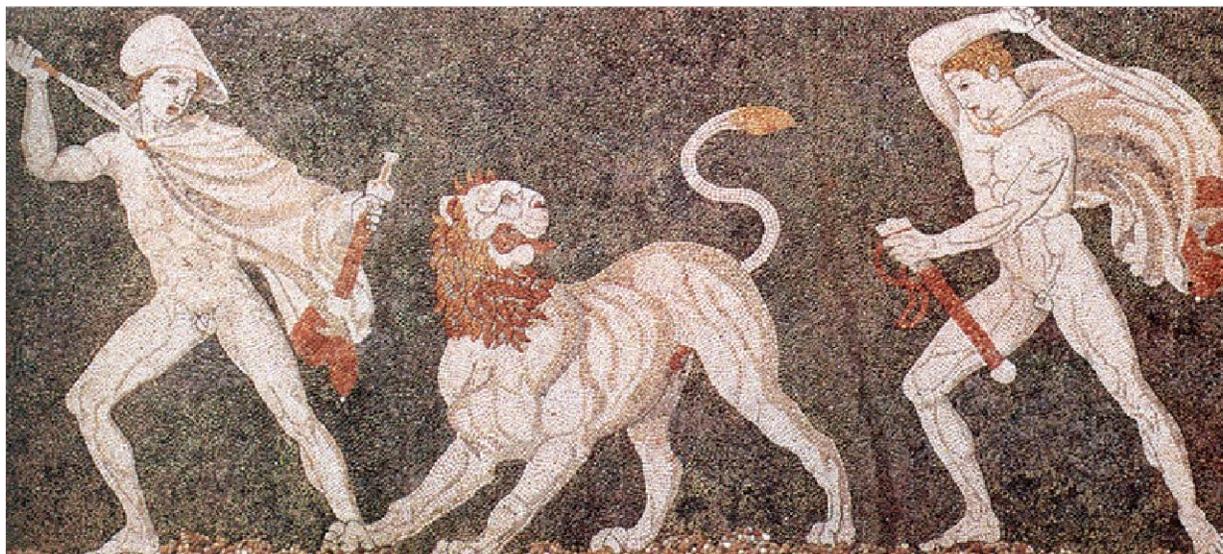


“When Lions Have Historians”: Black Political Literacy in the Carceral University

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It is well known that the prohibition of slave literacy was central to the maintenance of the plantation system in the antebellum South. Following the Stono Rebellion of 1739 and intensifying after the Nat Turner Rebellion of 1831, the planter bloc in various slaveholding states passed legislation prohibiting people to teach enslaved Africans to read and write (Genovese 1976, 1992). Adopting the voice of his enslaver, Frederick Douglass (2003) explained compulsory Black illiteracy as a strategy of plantation management:

A nigger should know nothing but to obey his master—to do as he is told to do. Learning would spoil the best nigger in the world. “Now,” said he “if you teach that nigger (speaking of myself) how to read there would be no keeping him. It would forever unfit him to be a slave. He would at once become unmanageable, and of no value to his master.” (p. 64)

According to Douglass, the planter bloc understood that a literate enslaved population could more easily enact subversive politics. They could forge passes or freedom papers, produce abolitionist propaganda, access cartographic data, and circulate insurrectionary plans. According to historian Ed Baptist, “Compulsory illiteracy was necessary to restrict access to ideas about freedom,” and thus secure reproduction of the slave system (Baptist, 2014, p. 209).

The framework of this volume—that US universities and slave plantations are enjoined by “parallel organizational and cultural norms” (Squire et al., 2018, p. 2)—obliges us to consider how the impetus for the historical prohibition on slave literacy continues to animate contemporary Black education. I argue that while formal prohibitions of Black literacy are no longer codified in law, a de facto proscription of what I am calling Black political literacy remains firmly in place. According to Damien Sojoyner (2016, p. xi), education is the “linchpin” of the US nation-state’s reactionary assault on Black social mobilization. It is a pre-emptive assault upon the very possibility of Black mobilization, an assault achieved through a series of ideological, cultural, and intellectual enclosures that often remain undetected. However, following Eli Meyerhoff (2019), I argue that education is but one among many different modes of study. There are other configurations, ethical foundations, and sites of knowledge production and transmission. These alternative modes of study can summon alternative worlds that are not so entwined with white supremacist, colonial, patriarchal, and capitalist logics.

By “Black political literacy” I mean the capacity to “read” between, beyond, and against the hegemony of the education-based mode of study and its authorized texts. I also mean the capacity to “write” alternative scripts that imagine, recover, and enact Black liberationist futures through praxis. In order to obtain this form of literacy, the subjects of study must come to see education as a site of ideological struggle rather than one of transcendental freedom and equality.

Moreover, as important as it is, formal literacy—the technical ability to read and write—is not sufficient for Black political literacy, as it commonly results in what singer Curtis Mayfield called “educated fools from uneducated schools” (Mayfield 1970).

