



# “Walls Turned Sideways are Bridges”: Carceral Scripts and the Transformation of the Prison Space

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## Abstract

This essay explores the ways prisoners use writing to re-make and reimagine their relationship to carceral space. Focusing on the writings of politically progressive prisoner writings or *carceral script* in the post-Civil Rights era, I contend that these prisoners used their relationship to landscapes of punishment and confinement to develop critical perspectives about space. They also created alternative sites within prison that enabled them to counter the banishing geography of incarceration and to remake its punitive spatiality. Thus, writing becomes a portal to a different place; it is a means of resisting. This study reveals how space is linked to struggles for social justice within prison.

“Walls turned sideways are bridges.”<sup>2</sup>

Angela Y. Davis  
*An Autobiography*



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<sup>2</sup> Angela Yvonne Davis, *Angela Davis: An Autobiography* (New York: Random House, 1974), 347

“Writing is my way of sledge-hammering these walls.”<sup>3</sup>

Alejo Dao’ud Rodriguez

“Through language I was free.”<sup>4</sup>

Jimmy Santiago Baca

“Coming into Language”

“Penal institutions, despite, if not because of their function as part of the state’s coercive apparatus of physical detention..., provide the *critical space*, within which, indeed, from out of which, alternative social and political practices are schooled.”<sup>5</sup>

Barbara Harlow

*Barred*

Prisoners are architects. They lack the ability to physically transform the world around them. Nevertheless, prisoners alter the space of prison. They do this through transcending the bars and repurposing prison space. One of the major ways they do this is through writing. Despite being caged, prisoners write. They write to connect with others, to be part of a community beyond the walls of prison. This writing, however, does more than convey information about friends and loved ones. Writing from prison is also a *spatial act*. When women and men in prison sit to compose a letter they use the place that confines them, the place that keeps them away from their community, as the tool—what Davis called a “bridge”—to connect with others. Because prisons function as places of isolation prisoners create spaces (“critical spaces”) within institutions to subvert isolation. These subversions are not uniform; they take several forms. But there is a common theme: prisoners’ subversions repurpose the prison. By repurpose, I mean, prisoners use prisons’ landscape of punishment and containment as a means to connect with family and friends or to do political organizing. This is particularly the case with writers. The space writers from prison create makes it possible for them to reimagine the prison landscape. These spaces do what the hands cannot. They change the geography of the prison and at times it transports prisoners out of the spaces that hold them.

This essay explores the ways prisoners create *counter-carceral* (counter-prison) spaces. I focus on how prisoners do this via writing from prison because prisoners talk about how the epistolary space changes their relationship to the prison. Prisoners’ writings work against the carceral spatial practice of containment, surveillance and isolation that the geography of prison engenders. I

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<sup>3</sup> Bell Gale Chevigny, ed. *Doing time: 25 years of prison writing* (New York: Arcade Pub., (1999), xiii.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> Harlow, *Barred: Women, Writing and Political Detention* (Hanover: Wesleyan University Press, 1998).

argue that this kind of writing gave rise to what I term *imaginative spatialities*—ways prisoners reimagine the geography of prison and create new maps by repurposing the geography of the prison.<sup>6</sup> Rather than isolation or confinement, sites of epistolary production allow prisoners to transform, repurpose and reimagine their relationship to containment.

This essay is principally concerned with how politically progressive prisoners in the United States create imaginative spaces within prisons via their own writing, thereby re-imagining carceral space. I use the term ‘politically progressive’ to reference prisoners, like Angela Y. Davis, Mumia Abu-Jamal, and Jimmy Santiago Baca who were involved in, inspired by, or influenced by left or progressive politics. I focus on politically progressive prisoners in the U.S. because they have been the most outspoken about the conditions they lived in while incarcerated. Moreover, because of the rapid explosion of incarceration in the United States, politically progressive prison writing represents a unique site to explore the ways in which carceral power is exercised and to illuminate its impact.

### **Placing Carceral Script**

What is carceral script? In short, it’s many things. I use the term to work through the spatial production of writing from prison. It helps me make sense of how the geography of prison impacts writing. Because of the confinement they are confronted with (which I will address in more detail below), writers in prison use writing as a tool to work against the constraints and isolation of incarceration. Sometimes they do this by simply connecting with family and friends through letters. In other cases, they use writing to protest conditions (Folsom prisoners manifesto and the Attica manifesto, for example). This paper looks at a third way incarcerated people use writing—to remake and reimagine the prison. I also use the term carceral script to recognize its imbedded protest quality. From Attica to the North Carolina prisoner’s labor union, prisoners use writing to challenge prison policy as well as to advocate for themselves and others. Lastly, I use the term to illuminate that writings from prison are not isolated pieces of individual work: prisoners write for themselves and others. For example, Mumia Abu-Jamal in addition to being a published author is also a “jailhouse lawyer.” Abu-Jamal writes legal briefs for the prisoners he represents. Given that literature is a term that references the individual’s production, Abu-Jamal’s written work serves a political propose in the way that a scribe—someone who writes for others—does.

