggle to Birmingham, Alabama, a manufacturing city and one of the richest in the South. The two-month campaign was as rough and as risky as King had anticipated. Hundreds were arrested. An injunction was granted forbidding marches and demonstrations, but King decided to break it. He dressed in denims and a work shirt — his jail clothes — and led a march on Good Friday, April 12, 1963. Again he was arrested, this time placed in solitary confinement.

Historian Adam Fairclough (1995) writes about this incident in his book *Martin Luther King Jr: King dreaded solitary confinement*. Separated from Abernathy after his arrest on April 12, "those were the longest, most frustrating and bewildering hours I have lived," he remembered. "You will never know the meaning of utter darkness until you have lain in such a dungeon, knowing that sunlight is streaming overhead and still seeing only darkness below." A gregarious man, he hated being alone. He ached to see his new daughter, born a few days earlier. He worried about the bail money. And he experienced straightforward fear." (p.77) It's worth hearing about this entire episode in Dr. King's own words. / mk

FROM THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR:

We rode from the motel to the Zion Hill church, where the march would begin. Many hundreds of Negroes had turned out to see us and great hope grew within me as I saw those faces smiling approval as we passed. It seemed that every Birmingham police officer had been sent into the area. Leaving the church, where we were joined by the rest of our group of fifty, we started down the forbidden streets that lead to the downtown sector. It was a beautiful march we were allowed to walk farther than the police had ever permitted before. We were singing, and occasionally the singing was interspersed with bursts of applause from the sidewalks.



STRENGTH

THE MEANING OF UTTER DARKNESS

What one is expected to conceal in a tomato is beyond me.

THE MEALS ARE SERVED IN METAL DOG B DLS

minute chunks of fat can be l...
LUN
Same day
a fact
of baked
Cactually
surplus to
be

TV set, only newspapers, if some inmate is fortunate in having the money to buy them. We are allowed playing cards, but strangely, a Monopoly set is forbidden. Having learned that I had two Monopoly sets in the package room, I requested that one be given to me — this request was refused. The Chief explained to me that a Monopoly set contains dice, and the inmates might use the dice to gamble. The jailers fail to understand that the more restrictive measures taken against the inmates, the more ingenious they become in devising ways and means of amusements; amusements often more harmful than a simple game called Monopoly. This seems to make no impression on the jailers; for they appear to be hell-bent on making the inmates as miserable as possible. "After all," the Chief exclaimed, "we are not interested in rehabilitation; this is not a prison, it is a jail. The prisoners are only here for a short time."

When I explained that I could hardly be called a "short-time" prisoner, that I am beginning my tenth month here, he readily admitted that my case is the exception, "though not exceptional enough to be permitted a Monopoly set" or a person-to-person visit, even though many of my visitors travel hundreds of miles to visit me. He admits that the state of Ohio has no charge against me; he even hinted that after four months the State of Ohio was willing to let me go. However, it is almost ten months and the State of Ohio is still holding me, the Monopoly set is still in the package room, the food is still terrible, the mattress is still thin, the pillow is still flat and limp.

Last month, I read Felix Greene's book on China. I was particularly interested in what he had to say about the jails in the People's Republic. Mr. Greene claims that one jail that he visited had only one guard with a rifle. The windows had no bars, and when he asked for the Warden, he was shown a young man with his sleeves rolled up helping an inmate fix a machine. According to Mr. Greene, "If this had been an American prison, the inmates would have been gone in three minutes." I agree with Mr. Greene wholeheartedly. From what I have read and from personal experience here, only Devil's Island and the Nazi Concentration Camps can compare with America's penal system.

I HAVE FAITH IN MY FRIENDS HERE IN AMERICA AND THROUGHOUT THE WORLD. FOR THIS REASON I CAN BEAR THE BARRED WINDOWS, THE STARK BARE WALLS AND THE HARD CONCRETE FLOORS; I CAN BEAR THE SNIDE INNUENDOS ABOUT KIDNAPPERS. I CAN BEAR THE CONDITIONS HERE THAT ARE WORSE THAN A ZOO, AND I CAN EVEN LIVE WITH THE PROSPECT OF HAVING TO SPEND CHRISTMAS AND NEW YEAR'S IN JAIL. FOR IF MY SUFFERING IN JAIL HAS CONTRIBUTED TOWARD THE LIBERATION OF MY PEOPLE, PEACE ON EARTH AND GOODWILL TO ALL MEN, THEN ANY SACRIFICE I HAVE BEEN FORCED TO MAKE HAS NOT BEEN IN VAIN.

MAE MALLORY
12. 17. 1962

As the holiday season draws nigh and newspapers are heavily laden with their gaudy displays for Christmas, I take this moment to write and express my gratitude for the work, thoughts and prayers you have extended.

Perhaps you are interested in how I have fared these many months in Cuyahoga County Jail. I will try to give you a clear picture of what life is like here — not out of self-pity, but so that you may be fully informed. The women are housed on the 7th floor of the building. The seventh floor is divided into three main sections — Cell Blocks 7A, B and C. Cell Blocks 7A and B are large, rectangular enclosures divided into thirteen rooms with two toilets, one shower, four face bowls and one utility sink. The capacity is 13; but often there are as many as 27 women there. Cell Block C is a row of cells with bunks on the walls. Because of the overcrowded conditions, this particular Cell Block houses part of the overflow of male prisoners.

My room is in Cell Block 7A. It is a tiny room approximately six feet by nine. There is a metal bed with a thin mattress. We are allowed one sheet, one limp flat pillow, one pillowcase and one unsanitary reprocessed wool blanket. We are given one bath towel a week — a whole one if you are lucky.