This chapter focuses on my attempts to generate Black political literacy by introducing Black and Latinx undergraduate students enrolled in a criminal justice program to the self-directed mode of study generated via Black radical prison movements. In the first section, I elaborate the structural, ideological, and practical continuities between universities, prisons, and slave plantations. I then draw on the thought and praxis of imprisoned members of the Black Panther Party (BPP) and the Black Liberation Army (BLA) to demonstrate how the historical orientation of formalized education in prisons and universities regulates Black political literacy in an effort to maintain a manageable Black population. In the final section, I discuss my own attempts to engender Black political literacy within, against, and beyond the education-based mode of study. In particular, I focus on how I introduced my students to the concept of ideology and hegemony, and engaged them in discussions around the National Strike Against Prison Slavery of 2016, which unfolded throughout the semester. I resist the temptation to present my pedagogical practice as a success because it would play

into the seductive tendency to present education as a transcendental force for progress. At best, my efforts in the classroom helped students situate what they were learning (and what they were not) within the context of a broader political struggle over ideas about freedom. However, the fact remains that we are still ensnared within a plantation regime.

Universities and Prisons as Sites of Plantation Politics

Universities and prisons are key nodes in a contemporary plantation system. The contemporary plantation is distinct from those of the antebellum South insofar as it is not a discrete geographical terrain; rather, the neplantation is a geographically dispersed network of institutions, ideologies, and social practices that bolster racial capitalism—the prevailing political economic system in which a minority elite accumulates wealth and power at the expense of a racialized and increasingly disposable majority. While the prison and the university are both sites of labor exploitation, I argue that their primary role with regard to plantation politics is to secure a generalized condition of exploitability for those that lie beyond their (diffuse) institutional boundaries.

It is by now well established that with 2.3 million people behind bars, the United States is the world's foremost carceral state and that the targets of this massive carceral project are overwhelmingly economically poor Black people and other people of color (Alexander, 2012; Gottschalk, 2014). There is a massive corpus of literature detailing the intimate relationship between US prisons and slave plantations (Childs, 2015; A. Y. Davis, 1998; James, 2005; McKittrick, 2011). Much of this scholarship orbits around the exception in the Thirteenth Amendment to the US Constitution, which reformed chattel slavery into a potential punishment for a crime. Following the demise of radical reconstruction, the imbrication of prisons and chattel slavery ensured that formerly enslaved people remained available as unfree labor via systems of convict leasing. These systems, which in the words of Angela Y. Davis (1998, p. 75) “transferred symbolically significant numbers of Black people from the prison of slavery to the slavery of prison,” persisted throughout the first half of the twentieth century (Blackmon, 2009).

Within the walls of contemporary prisons, plantation politics are enacted via the near total subjection of captive populations to the will of the “master-state” (James, 2005). Indeed, roughly 700,000 prison captives are put to work, performing the various forms of labor required to keep prisons running (Gilmore & Kilgore, 2019; Schwartzapfel, 2016; Stein, 2017). Thousands more work for prison industries for which they produce material goods such as office furniture, equipment, and uniforms, which by law must be sold to other state institutions, including universities, via monopoly contracts (Heiner, 2015). The average remuneration for captive laborers in state prisons ranges from \$0 per hour to \$1.41 per hour, figures that are indeed tantamount to “slave wages” (Sawyer, 2017). Responding to this condition, imprisoned people have long described themselves as slaves (Berger, 2014; Jackson, 1994/1970; James, 2005; Shakur, 2001).

However, the very real conditions of labor exploitation within US prisons are often misrecognized as the prison's *raison d'être*, obscuring the broader dynamic at play. Prisons are primarily concerned neither with labor exploitation nor with generating profit for corporations. This explains why *the majority of incarcerated people do not work at all*, and why, of those who do, just over 5,000 of them work for private corporations (C. Gilmore, 2019; R. W. Gilmore, 2007; Gilmore & Kilgore, 2019). In her book *Golden Gulag*, Marxist geographer Ruth Wilson Gilmore explains that beginning in the early 1970s, California's elite class fractions mobilized prison expansion as a strategy for absorbing surplus land, labor, finance capital, and state capacity, thereby (temporarily) resolving a crisis capital overaccumulation that appeared in the post-Keynesian state (R. W. Gilmore, 2007). From this perspective, the massive expansion of human caging that exploded in the 1970s was not a conspiracy to extract slave labor from captives inside the walls (although this did take place on a

limited scale) but rather a mechanism for removing surplus populations from circulation, neutralizing their labor power, and thus for securing the conditions of generalized exploitability for workers *outside the prison walls*. Consider the fact that while 2.3 million people are currently imprisoned in the United States, at least 65 million have a criminal record and can therefore legally be excluded from various forms of work. In the words of Ruth Wilson Gilmore, this means that “half of the US labor force is documented not to work” (Gilmore & Kilgore, 2019).

Like prisons, US universities also have historical linkages and con-temporary parallels to slave plantations. As Craig Steven Wilder (2013) has shown, elite universities established during the antebellum period were constructed on stolen indigenous land using enslaved Black labor. University benefactors, many of whom amassed their wealth from the plantation economy, mobilized their economic influence to shape the production and circulation of knowledge in ways that naturalized Native genocide, Black enslavement, and white supremacy. Khalil Gibran Muhammad (2010) has shown how university-based scholars mobilized the burgeoning fields of statistics, sociology, and criminology to establish a spurious yet enduring association between Blackness and criminality as a means of legitimating Black subjugation.