The geography of prison is what gives carceral script its form and function. Prison geography and architecture are oppressive, imposing and isolating. Most

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<sup>6</sup> Imaginative spatialities is different from Drivers (1999) term “imaginative geographies.” Whereas Driver uses the term to reference the way in which space and place inform or structure peoples understanding of the world and their actions, *imaginative spatialities* references the way prisoners repurpose and remake space through the using the imagination. See, Philip Crang paul Cloke, Mark Goodwin, ed. *Introducing Human Geographies* (New York: Routledge, 2013).

prisons are located far away from major cities from which the majority of their inhabitants hail. Geographers (Sibley and van Hoven 2009) and historians (Garland 1995; Rothman 1971) of prison have all emphasized that the lack of personal space, tight quarters, architectures of confinement and ubiquitous surveillance are a key elements of its punitive practice. This is a kind of “frontier architecture” (Weizman 2007: 1), created not only with the purpose of keeping people in, but also keeping people out. Tall walls equipped with razor wire, armed guards, surveillance towers, monitoring equipment and six foot by nine-foot cells characterize the geography of prison, what Fyodor Dostoyevsky (1961) termed the “house of the dead.” This architecture, these spaces of authority are constructed so that everything points inward: guns, walls, bars, and the ubiquitous eye of the guards.

Built in America’s rural towns, prison locations often prohibit prisoners’ family and friends from visiting. The violent “netherworld” of prison to use Mumia Abu-Jamal’s formulation (1995:53) creates what Mecke Nagel (2008) calls a diaspora, which pulls people from around the state and dislocates, and disconnects many prisoners from their communities, effectively banishing them to archipelagic sites cut off from the rest of the world. In California, for example, the overwhelming majority of state prisons are located in the central valley along the spine of the state, also known as “prison alley.” It’s hundreds of miles away from urban centers, like the Bay Area and Los Angeles, from which the majority of the state’s prisoners come.

Through containment and isolation, carceral regimes create disciplined and docile subjects. Foucault (1976) argued that part of the prisons’ regime of punishment was not merely to contain people but also to create subjects. The prison is an important apparatus within the larger disciplinary society that enhances and maintains the exercise of power. Carceral script is framed by this regime, because it is created within it. Epistolary sites within prisons have enabled some prisoners to develop critical perspectives about their environment. Prisoner’s acute relationship with punishment through containment, surveillance and discipline in turn produces knowledge of the workings of carceral power. For example, elsewhere I’ve written about the ways some Black prisoners have used the “critical space” (1992) of the prison to theorize the migration of prison techniques and tactics into the quotidian lives of poor Blacks (Shabazz, 2009). This is most acute in Chicago’s housing projects where the architecture and spatial order of the buildings enables for prison techniques—surveillance cameras, police, bars, turnstiles, identification badges and even biometric scanners—to be used on residents (Shabazz 2009; See also Browne 2009). Drawing on that work, I demonstrate here that the space prisoners developed to think and write was an alternative space, a counter-carceral geography where prisoners augmented and transformed the spaces of captivity.

The oppressive geographic regime that informs carceral script also plays a central role in its politics. This is evidenced in the emergence of the prison as an

important site in the fostering of progressive and radical social and political analyses in the post Civil-Rights period (James 2005). Throughout much of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, writings that emerged from sites of confinement opposed the status quo, shifting to the political left. Scholars fascinated by this coined the term “prison literature” (Franklin 1978) and attempted to make it into a coherent academic genera, giving it a history and elevating particular figures (Miller 2005). Franklin contends that “personal narratives of the lives of criminals”—the “confessional”—was one of the first forms of American popular literature (Franklin, 1978: 124, 127). In making the argument that writings from prisoners are important sites of scholarly interrogation, Franklin wants to apply the same canonical logic that has been applied to other bodies of literature—Black literature, post-colonial literature, for instance—in an attempt to situate the writings of prisoners within the Western literary cannon. In doing this, Franklin also highlights that prisons (or carceral spaces in general) can and were important sites for radical learning and knowledge production; turning the idea that the university is the only site of knowledge production on its head (Franklin 1978). Theorist Dylan Rodriguez is critical of the idea that prison writing is a coherent scholarly genre. He writes that “the cultural fabrication of “prison writing” as a literary genre is...a discursive gesture toward order and coherence, where, for the writer, there is generally neither” (Rodriguez 2006: 85). I’m swayed by Dylan Rodriguez’s critique of making the writings of prisoners into a literary genre that for scholars is recognizable, cohesive and works within established academic forms. He is correct in his analysis that carceral script opposes such canonization. Therefore, my use of Franklin’s analysis is limited to his genealogy of “prison literature.” I find this element of his work compelling because his insights contextualize my reading of carceral script.