The librarian comes once a week with a very limited selection of books, mostly who-dunnits and westerns; however, I did find John Hersey's book entitled *The Wall*. Besides these books, Cuyahoga County Jail furnishes no other form of recreation.

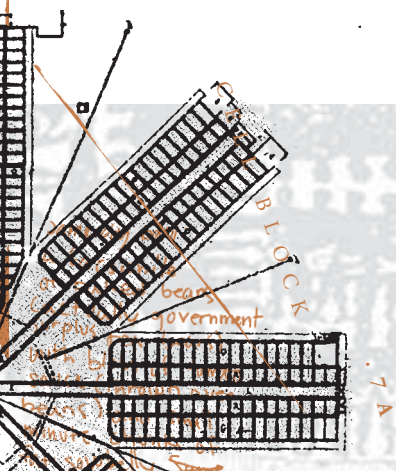
The inmates are allowed to receive packages each day provided that there is someone interested and able to bring the few things which are allowed. Since the jail furnishes no clothing, the inmates must provide their own.

THE MEALS ARE SERVED IN METAL DOG BOWLS.

A metal cup is given to each inmate on entry. A typical menu is the following: Breakfast — soggy corn flakes, a cup of the poorest coffee and chicory combination (sometimes complete with floating cockroaches); Lunch — same dog bowl, a facsimile of baked beans (actually government surplus pea beans) with blobs of tomato sauce (thrown over the beans), small minute chunks of fat sowbelly, cup of the same brew called coffee, bread; Dinner — bologna, bread, same brew, rolls. If there is anything Cuyahoga County serves plenty of, it's bread. After a month of this diet, one is almost willing to admit guilt to any crime, since I am told that better food is served in the penitentiary.

We are allowed such fruits as bananas, apples, oranges, an occasional avocado and sometimes tomatoes. These items are often mutilated under the pretense of inspection. What one is expected to conceal in a tomato is beyond me.

The day room or "recreational room" is the space that is left between the rooms on either side of the area taken up by the toilet and shower. In the recreation room is a long rustic table with two make-shift benches, no radio or



introduction / Willie Mae Mallory was born in Georgia in 1927. She moved to New York City with her mother in 1939. Ms. Mallory died in 2007 at the age of 80. In between those years, Mae Mallory played an integral role in the black freedom movement in the U.S. Yet she is far from a household name and even those who know something about black history may not have heard of her contributions. Yet before there was a *Free Angela* or *Free Assata* campaign, there was a *Free Mae Mallory* one.

Mae Mallory fled from North Carolina to Ohio in August 1961 in fear for her life. She was a supporter and friend of black radical Robert F. Williams. Williams, who had fought in World War II, returned home to become the leader of his local North Carolina NAACP chapter in the mid-1950s. In August 1961, Mae Mallory along with journalist Julian Mayfield visited Robert Williams and his family in Monroe. The summer of '61 in Monroe had been characterized by racial tumult. It ended with Robert Williams being accused of kidnapping an elderly white couple, Mr. and Mrs. Bruce Stegall. He fled the country to Cuba allegedly with the help of Mallory and Mayfield. Mayfield escaped to Ghana and Mallory found her way to Cleveland Ohio.

Falsely accused of kidnapping charges, Mae Mallory along with the other Monroe Defendants would face a stiff prison sentence and years of legal troubles. While in Cleveland, Mallory fought against being extradited to Monroe to face her charges. Mallory described Monroe as a place "where a black man has never been acquitted when accused of a crime against a whiteman, and a whiteman has never been convicted when accused of a crime against a blackman." Because of her refusal to return to Monroe, Mallory would spend over a year and a half in jail in Ohio.

While she was incarcerated at Cuyahoga County Jail, she wrote letters and shared her thoughts about the experience. The following is an excerpt from *An Open Letter... To My Many Friends in America and Those in Foreign Lands*, in which Mae Mallory describes her life in jail. / *mk*

57

akes

r)

poorest

kory

ometimes

floating

W L

Mallory

LUNCH

same dog bowl:
a facsimile
of baked beans
(actually government
plus pea beans)
with blobs of tomato

ans) and small
chur

METAL DOG BOWL

ST
s
akes
r)
poorest
kory
sometimes
floating

-UN-
me do
a facs
of bake
vally
government
beans)

bean
minu
fat s

the story of Mae Mallor

AGE
COMPLEXION
BUILD
NATURALITY
OCCUPATIONS
SCARS AND MARKS

CRIME RECORD

CHEISMARD HAS BEEN CONVICTED OF MURDER

In that jail it was nothing to see a woman brought in all beat up. In some cases, the only charge was "resisting arrest." A Puerto Rican sister was brought in one night. She had been so badly beaten by the police that the matron on duty didn't want to admit her. She kept saying...

I don't want her dying on my shift.

It was days before this sister was able to get out of bed.

Born July 10, 1947, New York, New York
Irish
Irish
American
actor, writer
bullet scars on abdomen, chest, left shoulder and
underside of right arm; round scar on left knee

OF A NEW JERSEY STATE TROOPERS
CHEISMARD, WHO IS REPORTEDLY A
MEMBER OF A REVOLUTIONARY ORGANI-
ZATION WHICH HAS AN EXTENSIVE
HISTORY OF CRIMINAL ACTIVITY INVOLV-
ING VIOLENCE, SHOULD BE CONSIDERED
ARMED, EXTREMELY DANGEROUS, AND
ESCAPE RISK

A Federal warrant was issued on November 3, 1979, at Newark, New Jersey, charging Chesismard with interstate flight to avoid confinement for the crime of murder (Title 18 U.S. Code, Section 107).
IF YOU HAVE INFORMATION CONCERNING THIS PERSON, PLEASE CONTACT:
TELEPHONE NUMBERS AND ADDRESSES OF ALL FBI OFFICES LISTED ON BACK
Identification: O-1, 1982
Rev. November 30, 1982

William A. Loft
Director, Bureau of Investigation
Washington, D. C. 20535

*ONE of SADDEST RULES prohibited
CHILDREN FROM VISITING their
MOTHERS in jail.*

were doing, I couldn't believe it. Quite a few of them were doing time for the numbers, either six months or a year. In New York, doing time for number running was practically unheard of, and it certainly didn't get six months or a year. Everybody in the world knows that the numbers business keeps the cops fat. These women hadn't hurt anybody or stolen anything, yet they were sitting in jail, probably busted by the same cops that they paid off. Their only crime was competing with the state lottery. Most of them had already been sentenced. If the sentence was less than a year, time was served in the county jail rather than in the state penitentiary.