The contemporary university is increasingly organized through plantation and carceral logics (Ferguson, 2012; Meyerhoff, 2019). Universities employ exploitative labor practices resulting in the generalized disposability of university staff and faculty, producing especially brutal effects for the “adjunct-majority,” some of whom have been pushed into the informal economy (Gee, 2017). Like the techniques of agricultural productivity developed on antebellum slave plantations, metrics of scholarly “productivity” are strictly enforced under the threat of punitive measures (Baptist, 2014; Ferguson, 2012). Curricular priorities authorize the circulation of particular kinds of narratives while silencing others. Universities have progressively succumbed to neoliberal regimes of management that prioritize the monetization of knowledge. They have underfunded and shuttered critical and potentially radical programs that fail to “add value” to the university’s bottom line (Giroux, 2002). University administrators are increasingly capitulating to pressure from right-wing and white supremacist organizations seeking to systematically silence leftist professors through public smear campaigns (Eltagouri, 2017; Kolowich, 2017). Campus security patrol and surveil university campuses in racially targeted ways, a point that was driven home to me in ironic fashion when, while sitting in my campus office over the winter holiday, at work on this very essay, an armed campus police officer appeared at my door and compelled me to produce identification (freedom papers?) proving that I was faculty. Had I refused I may have been detained. Had I resisted I may have been shot.

The primary commodity of the university-cum-plantation is the exploitable worker. For perhaps the majority of young people, university education does not present itself as a “choice,” or as simply one path among many leading to their ability to economically support themselves and their families. Rather, the omnipresent lash of late capitalism has rendered university education a compulsory regime. To meet the colossal financial obligations of university education, undergraduate students in the United States have collectively amassed nearly one and a half trillion dollars in student loan debt (Bloomberg, 2018). This debt is a form of unfreedom that channels its bearer, under the threat of imprisonment, toward the pursuit of “marketable” degrees that are more likely to yield financial returns, shackling them to the wage economy for the foreseeable future. This is the way of the contemporary plantation.

US Political Prisoners and the

Regulation of Black Political Literacy

As Frederick Douglass’s observation in this chapter’s introduction makes clear, the survival of the plantation system necessitated the intellectual stultification of enslaved populations. Literacy, according to Douglass would make enslaved people “unmanageable” and would divest them of the “value” so

maniacally sought by the planter bloc. But it was not simply the ability to read that was the threat, rather it was the possibility that literacy would enable new forms of insurrectionary study, strategy, planning, and action. Understanding this, Douglass and countless other enslaved people embarked upon the dangerous task of surreptitiously obtaining that which would make them unmanageable for the planter bloc.

In her *Autobiography*, written more than a century after Douglass's *Narrative*, Assata Shakur, the Black revolutionary activist and self-proclaimed "20th century escaped slave" (Shakur, 2014), explained the repressive function of formal education on Black populations in the following way:

The schools we go to are a reflection of the society that created them. Nobody is going to give you the education you need to overthrow them. Nobody is going to teach you your true history, teach you your true heroes, if they know that that knowledge will help set you free. Schools in amerika are interested in brainwashing people with amerikanism, giving them a little bit of education, and training them in skills needed to fill the positions the capitalist system requires. (Shakur, 2001, p. 181)

Shakur's analysis highlights the oft-observed fact that formal education takes place within a broader context of political struggle. For Shakur, the function of education is not to liberate but rather to produce subjects that are available for exploitation. As such, certain formations of knowledge, particularly Black political literacies, which seeks to maintain connections between Black pupils and their intellectual and political inheritances, is seen as inherently threatening to the manageability and value of Black populations.

Shakur's evolution as an activist while enrolled in Manhattan Community College during the late 1960s is illustrative of how university education alone is not sufficient for the development of Black political literacy. Shakur supplemented her formal education by joining a student organization called the Golden Drums, which sought to infuse the university with knowledge "to help us free our people" (2001, p. 186). Like other formations in the burgeoning student movement on the 1960s, the Golden Drums asserted demands for a Black studies program and for more Black faculty on campus. They invited members from radical organizations such as the Young Lords and the Black Panthers to speak and they also launched a program to teach reading, writing, math, and Black history to young children. This campus activism developed in dialogue with community-based movements beyond the campus. Golden Drum members also belonged to a variety of Black organizations, such as the Nation of Islam, the Organization of Afro-American Unity, and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. Campus activism taught Shakur (2001) that "theory without practice is just as incomplete as practice without theory. The two have to go together. I was determined to do both" (p. 180). While still a student at Manhattan Community College, she joined the Black Panther Party.

Shakur's aboveground and underground activities with the BPP and later with the clandestine BLA ranged from administering the Free Breakfast for Children program to engaging in expropriations and armed struggle. These activities brought Shakur in direct confrontation with the forces of organized state violence, including FBI counterintelligence programs (COINTELPROs), often-illegal US government initiatives designed to "expose, disrupt, misdirect, discredit, or otherwise neutralize" Black radical organizations, and the BPP in particular (Churchill & Vander Wall, 2002b, p. 92). One of the imperatives of these COINTELPROs was to "prevent the long-range growth of militant black nationalist organizations, especially among youth" (p. 111). In other words, in the late 1960s, the forces of organized state violence became increasingly preoccupied not only with "neutralizing" extant revolutionary activists such as Assata Shakur but also with impeding the generational transmission of Black radical knowledge formations, thereby stunting the development of future activists. This is why the FBI also launched COINTELPROs against Black-owned bookstores and Black writers, and placed

spies in university Black student unions throughout the United States (Churchill & Vander Wall, 2002a; Corson, 1970; J. C. Davis, 2018).

Shakur and her comrade Sundiata Acoli were arrested on May 3, 1973, following a shootout with New Jersey state troopers, which resulted in the deaths of Zayd Malik Shakur, another BPP/BLA member, and Werner Foerster, a trooper. Death and imprisonment were two of the government's primary modes of "neutralization," and yet imprisonment failed to contain the dissemination of Black political literacy. Instead, imprisoned intellectuals in the 1970s, like the insurgent enslaved Africans of the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries, formed illicit study groups in which they continued to disseminate Black political literacy, thereby advancing broader efforts to achieve liberation within and beyond the prison. As Sundiata Acoli explained, "The jails are Universities of the Revolutionaries and the finishing schools of the Black Liberation Army. Come, brothers and sisters, meet Assata Shakur. She is here holding seminars in 'Getting Down,' 'Taming the Paper Tiger,' and 'The Selected Works of Zayd Malik Shakur.' So brothers and sisters do not fear jail. Many of you will go anyway—ignorance will be your crime. Others will come—awareness their only crime" (1973, p. 6). Taken together, Shakur and Acoli's reflections invert the dominant narratives about schools and prisons. They present the school—ostensibly a site of freedom, upward mobility, and transcendence—as a space of ideological incarceration and intellectual repression, while offering the prison—a space of overt repression, bodily captivity, and generalized dishonor—as the privileged site of intellectual and political development. In this way, they saw schools as more effective than the prisons in regulating Black political literacy. The repressive function of schools was more effectively mystified via discourses of transcendence, while the explicitly dehumanizing rituals of prisons acted as an accelerant to the captives' struggle to obtain Black political literacy through the unsanctioned archives of Black liberationist praxis (Rodríguez, 2006, 2010). Aided by the pedagogy of state repression, captive populations were compelled to analyze the material conditions of Black unfreedom and develop diverse methodologies of collective resistance. The forms of Black political literacy that circulated within prisons in the 1970s gave rise to forms of political rebellion that heralded the possibility of the prison's abolition. One national study identified 5 prison riots in 1967, 15 in 1968, 27 in 1970, 37 in 1971, and 48 in 1972 (Useem & Kimball, 1991), indicating an intensifying crisis of unmanageability among captive populations.

Assata Shakur escaped from prison in 1979. However, imprisoned intellectuals such as Acoli and Jalil Muntaqim, also a former BPP/BLA member, remain in prison after decades. Muntaqim has been in prison for more than 45 years and has been denied parole eleven times (Gross, 2019). In their most recent decision denying his parole, the New York State Parole Board claimed that Muntaqim's release "would be incompatible with the welfare of society," despite citing no evidence that the elderly teacher is a social threat.¹

Although the FBI officially discontinued COINTELPRO operations in 1974, the forces of organized state violence continue to prioritize containing the spread of Black political literacy. In December 2016, Muntaqim was punished for teaching an administratively sanctioned Black history class in Attica, the New York State prison made famous by a massive rebellion in 1971. Muntaqim's lecture focused on the organization and ethics of the Black Panther Party, including its 10-Point Program, Codes of Conduct, and Eight Points of Attention. At one point during the lesson, which was video recorded, Muntaqim stated that the Bloods gang "could be the biggest army across this country if they were to organize themselves."² For this, Attica's administration charged Jalil with disciplinary violations, including "an inmate shall not engage in or encourage others in gang activities," "an inmate shall not engage in any violent conduct," and "an inmate shall not lead, organize, participate, or urge other inmates to participate, in a work-stoppage, sit-in, lock-in or other actions which may be detrimental to the order of facility."³ Jalil was transferred to the supermax prison Southport Correctional Facility, where he was held in solitary confinement for nearly four months despite the fact

that the United Nations, the Center for Constitutional Rights, and other agencies consider solitary confinement a form of torture (Boyd, 2018).

Muntaqim filed a lawsuit against the New York State Department of Corrections and Community Supervision in which it was argued that he had been unjustly punished for teaching a legitimate history lesson. The judges of the New York Supreme Court agreed, writing in their opinion, “A review of the videotape of the class clearly reveals that petitioner made the statements at issue while discussing African-American organizations from a historical, cultural and political perspective and that such statements were consistent with the approved subject matter of the class.” They continued, “[The] petitioner engaged in a detailed discussion of various historical events during the 11/2-hour class and recited facts regarding these organizations that he thought were relevant in an effort to engage the class participants.”⁴ The very conveyance of particular facts within the institutional context of the prison was enough to be interpreted as a threat to the manageability and value of the captive population and thus the order of the prison itself.