If I had expected to find so-called hardened criminals or big-time female gangsters or gun molls in the workhouse, I would have been sadly disappointed. The rest of the women who weren't doing time for the numbers were in for some form of petty theft, like shoplifting or passing bad checks. Most of those

sisters were on welfare and all of them had been barely able to make ends meet.

The courts had shown them no mercy. They brought in this sister shortly after I arrived who was eight months pregnant and had been sentenced to a month for shoplifting something that cost less than twenty dollars.

*LATER, a middle-aged SISTER
BEGAN coming TO THE workhouse*

She worked during the week and served her six-month sentence for drunken driving on weekends. Knowing that white women with the same charges would never have received such a sentence, I thought it was harsh. But I didn't realize how harsh until she told me that she had been arrested for drunken driving in the driveway of her own house. She hadn't even been on a public road. She also told me that the cops had arrested her because they didn't like the way she talked to them.

NCIC: AAAAAA

"All right, but you really don't need it."

Every time they called me to see the doctor after that, I went reluctantly. He would take my arm out of the sling and move it back and forth about two inches. "Oh, yes, you're getting better," he would say. I always asked about physical therapy and he always said there was nothing he could do.

Finally, Evelyn went to court. Some of the items we petitioned for were ridiculous. In addition to physical therapy and nerve tests, we asked for peanut oil, a rubber ball, a rubber grip, books, and stuff to draw or paint with. The court finally granted a physical therapist if we would find one and pay the bill, but I never got one. It seems that no physical therapist in Middlesex County was willing to come to the prison to treat me, and only a physical therapist from Middlesex County was permitted.

*THE WORKHOUSE HAD
A WHOLE HEAP OF RULES,
MOST OF THEM STUPID.*

No newspapers or magazines were permitted. When I asked why we couldn't read newspapers, they told me that newspapers were "inflammatory." Obviously, if a person read in the paper that his or her sister had

been raped, he would wait until the rapist came to jail and then do him bodily harm.

"But," I protested, "the other inmates watch television and listen to the radio (I wasn't allowed either). They could receive the same information that way or from a visit from home.

"In that case," the warden told me, "we don't let you read newspapers because they are a fire hazard."

I could see the children waiting outside, looking up at that ugly old building with sad, frustrated faces. Their mothers would run to the only window that faced the parking lot just to get a glimpse of their children. Yelling out of the window was a no-no, but once in a while somebody would get carried away. Sometimes their frantic screams went unheard.

Gradually, I began to know the women. They were all very kind to me and treated me like a sister. They laughed like hell when I told them that I was supposedly being protected from them. Those first days, before I had really learned to maneuver with one hand, they did whatever they could to make things easier for me. They volunteered to iron my uniforms and sneak them into the laundry to be washed more than once a week. When they told me their charges and the time they

In about an hour, a guard unlocked the outside door and asked me if I wanted breakfast. I said, "Yes," and in a few minutes she came back with eggs and bread in a plastic bowl and a metal cup containing something that was supposed to be coffee. The eggs didn't taste too bad. "Maybe prison food isn't as bad as they say it is," I remember thinking.

I heard voices and it was clear that they weren't police voices. Then the radio came on. Black music. It sounded so good. I looked through the peephole and saw faces, weird and distorted because of the concave glass, but Black faces to match the Black voices I had heard.

"How y'all doin'?" I asked.

No response. Then I realized how thick the metal door was, so I shouted this time: "How y'all doin'?" A chorus of muffled "Fine"s came back. I was feeling good. Real people were just on the other side of the wall.

The guard opened the metal door and handed me some uniforms, maid's uniforms – royal blue, white buttons, collars and cuffs.

I kept trying them on until two of them fit. Then she gave me a huge cotton slip that looked like a tent dress and a nightgown that looked exactly like the slip.

"You are entitled to a clean uniform once a week." "Once a week?" I nearly screeched. They had to be crazy.

Behind the guard, through the open door, I could see some of the women standing around. They were all, it seemed, Black. They smiled and waved at me. It was so good to see them, it was like a piece of home.

"When are you going to unlock me and let me go out there?" I asked, motioning to the other women. The guard looked surprised.

"I don't know. You'll have to ask the warden."

"Well, when can I see the warden," I pushed.

"I don't know." "Then why can't you let me out?"

"We were told you were to remain in your room."

"Well, how long am I supposed to stay in here locked up like this?" "I don't know." I saw it was useless. "Would you please tell the warden or the sheriff that I would like to see him?" I requested. The guard unlocked the door and was gone.

*I had little or no
feeling in my right arm.*

I knew I needed physical therapy if I was ever to use it again. I had learned to write with my left hand, but that was no substitute. I needed a more specific diagnosis of exactly what had been damaged before I would know whether or not I would ever use it again, even with physical therapy.

Isolation was driving me up the walls. I needed materials to write and to draw, paint, or sketch. All my requests went unheeded. I was permitted nothing, including peanut oil and a small ball to aid movement in my arm. When the jail doctor examined me I asked him about my arm.