“When Lions Have Historians”

Whereas the naked repression of prison captivity, like that of the slave plantation, facilitates incarcerated peoples’ recognition of themselves as unfree and activates their desire to obtain illicit knowledge, the university effectively mystifies its role as an instrument of domination. The university presents itself as a pristine site of “freedom,” “opportunity,” “diversity,” and “upward mobility.” This mystification is one of the chief reasons the university is so effective at maintaining the contemporary plantation system. “The university is not grounded into the needs of any community in struggle,” opines Joy James, a philosopher of race, democracy, slavery, and incarceration. While organizing a conference on US political prisoners at Brown University, James encountered several subtle and overt obstacles: “I found that if you treated the history of liberation movements not as an abstraction, but as a living testimony to the will and desire of people to be freed from repression but also to not succumb to state terror and that would include, to quote Malcolm ‘by any means necessary,’ that in fact was a taboo” (Steele, 2019). As the conference came together, James was called into office of the president and told that she could study and write about whatever she wanted but that her “advocacy” needed to stop. As it relates to Black political struggle, merely to pursue certain lines of inquiry is seen as synonymous with advocacy. James refers to this as a “prohibition on critical thinking” (Steele, 2019). I call it compulsory political illiteracy.

In the fall of 2016, while still completing my dissertation in social anthropology, I began teaching in a criminal justice program. My dissertation traced a tradition revolutionary Black organizing within New York State prisons from 1970 to the present. It also examined how, in response to a series of rebellions in the 1970s, prison authorities innovated new penal techniques as a means of maintaining order. I had been hard at work developing a methodological approach, a mode of study, and a narrative style that challenged criminological common sense. In fact, a core part of my argument was that discourses of “criminal justice” and “law enforcement”—even in their progressive, reform-oriented iterations—obscure the essential function of the criminal legal system as an instrument of domestic warfare. I approached my role as a criminal justice professor as a way to promote Black political literacy by destabilizing hegemonic criminological ways of seeing and by introducing my students to alternative sources of knowledge production, particularly the Black radical thought emanating from the prison itself.

I knew that teaching in a standard criminal justice program would be difficult. While universities do not employ violence to police political discourse in the same way that prisons do, universities are not the pristine spaces of intellectual freedom many believe them to be. Few disciplines

reveal the university's deep "structural complicities" with the armed apparatus of the state and its plantation legacies more clearly than university criminology programs (Schept et al., 2015). The discipline of criminology proliferated in tandem with the FBI's counterintelligence operations. In 1968, as part of the "war on crime," the federal government established the Law Enforcement Assistance Administration (LEAA) a federal funding agency tasked with enhancing the state's repressive and seductive capacity. Through its repressive side, the LEAA supplied new weapons, surveillance technologies, training, and technical expertise to local and state law police, courts, and prison systems throughout the country (Murakawa, 2014). Through its seductive side it distributed millions of dollars so that universities could establish criminology programs and more effectively circulate law-enforcement ideology throughout the population. It also funded the implementation, by police agencies, of "diversity and inclusion" initiatives seeking to enlist greater numbers of Black police officers and prison guards (Center for Research on Criminal Justice, 1977; Forman, 2017). These and other efforts were an attempt to pacify restive Black populations by channeling Black protest into avenues that preserved the stability of the contemporary plantation system (Schept et al., 2015). This process typifies education's role in what Sojoyner (2016) calls "strategic incorporation," through which "radical social movements and actions pertaining to communal, educational, and gendered marginalization [are] willingly or forcefully subsumed into the state process" (p. xv).

During my first week on the job it became immediately apparent that my students were learning a very narrow, state-sanctioned version of the function of "criminal justice" in society, and that they were being actively groomed for positions as enforcers of the contemporary plantation system. They were learning contested concepts as though they were value-free, naturally occurring phenomena. As one example among many, virtually all of my students had been taught in a previous class that the "broken windows theory," the right-wing doctrine that serves as the frail intellectual justification for racist policing practices across the world (Parenti, 1999), was an effective public safety strategy.

Yet throughout the year, my students, who were overwhelmingly Black and Latinx, revealed that they were not the uncritical automatons they were being trained to be. Many of them expressed deep resentment toward law enforcement based on personal experience. A formerly incarcerated Black male student regularly spoke in class about the "dehumanization" and "abuse" he experienced while confined in a local jail. Two Black female students shared separate experiences of being harassed and neglected by police during the course of their response to an alleged crime committed by someone else. Several first- and second-generation immigrant students were pursuing degrees while in the midst of maddening struggles with the bureaucracy of US Immigration and Customs Enforcement. Yet despite these experiences, they aspired to become police and parole officers, court clerks, and homeland security analysts, because few other degrees held out the promise of gainful employment in this severe employment landscape. The structural conditions of the contemporary plantation complex are so constrained that they aspired to become functionaries in the very system that oppresses them.