"Why, we doctors aren't gods, you know. There's nothing anyone can do when someone is paralyzed."

"But they said I might get better," I protested.

"Oh, yes, and the physical therapist at Roosevelt said that some peanut oil might help."

"Peanut oil?" he asked, laughing. "That's a good one. I can't write a prescription for that now, can I? My advice to you is to forget about all of that stuff. You don't need any of it. Sometimes in life we just have to accept things that are unpleasant. You still have one good arm."

I kept talking but I could see I was wasting my time. He had no intention of even trying to help me. "Well, would you at least prescribe some vitamin B?"



IT SEEMED LIKE the middle of the night. Someone was calling me. Waking me up. What did they want? Suddenly I was aware of all kinds of activity. Police, the crackling of walkie-talkies. The place was buzzing.

HERE, PUT THIS ON

one of them said, handing me a bathrobe.

"What's going on?" I asked. "You're being moved." "Where am I being moved to?" "You'll find out when you get there."

A wheelchair was waiting. I figured they were taking me to jail. There was a caravan of police cars outside the hospital. It looked like I was gonna be in a parade again.

The ride was pleasant. Just looking at houses and trees and people passing by in cars was good. We arrived at the prison at sunrise, in the middle of nowhere. It was an ugly, two-story brick building. They pushed me up the stairs to the second floor.

I was put in a cell with two doors. A door of bars was on the inside, and directly outside of that was a heavy metal door with a tiny peephole that I could barely see through. The cell contained cot with a rough green blanket on it and a dirty white wooden bench with hundred names scratched on it. Adjacent to the cell was the bathroom, with a sink, a toilet and a shower. Hanging above the sink was the bottom of a pot or pan. It was supposed to serve as a mirror, but I could barely see myself in it. There was one window covered by three thick metal screens facing a parking lot, a field, and, in the distance, a wooded area.

I walked around the cell, to the bath, to the window, to the door. Back and forth until I had tired myself out. I was still pretty weak. Then I lay down on the cot and wondered what this place was going to be like.

here i was, my
first day in prison



\$1 MILLION OR ISOLATION

ASSATA SHAKUR



introduction / Assata Shakur was a member of the Black Panther Party (BPP) and then a leader in the Black Liberation Army (BLA). She was implicated in a series of BPP bank robberies in the late 60s and was targeted by the FBI which made her the subject of a nationwide manhunt in 1971. When she was captured in 1972, she was not charged with a crime.

In May 1973, Assata Shakur was stopped on the New Jersey Turnpike along with her friends Zayd Shakur and Sundiata Acoli allegedly for driving with a broken taillight. There was a subsequent shoot out that resulted in the deaths of Zayd Shakur and a New Jersey State Police Trooper named Werner Foerster. Assata was shot twice during the incident while her arms were raised in surrender. In 1977, after several court appearances and trials, she was found guilty of murder and assault and sentenced to life in prison. Assata escaped from prison in 1979 with the help of four members of the BLA. After living for several years as a fugitive in the U.S., she eventually made it to Cuba in 1984. She still lives there. The FBI has branded her as a "domestic terrorist" and offered a reward of \$1 million for her capture.

Joy James explains the enduring appeal of Assata Shakur, "Shakur is singular because she is a recognizable female revolutionary, one not bound to a male persona (p. 138)." James adds, "Along with Harriet Tubman, Shakur would become one of the few black female figures in the United States recognized as a leader in an organization that publicly advocated armed self-defense against racist violence (p. 139)."

In 1988, Shakur published her best-selling autobiography "Assata." The following is an edited excerpt from the book. / *mk*

nutmeg men who, for money or cigarettes, bought from kitchen-worker inmates penny matchboxes full of stolen nutmeg. I grabbed a box as though it were a pound of heavy drugs. Stirred into a glass of cold water, a penny matchbox full of nutmeg had the kick of three or four reefers.

With some money sent by Ella, I was finally able to buy stuff for better highs from guards in the prison. Smuggling to prisoners was the guards' sideline; every prison's inmates know that's how guards make most of their living.

I SERVED A TOTAL OF SEVEN YEARS in prison. Now, when I try to separate that first year-plus that I spent at Charlestown, it runs all together in a memory of nutmeg and the other semi-drugs, of cursing guards, throwing things out of my cell, balking in the lines, dropping my tray in the dining hall, refusing to answer my number – claiming I forgot it – and things like that.

I preferred the solitary that this behavior brought me. I would pace for hours like a caged leopard, viciously cursing aloud to myself. And my favorite targets were the Bible and God. But there was a legal limit to how much time one could be kept in solitary.

My sister Ella had been steadily working to get me transferred to the Norfolk, Massachusetts, Prison Colony, which was an experimental rehabilitation jail. In other prisons, convicts often said that if you had the right

Behind bars, a man never reforms.

money, or connections, you could get transferred to this Colony whose penal policies sounded almost too good to be true. Somehow, Ella's efforts in my behalf were successful in late 1948, and I was transferred to Norfolk.

I GOT TEN YEARS. The girls got one to five years, in the Women's Reformatory at Framingham, Massachusetts.

You never heard your name, only your number.

This was in February, 1946. I wasn't quite twenty-one. I had not even started shaving. They took Shorty and me, handcuffed together, to the Charlestown State Prison.

That seems surprising, even after the dozens years since I have been out of prison.

Because your number in prison became part of you. You never heard your name, only your number. On all of your clothing, every item, was your number, stenciled. It grew stenciled on your brain.

Any person who claims to have deep feeling for other human beings should think a long, long time before he votes to have other men kept behind bars – caged. I am not saying there shouldn't be prisons, but there shouldn't be bars. Behind bars, a man never reforms. He will never forget. He never will get completely over the memory of the bars.

After he gets out, his mind tries to erase the experience, but he can't. I've talked with numerous former convicts. It has been very interesting to me to find that all of our minds had blotted away many details of years in prison. But in every case, he will tell you that he can't forget those bars.

As a "fish" (prison slang for a new inmate) at Charlestown, I was physically miserable and as evil-tempered as a snake, being suddenly without drugs. The cells didn't have running water. The prison had been built in 1805 – in Napoleon's day – and was even styled after the Bastille. In the dirty, cramped cell, I could lie on my cot and touch both walls. The toilet was a covered pail; I don't care how strong you are, you can't stand having to smell a whole cell row of defecation.

THE PRISON PSYCHOLOGIST

interviewed me and he got called every filthy name I could think of, and the prison chaplain got called worse. My first letter, I remember, was from my religious brother Philbert in Detroit, telling me his "holiness" church was going to pray for me. I scrawled him a reply I'm ashamed to think of today.

ELLA WAS MY FIRST VISITOR. I remember seeing her catch herself, then try to smile at me, now in the faded dungarees stenciled with my number. Neither of us could find much to say, until I wished she hadn't come at all. The guards with guns watched about fifty convicts and visitors. I have heard scores of new prisoners swearing back in their cells that when free their first act would be to waylay those visiting-room guards. Hatred often focused on them.

I FIRST GOT HIGH IN CHARLESTOWN on nutmeg. My cell mate was among at least a hundred

introduction/ Malcolm X's autobiography published in 1965 had and still has a significant influence on the consciousness of incarcerated people in the United States. In *Soul on Ice*, Eldridge Cleaver wrote about the impact that Malcolm X had on black prisoners in particular:

"Malcolm X had a special meaning for black convicts. A former prisoner himself, he had risen from the lowest depths to great heights. For this reason he was a symbol of hope, a model for thousands of black convicts who found themselves trapped in the vicious PPP cycle: prison-parole-prison. One thing that the judges, policemen, and administrators of prisons seem never to have understood, and for which they certainly do not make allowances, is that Negro convicts, basically, rather than see themselves as criminals and perpetrators of misdeeds, look upon themselves as prisoners of war, the victims of a vicious, dog-eat-dog social system that is so heinous as to cancel out their own malefactions: in the jungle there is no right or wrong.

Rather than owing and paying a debt to society, Negro prisoners feel that they are being abused, that their imprisonment is simply another form of oppression which they have known all their lives. Negro inmates feel that they are being robbed, that it is "society" that owes them, that should be paying them, a debt.

America's penology does not take this into account. Malcolm X did, and black convicts know that the ascension to power of Malcolm X or a man like him would eventually have revolutionized penology. Malcolm delivered a merciless and damning indictment of prevailing penology (p. 58-59)."

Malcolm X spent nearly seven years locked behind bars and converted to Islam while he was imprisoned. Upon his release, he became committed to the social and political uplift of black people and was an inspiration to millions. The following is an excerpt from *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* that recounts some of his experience of captivity and confinement. */mk*

ANY PERSON WHO CLAIMS
TO HAVE DEEP FEELING FOR
OTHER HUMAN BEINGS
SHOULD THINK A LONG,
LONG TIME BEFORE HE
VOTES TO HAVE OTHER
MEN KEPT BEHIND BARS —
CAGED.



MY TERMINATION



Source: *If They Come in the Morning* by Angela Y. Davis and other political prisoners (The National United Committee to Free Angela Davis, December 1971), 128-129.

Of course after the courts overruled them and they were compelled to release me from solitary confinement and 24-hour guard, they had to seek other ways to assert their dominance.

Unlike the other women who are being held for trial, I am forced to wear institutional clothing. They say I am a high security risk and they want to make it difficult for me to escape.

They refuse to permit my attorneys to give me legal material unless they first read it over, demonstrating that they have no respect whatsoever for the confidentiality which is supposed to exist between lawyer and client.

I COULD CONTINUE TO ENUMERATE A HUNDRED LITTLE THINGS THAT HAVE BEEN DONE IN THE HOPE OF BREAKING ME, BUT I CONTINUE TO GIVE NOTICE TO THEM THAT THERE IS ABSOLUTELY NOTHING THEY CAN DO TO BREAK MY DETERMINATION TO KEEP STRUGGLING.

THE ONLY WAY THEY CAN ACCOMPLISH THIS IS BY TAKING MY LIFE AND THEN THEY WOULD HAVE TO FACE THE WRATH OF THE PEOPLE. THE SAME HOLDS TRUE FOR ERICKA, BOBBY, GEORGE, THE SOLEDAD BROTHERS, ETC.



THERE IS ABSOLUTELY NOTHING
THEY CAN DO

TO BREAK M DETERM

This is a prison and the atrocious conditions that characterize virtually every American prison are present in this place. Rather than start with the specific treatment I have been receiving, I would like to delineate the circumstances under which all of us are compelled to exist.

First of all, the prison is filthy. It is infested with roaches and mice. Often we discover roaches cooked into our food. Not too long ago, a sister found a mouse tail in her soup. A few days ago I was drinking a cup of coffee and I was forced to spit out a roach.

Roaches literally cover the walls of our cells at night, crawling across our bodies while we sleep. Every night we hear the screams of inmates who wake up to find mice scurrying across their bodies. I discovered one in bed with me last night in fact.

The medical conditions here are abominable. The doctors are racists and entirely insensitive to the needs of the women here. One sister who is housed in my corridor complained to the doctor not too long ago that she had terrible pains in her chest.

After which the doctor suggested to her that she get a job without once examining her. It was later discovered that the sister had tumors in her breast and needed immediate hospital attention. This is indicative of the way we are treated here.