At the top of my syllabus for my survey course on criminological thought, I included an oft-cited African Proverb: "Only when lions have historians will hunters cease being heroes." During the customary review of the syllabus on our first meeting, I asked students what they thought this proverb meant. My question was met with total silence. I could see from the looks on their faces that the students were thinking, but no one ventured an answer. I tried to prompt them further by rephrasing the question. "If you're a hunter and you go out and kill a lion and bring it home to feed your family, what story do you tell them about the hunt over dinner?" I asked.

"You gonna talk about how big and scary the lion was and how brave you were," came the voice of a young man with long dreadlocks sitting in the back of the class.

"Right," I replied, relieved that we were getting somewhere. Pushing further, I added, "Now if those same lions were able to tell their own stories, how might their version be different?"

Shana, a visibly pregnant student in the front of the class matter-of-factly said, “We was in our house minding our own business when a man with a gun broke into our house and killed Simba.” The whole class broke out into laughter at her reference to the Lion King.

“Exactly,” I said as the laughter subsided. “So, what is this proverb about?”

“There’s different sides to every story,” Shana replied.

Confident that they understood, I explained that much of what they were going to learn from me would contradict what they were learning in their other classes. I explained that this is because I teach based on a theory of history that privileges the hunted rather than the hunter. I displayed the proverb on at the beginning of each subsequent lecture. It turned out to be a very effective framing device, even a mantra of sorts. Over the course of the semester, it was not uncommon for students to express dismay and incredulity at never having learned a particular historical fact, only to have one of their classmates respond by reciting some version of the proverb.

Early in the semester, I added analytical heft to the proverb by introducing students to the Marxist concepts of ideology and hegemony. Many were familiar with ideology and knew that it had something to do with deeply held ideas and belief systems. One student had discussed it in her class on counterterrorism and understood it essentially as a distortion of Truth and a catalyst for violent extremism against the Western world.

I pointed out that the students were correct in recognizing that ideology was largely about ideas, but that everyone, ourselves included, inhabited and reproduced an ideology. We collectively analyzed Stuart Hall’s (1996) useful conceptualization, which defines ideology as “the mental frameworks—the languages, the concepts, categories, imagery of thought, and the system of representation—which different classes and social groups deploy in order to make sense of, define, figure out and render intelligible the way society works” (p. 26). Hall’s definition reveals a critical and underacknowledged aspect of ideology, namely that “different classes and social groups deploy” it, often to achieve particular political objectives. In other words, ideology is a terrain of struggle. I explained that ideology was less a set of beliefs than a set of assumptions that structure what and how one believes. We discussed the ways in which “language” and “systems of representation” served as the foundation for ideas—they made certain ideas possible, while obscuring alternative possibilities. I told them that standard criminology provided a particular language for describing and making sense of the world, but that it wasn’t the only one.

I facilitated an activity designed to illustrate the importance of language and representation as a key domain of struggle. I asked students to collectively do word associations with a set of images I displayed on the board. The first image depicted a Black man with cornrows wearing an orange jumpsuit peering ominously at the camera through prison bars. I asked them to call out as many different terms as they could think of to describe the image. The first three words were rattled off immediately: “prisoner,” “convict,” and “criminal.” I wrote them on the on the board, disheartened but not surprised at the extent to which these working-class students of color had so thoroughly internalized the punitive and racialized language of the state. I asked them to keep going, provoking them to “think outside the box.”

“Detainee, gangsta, thug,” they continued hesitantly.

Then one student, visibly thinking, intoned, “Wait, just because he’s in prison and he has cornrows doesn’t mean he’s a thug. Maybe he’s innocent.” A few students nodded in agreement. I wrote “innocent” on the board with a question mark. (This observation was, of course, correct. People languish in prisons and jails for crimes they did not commit. But there are also people who commit heinous acts yet continue to live in the free world, because those acts are not labeled criminal. Consider that no one was convicted of crimes stemming from the 2010 BP oil spill despite the fact that 11 workers died, and millions of gallons of oil poured into the Gulf of Mexico, causing catastrophic damage to the natural environment, public health, and the local economy. By interpreting the image

as depicting either the “criminal” subject deserving of punishment or the “innocent” subject deserving of rights, we remain ensnared within the language of criminological hegemony and affirm the authority of the racial-capitalist state’s hierarchical ordering of the body politic.) Finally, Carl, the student who earlier disclosed that he spent time in jail, made the comment that challenged hegemonic language. Shaking his head at where the discussion was going, he said, “It really don’t matter whether he did it or not. He’s still a human being.”

I wrote “human being” on the board.

“Yeah, my uncle is locked up,” someone else said. I wrote “uncle” on the board. I asked how many of them had family members that were currently or formerly incarcerated. The majority of the class, including myself, raised our hands. These were people we loved and had close bonds with. We discussed why it was that despite so many of us having incarcerated family members, when we see images like this, we use language that negates peoples’ humanity. They had no answers.