We spend most of our time in either 5' x 9' cells with filth and concrete floors or outside on the bare corridors. We are not even allowed to place blankets on the floor where we must sit to protect ourselves from the filth and the cold.

To talk a little about the library, they have a collection of adventure stories and romances which they have designated the library. It is important to realize that although the prison population is 95 percent Black and Puerto Rican, I found only five or six books about Black people and literature in Spanish is extremely scarce.

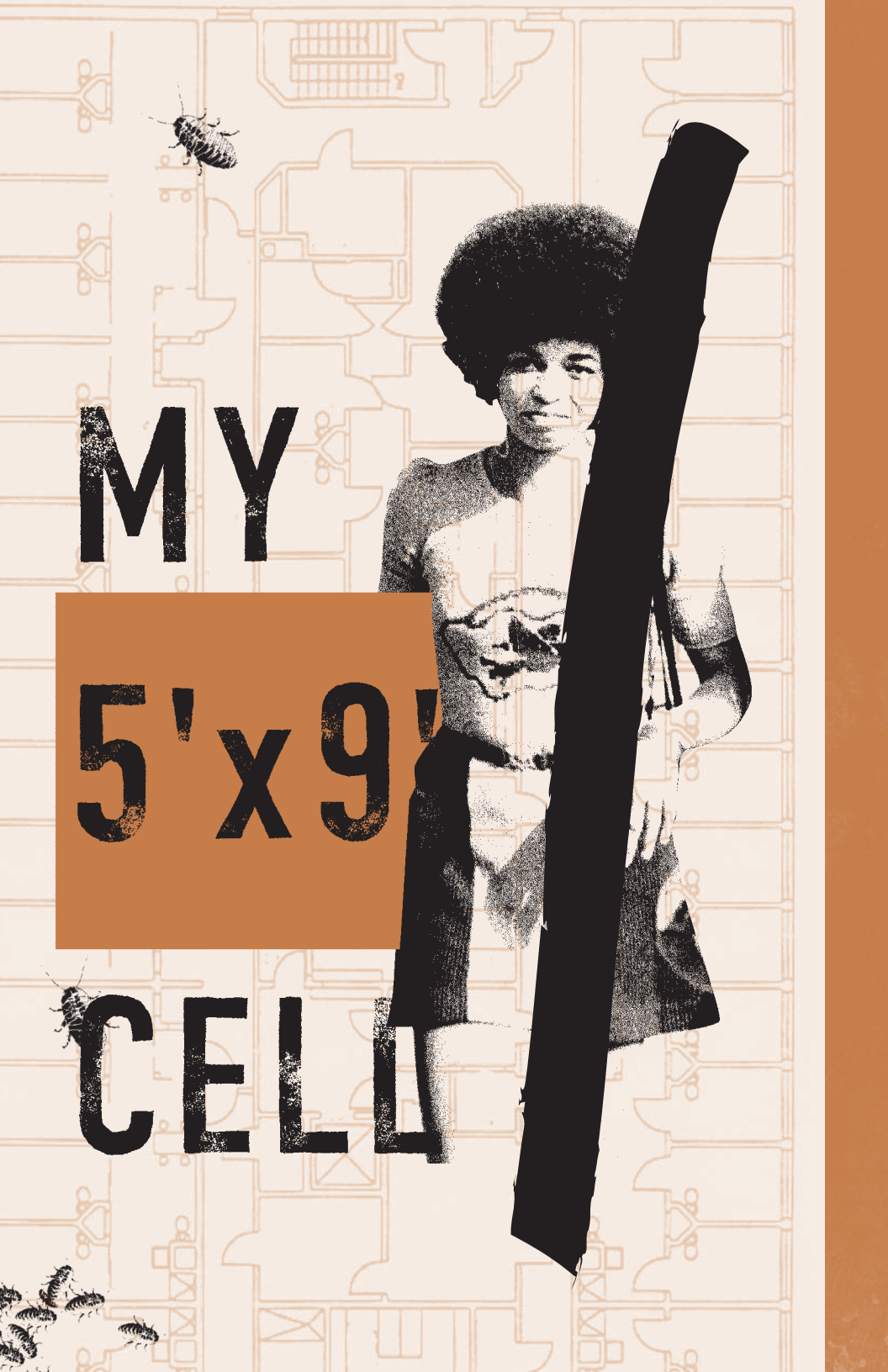
I could go on and on but perhaps now I will turn to the specific kinds of treatment I have been receiving myself. I am convinced that the authorities in this place have been instructed to make life as difficult as possible for me, probably in order to convince me to stop fighting extradition.

ANGELA DAVIS

introduction / In the summer of 1970, Angela Davis began to work on a campaign to free imprisoned Black Panther activists who were known as the "Soledad Brothers." Davis came to national attention after 17-year old Jonathan Jackson (brother of George Jackson) burst into a California courtroom and abducted Judge Harold Haley, a prosecutor, and three female jurors, while freeing two prisoners on trial for murder. Jonathan Jackson had hoped to exchange the hostages for the release of his brother George and the other Soledad prisoners. Unfortunately, Jonathan, two prisoners, and Judge Haley were all killed during the incident. A shotgun that was used in the incident was found to be registered to Angela Davis. She was indicted and placed on the FBI's Most Wanted list. Facing conspiracy and murder charges, Davis went into hiding. She was eventually arrested in New York in October 1970. Angela Davis became a cause célèbre and an international campaign was established to free her. Davis would eventually face a trial in March of 1972. In June 1972, she was acquitted of all charges. Angela Davis remains a prominent voice for social justice and transformation today.