We segued into a discussion of “hegemony,” which we defined as a period in which a particular group has achieved ideological dominance (Hall et al., 1978). I explained that we construct the world using the language that is available to us, and that the language we use appears natural but is actually the outcome of struggle. We examined this point by reading “An Open Letter to Our Friends on the Question of Language,” commonly referred to as the “Language Letter,” written by Eddie Ellis, a former Black Panther. Ellis wrote the letter in the early 1990s after spending 25 years in New York State prisons. “We habitually underestimate the power of language,” Ellis writes. He demands a shift away from criminological terms that are “devoid of humanness” and toward terms that “simply refer to us a PEOPLE. People currently or formerly incarcerated, PEOPLE on parole, PEOPLE recently released from prison, PEOPLE in prison, PEOPLE with criminal convictions, but PEOPLE” (Ellis, n.d.).

The letter, circulated widely within universities, think tanks, and prisons, was a key impetus behind the widespread replacement of terms such as “ex-convict” with the term “formerly incarcerated person,” as is commonly used today. The students appreciated the letter and began to make connections between language, hegemony, and social action. Yet everyone was not impressed. Shana, the pregnant student in the front of the class, made an important point: “This doesn’t matter. Regardless of what we call him, he’s still locked up. This is stupid,” she said.

While I disagreed with Shana’s assertion that language didn’t matter, the substance of her critique—that my efforts to destabilize hegemonic criminological language did not change the fact that millions of people remain “locked up”—was absolutely correct. Shana’s comment was in fact a proto-abolitionist framing of the problem that implied that the goal of education should not be to change people’s minds but, more radically, to change material conditions. By calling the exercise “stupid,” she called attention to the structural limitations of my classroom-based pedagogical practice, which, while purportedly radical, remained confined within the boundaries of the university. She called out the essential contradiction of my attempts to cultivate Black political literacy without connecting concepts we were learning about to concrete movements emerging beyond the university.

The semester coincided with the launch of nationally coordinated strikes within US prisons, which provided an opportunity for me to further clarify the notions of history, power, language, and hegemony that were central to the course. Initiated by the Free Alabama Movement (FAM), an organization of incarcerated activists in the Alabama and Mississippi State prison systems, the National Strike Against Prison Slavery was an effort to “finally end slavery in 2016” (Free Alabama Movement, 2016).

FAM organized the strike to start on September 9 in order to coincide with the 45th anniversary of the Attica prison rebellion. On that day in 1971, a Black-led, multiracial coalition of nearly 1,300 state captives seized control of New York’s Attica Prison and articulated a series of demands for basic human rights. Because of the brutal siege that brought the rebellion to an end, Attica is most commonly remembered as an exemplary case of state repression (Burton, 2017). Yet for FAM, Attica and the

numerous prison uprisings of the era represented a historical moment in which “people were standing up, fighting and taking ownership of their lives and bodies back from the plantation prisons” (Free Alabama Movement, 2016).

One of FAM’s key objectives for the strike was to illuminate the ways in those of us who reside in the “free world” are ensnared within the same plantation and carceral logics as those within the prisons:

Our protest against prison slavery is a protest against the school to prison pipeline, a protest against police terror, a protest against post-release controls. When we abolish slavery, they’ll lose much of their incentive to lock up our children, they’ll stop building traps to pull back those who they’ve released.

When we remove the economic motive and grease of our forced labor from the US prison system, the entire structure of courts and police, of control and slave-catching must shift to accommodate us as humans, rather than slaves. (Free Alabama Movement, 2016)

FAM’s protest was not focused on the 2.3 million people currently incarcerated. It broadly targeted carceral practices within the public education system, policing practices in Black communities, and distended forms of carceral supervision. It targeted a broader plantation system that treated economically poor people of color as subjects of domination. FAM’s discourse places a heavy emphasis on “forced labor [in] the US prison system,” playing into the dominant leftist misinterpretation of the prison as primarily a site of profit generation through labor exploitation. However, the fact that labor exploitation is not a major driver of mass criminalization and human caging does not detract from the fact that labor exploitation does take place and that such exploitation is experienced as slavery. It is also worth noting that the strike originated in Alabama, Mississippi, Texas, and Florida, states that employ some of the most draconian and exploitative prison labor practices. Moreover, in recognition of the unevenness of carceral labor practices throughout the country, the second round of national prison strikes, which emerged in 2018, deemphasized the role of labor exploitation in prison.

In the word-association exercise, I encouraged my students to think critically about how state-sanctioned language shapes our perception of reality. Now, using the literature of the national prison strike, I was able to expose them to the power of self-organization and to the notion that the university is simply one among many spaces of study and learning. To contextualize the connection between the prison and putatively past forms of racial slavery articulated by FAM, our class read and discussed Angela Y. Davis’s essay “From the Prison of Slavery to the Slavery of Prison: Frederick Douglass and the Convict Lease System,” which explains how the ultimate demise of reconstruction in 1877 was accompanied by the proliferation of “Black codes,” legitimizing the generalized policing, criminalization, and incarceration of Black existence. We discussed how prisons perform ideological work on the captured and “free” alike, particularly in the way that they, in Davis’s words, “relieve us of the responsibility of seriously engaging with the problems of our society, especially those produced by racism and, increasingly, global capitalism” (A. Y. Davis, 1998, p. 16).

As part of the national prison strike of 2016, captive men and women caused “disturbances” in as many as 50 prisons in Florida, Michigan, Alabama, Texas, California, and elsewhere. They led labor strikes, hunger strikes, acts of civil disobedience, and rebellions. Administrative reprisals were swift and severe. Although we will likely never know the full extent of these reprisals, we do know that organizers were tortured through solitary confinement and that affected facilities were placed on “lockdown” and captives confined to cages 24-7.

The strike did not achieve its ultimate objective of decisively abolishing slavery, yet it succeeded in educating the broader public about the “present tense” of this putatively bygone form of racial domination (Rodríguez, 2006). By bringing the pedagogy of this movement into a criminal

justice classroom, and by taking it seriously as intellectual labor, I was able to destabilize the university's hegemony over the concept of "education." By studying this movement—its historical development and demands, and the repression its leaders faced—my students were able to apprehend the existence of an alternative modes of study that now appeared as conspicuously absent from their formal education. By providing them with the tools to understand the central role of ideology and hegemony in contemporary political struggle, and by showing them that unbroken traditions of struggle are taking place around them, I invited them to cultivate the Black political literacy necessary to "read" and "write" this living archive.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have shown how universities and prisons enact plantation politics insofar as both institutional formations are centrally concerned with the production of exploitable subjects for capitalism. One of the chief means by which this is achieved is by regulating Black political literacy, that is, by ensuring that deep histories and contemporary resonances of Black radical struggle and self-emancipation are not comprehensively engaged with. However, by making these claims, I am not asserting that the contemporary university should be abandoned as a site of political struggle. Rather, I am suggesting that, as a small but important political act, university educators who aspire to achieve progressive, transformative, and/or liberatory social justice objectives should work within and against education by helping their students recognize that by virtue of their status as students, they are immersed in an ongoing ideological and political struggle and that they should not treat their formal classroom education as their sole or even their primary source of knowledge acquisition. I also suggest that university educators strive to expose their students to alternative modes of study and organization that exceed the university. Such an orientation will provide students with a repertoire of effective strategies for how one might work "within and against" the forms of surveillance, control, and punishment that keep the contemporary plantation system alive.

Notes

1. The Plaid Dragon Collective. (n.d.). NYS Parole Board's 2016 Decision. Retrieved July 18, 2020. <http://freejalil.com/2016decision.html>
2. Anthony Bottom v. Anthony J. Annucci (2018), WL 2139105 Supreme Court Appellate Division, Third Department, New York.
3. "Official Compilation of Codes, Rules and Regulations of the State of New York Title 7. Department of Corrections and Community Supervision Chapter V. Procedures for Implementing Standards of Inmate Behavior and for Granting Good Behavior Time Allowances Subchapter C. Standards of Inmate Behavior in All Facilities Part 270. Standards of Inmate Behavior—Behavior Prohibited in All Facilities and the Classification of Each Infraction." 7 Nycrr 270.2[B].
4. Anthony Bottom v. Anthony J. Annucci (2018), WL 2139105 Supreme Court Appellate Division, Third Department, New York.

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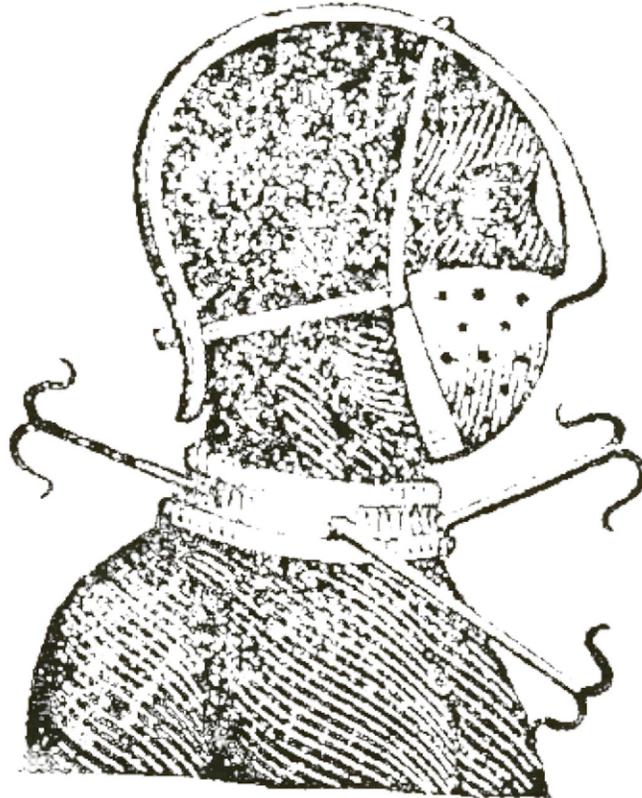
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**HISTORY
IS OFTEN
PAINTED
PRETTIER**

(THEN IT WAS)