The following is an excerpt from an interview with Angela Davis at the New York Women's House of Detention in October 1970. / *mk*





MY

5'x9'

CELL

I swear I want to cry sometimes when I look at some of the older prisoners who have been in prison so long that they hold conversations with people who aren't there and blink their sad eyes once every four or five minutes. I swell all up inside every time I watch those old convicts shuffling aimlessly around the yard with no particular destination in mind. What they feel inside, however, is beyond my scope of knowing, and I will not attempt to enter into their troubled minds. This would be unfair, I think. All I can do at this stage of the game is look at my older brothers of oppression and wonder if this will be me 15 or 20 years from now.

CAN I HOLD ON? WILL I LAST? WILL I
SOMEDAY HOLD CONVERSATIONS WITH
GHOSTS? WILL I LET MY MIND PLUNGE
DOWNWARDS INTO THE PIT OF LOST SOULS,
WHERE IT IS COLD AND DAMP AND LONELY?

These are things I often think about. I try not to think about them, but the harder I try the more vivid they become in my mind. It is enough to make a cat shake his closed fists at the sky. I feel this way because I know something is very wrong. It's not right that a man should spend half of his life behind prison walls because of a mistake he made in his youth. I know this is wrong because I have seen what long periods of incarceration have done to the mind — the soul. I have seen cats leave here twice as hostile, twice as confused, twice as anti-social than they were when they entered. Depleted of nearly all of their mental juices, they are "thrown back" into society where they are expected to function like normal human beings. And then society wonders why recidivism is so high in the country; why a man serves five or ten years in prison only to go out and commit the same act again.

THE PIT IS HELL! IT IS A BURNING, FLAMING HELL. CUT OFF FROM SOCIETY, DEPRIVED OF THE SOFT TOUCH OF A WOMAN, RELEGATED TO THE INSANE WORLD OF UNSAVORY FOODS, HARD BEDS, SECOND-HAND INFORMATION, NEEDLESS HARASSMENT AND INTIMIDATION, ARCHAIC THERAPEUTIC PROGRAMS, OBSOLETE VOCATIONAL TRAINING, INFERIOR SCHOOLS, STUFFY CELLS, UNFAIR MAILING AND VISITING PRIVILEGES, RACIST PRISON GUARDS, VIOLENCE, TREACHERY, MURDER AND SO MANY OTHER EVILS THAT YOU GET DIZZY JUST THINKING ABOUT THEM, YOU FIND YOURSELF SOMETIMES QUESTIONING YOUR OWN EXISTENCE. IT'S FRIGHTENING. I THINK EACH NIGHT EVERY CONVICT IN THIS PLACE THANKS WHATEVER GOD HE BELIEVES IN FOR SEEING HIM SAFELY THROUGH THE DAY. WHEN I LAY MY HEAD DOWN AT NIGHT, I KNOW I AM THANKFUL TO WHATEVER GODS EXIST THAT I WASN'T SHANKED TO DEATH OR POISONED BY THE ROTTEN FOOD, OR SHOT IN THE HEAD BY SOME TRIGGER-HAPPY GUARD LOOKING FOR A REPUTATION.

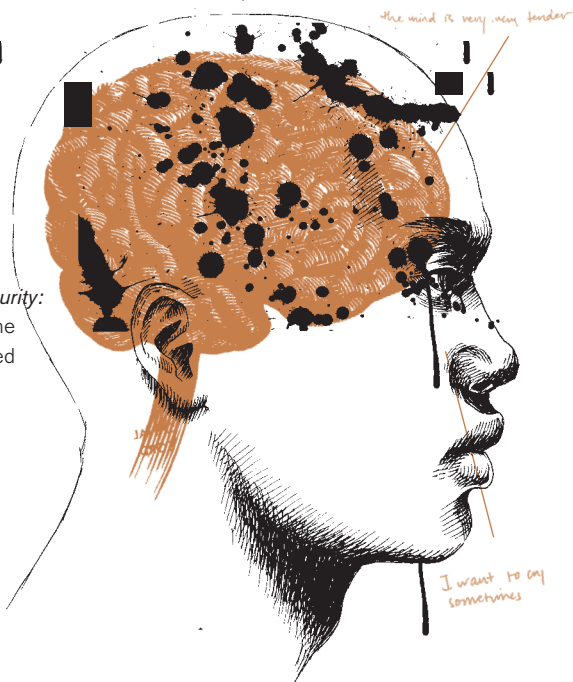
*but I still find myself whispering
at night to somebody I can't see...*

THE PIT

ALFRED HASSAN

introduction / Hassan was a prisoner at Folsom Prison whose letters and essay appeared in a book called *Maximum Security: Letters from Prison* published in 1972. The following is an excerpt from his essay titled "The Pit" / *mk*

Fig.1
3049



We spend the vast majority of our time vegetating and plunging deeper into the pit of lost souls. It is no wonder that we behave like snakes crawling around at the bottom of a deep, dark pit. When you cage a man up like an animal, how else do you expect for him to behave? No man, no matter what he has done in life, deserves to be treated like an animal. If a man has done something so bad that we can't stand to look at him, then shoot him. But don't tamper with his soul. If he is a tyrant, then relieve him of his misery with a bullet in his brain. But don't whip his mind. Don't lie to him when he knows you are lying. Don't hand him that shit about rehabilitation. Don't make promises you'll never keep. A man can stand so much. You can beat the flesh but it will soon become accustomed to the pain. But the mind is very, very tender. It can stand so much. And once the mind is gone, what do you do with the body? You put the body out on the yard. Yeah, that's it. Walking down long corridors, in small rooms, across the neatly trimmed grass. I'm talking about the convicts who are in the Pit forever.

No man,
No matter
what he does
deserves to
be treated
like an
ANIMAL

introduction / A prisoner named Ahmad Al Aswadu wrote an essay titled "A Black View of Prison" in the April-May 1971 issue of the Black Scholar. In his essay, he describes the experience of living in the "hole" while incarcerated. Here is some of what he wrote. / mk

The hole is the
desolation

The "Hole" (called such because its locality is usually under the prison's first floor) is solitary confinement. One could stay in the hole for a week or a lifetime depending upon his color and attitude. It is here in the hole that men are made and broken at the same time. It is here that the previous threat of getting "hurt" can realize itself all too quickly. And it is here that the seeds of Black Consciousness have been cultivated in the minds of many black men.

the feeling of

It is very difficult for a layman such as I to describe the atmosphere of the hole but I shall try. I believe that the very first thing that the brother notices about the hole is the desolation and the feeling of utter aloneness. The first time that I was sent to the hole I felt as if my soul had deserted me. I don't believe that I had ever experienced such a feeling of intense emptiness in my life before then. I had been sent to the hole to have my attitude changed, because, as they stated, it was not conducive to "good order." A brother had just been murdered by the guards who worked in the hole, and rather than go through that type of thing, I pretended to be institutionalized. Fortunately, my stay only lasted fourteen days and I was returned to the general inmate population.

Life in the hole is epitomized by one big question mark. Uncertainty is the order of the day. Your visitors are turned around at the gate when they come to see you. The food quantity and quality is drastically reduced to the level of subsistence. You might get a shower and you might not — depending upon whether or not the guard's wife was good to him the night before. I believe that it is the hole that is the most memorable aspect of the prison experience. They are all the same, and yet they are totally different from one another.

utter aloneness

BY "GOOD ORDER"

AHMAD AL ASWADU

my soul had
deserted





Writing in 1970, Zayd Shakur, the deputy minister of information for the New York State chapter of the Black Panther Party and also once a prisoner, echoes Jackson's sense that many black men will eventually find themselves behind bars. He also suggests that life in prison is an extension of life in some disadvantaged communities.

"We have people who are forced at gunpoint to live behind concrete and steel. Others of us, in what we ordinarily think of as the community, live at gunpoint again in almost the same conditions. The penitentiaries, as they call them, and the communities are plagued with the same thing: dope, disease, police brutality, murder and rats running over the places that you dwell in."

destinies. They're not relying on lying, demagogic politicians to redress their grievances. Of course, the courts didn't redress their grievances in the first place, so there's no sense in relying on them either. There's very little difference between the penitentiaries in California and those in New York, New Orleans, Alabama or Chicago. It's the same system. America is the prison. All of America is a prison where the people are being held captive by the real arch criminals."

In the current era of mass incarceration, it is critical that we re-engage with prisoners who can teach us something about their

→ prisons are really an extension of our communities →

We recognize that most of the militant dissatisfied youth are off in the penitentiaries. Eighty percent of the prison population is black, brown and yellow people. You look around and say, 'what happened to my man. I haven't seen him for a long time,' then you get busted, go to jail and there he is. Prisons are an extension of the repression. In these penitentiaries are the Malcolms, Cleavers, Huey P. Newtons, Bobby Seales and all other political prisoners. Now the inmates are moving forth to harness their own

experiences of captivity and confinement. Their stories and their voices are important in our efforts to dismantle the Prison Industrial Complex. The selections offered in this publication are all written by black prisoners and focus on their experiences and observations about incarceration.

We invite all of you to visit the *Black/Inside* exhibition in fall 2012. Information about the exhibition will be available at blackinside2012.wordpress.com.

/ Mariame Kaba

introduction /
introduction /
introduction /
introduction /

Nearly 2.3 million people are locked in America's prisons and jails today. In the 1960s, Malcolm X suggested that "America means prison." His statement is even more appropriate today. The United States has five percent of the world's population and twenty-five percent of its prisoners. To call the United States a prison nation is to be stating the obvious. However, not everyone is equally targeted by the Prison Industrial Complex. African Americans, in particular, are disproportionately impacted by this American epidemic of mass incarceration. They comprise forty-four percent of the prison population even while only making up about twelve percent of the total U.S. population.

Over the years, a number of unknown and famous prisoners have written about their experience of incarceration. Several excellent anthologies of their writing already exist. This publication, however, is a companion to an exhibition titled *Black/Inside* about the history of black imprisonment in the United States. The *Black/Inside* exhibition considers how a system of imprisoning Black men and women in the United States has been sustained from colonial times to the present. One of the goals of the exhibition is to feature the voices of black prisoners addressing their experience of captivity, confinement and freedom.

George Jackson, who became known as one of the Soledad Brothers, is a terrific example of a prisoner whose writing helped to illuminate the experience of incarceration for a whole generation of people across the world. He wrote that his life as a black man in America prepared him for his prison experience.

"Blackmen born in the U.S. and fortunate enough to live past the age of eighteen are conditioned to accept the inevitability of prison...Being born a slave in a captive society and never experiencing any objective basis for expectation had the effect of preparing me for the progressively traumatic misfortune that led so many blackmen to the prison gate. I was prepared for prison. It required only minor psychic adjustments."

¹ George Jackson, *Soledad Brother*
(New York, Coward McCann
& Bantam, 1970) p.1

BLACK/I

BLACK PRISONERS WRITING

01

BEHIND BARS

CONDITION

0-0-6-2-9

BLACK LIST

~~INCARCERATIONS~~

Introduction

Mariame Kaba

2

By Good Order

Ahmad Al Aswadu

4

The Pit

Alfred Hassan

6

My Cell

Angela Davis

8

A Name for Me

Malcom X

12

\$1 Million for Isolation

Assata Shakur

16

Metal Dog Bowl

Mae Mallory

24

My Strength

Martin Luther King

28

Acknowledgements

Communities

32

BLI

INS