### **Politically Progressive Carceral Script**

Writing from confinement is not new. In fact, the slave narrative was North America’s first literary genre (Franklin 1978: 3). Throughout the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, prisoners, artists, and political radicals like Jack London, Margaret Sanger, Ethel Rosenberg, Alexander Bergman, Emma Goldman, Kate Richards O’Hara, and even the great Trinidadian Marxist, C.L.R. James (who wrote much of the *Black Jacobins* while being detained at Ellis Island) found ways to get their prose out of sites of confinement (Franklin 1978; Scheffler 1986; Christianson 2002; James 2003). Like much of the politically progressive carceral script, these prose emerged against the backdrop of struggles for social justice. Between World War I and World War II, socialists, communists, anti-racists, and anti-fascist movements challenged the legitimacy of the War, white supremacy, patriarchy, and pushed to make socialism part of the American political canon. The prose of incarcerated radicals was given a platform by the activism of political radicals, and organizations such as the Communist Party worked to make the writings of imprisoned activists available to the public (Scheffler 1986; Christianson 2002). As the century wore on, however, prison became a first response to social

problems. And because Black people were the focus of this new regime of state punishment, the imprisoned writings of the 1960's and 1970's were primarily the prose of Black prisoners. Most notable were Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s letter from the Birmingham Jail and Malcolm X's autobiography, which inspired the work of people like Assata Shakur and George Jackson.

The prose that emerged out of American prisons in the 1970's was insightful, politically charged and poetic. It fed a growing political movement that questioned the legitimacy and usefulness of prisons. "The prison didn't come to exist where it does just by happenstance", argued George Jackson (Jackson 1994: 18). As the population of prisoners increased—especially in states like Illinois, California, and New York—the words of prisoners provided a window into their worlds. Prison presses emerged to take on the task of publishing these writings, and organizations like PEN America worked with prisoners to anthologize their work (Chevigny 1999).

All this changed as the 1970's drew to a close. The end of the Carter administration and the rise of the Reagan regime affected the publication of prisoners' writings. Reagan shrank government programs, taking funding away from organizations that worked with prisoners. According to Franklin, "creative writing courses were defunded" and "by 1984, every literary journal devoted to publishing poetry and stories by prisoners was wiped out", muting a voice that articulated the racist and class-based nature of American prisons (Franklin 1978: 14). Even as the politics of "tough on crime" became a trope in politics and state prisons burst at the seams, fewer avenues for hearing from prisoners existed.

As a result, for more than a decade, very little writing from prisoners reached the public. This started to change in 1994, when Random House published Mumia Abu-Jamal's *Live From Death Row*. This publication is at the forefront of what Franklin termed a "literary renaissance" in carceral script. Nevertheless, also in 1994 Congress de-funded prisoner education by making prisoners ineligible to receive Pell grants. Pell grants are federally backed grants that enable college students who do not have the economic means of paying for school to complete their education. High on punishment, Congress removed the stipulation that allowed prisoners to use the grants (Zham 1999).

This disinvestment in prisoner education was especially shortsighted; numerous studies have shown that education dramatically reduced recidivism. Journalist and former prisoner John Marc Taylor's insightful essay about the de-funding of Pell grants cites a widely read study that argues that "recidivism...among college classes at New Mexico State Penitentiary between 1976 and 1977 average 15.5 percent, while the general population averaged 68 percent recidivism": a decrease of 53.5 percent (Chevigny 1999: 108). Recent studies have had similar findings. The American Community Corrections Institute's study of education programs in prison revealed in 2003 that not only did recidivism rates drop to "less than 10 percent" for those taking college courses, but

also that court dockets in that same year for criminal cases were dramatically lowered (Institute 2004).

### **The Imaginative Space of Carceral Script**

Whether in a classroom or in a cell or in “the yard”, all writers in prison write within the geography of prison. In doing this, writers in prison transform fragments of the prisons geography into writing spaces, which transcend the prison geography. Jackie Ruzas, who was incarcerated at the Shawangunk Correctional Facility, wrote, “ I write because I can’t fly” (Chevigny 1999: vii). Indeed, Ruzas used the geography of prison to write, which in turn he used as a way to transcend the prison’s bars. Ruzas’s prose further illustrates that writing for many prisoners is a way to imagine and own a small piece of freedom, and in the process, reimagine their relationship to prison. Pencils and paper served as the tablets on which dreams of freedom were played out; prison cells became portals where prisoners, if only momentarily, were transported.

Sentenced to prison in 1972 when he was 20 years old, Jimmy Santiago Baca, like many poor people of color, was failed by an education system that was hostile to poor people of color. He was functionally illiterate through much of his adolescence. Baca did not begin reading and writing until he went to prison, yet another reminder that the state is more concerned with providing young people of color with prison cells than with adequate education. Baca’s experience further underscores the role writing plays in allowing people to grapple with the oppressive conditions of prison. “When at last I wrote my first words on the page”, says Baca, “I felt an island rising beneath my feet, like the back of a whale” (ibid.: 103). These words were not just symbols; they were material manifestations of a life transformed. He writes, “I had a place to stand for the first time in my life. This island grew with each page, into a continent inhabited by people I knew and mapped with the life I lived” (ibid.: 103).

Baca’s words also illustrate the way in which writing creates a context for writers in prison to differently imagine their relationship to confinement. The “place” Baca is able to stand was created through writing. “With each page”, Baca uses words to not only create a new world but to bridge the divide between prison and world beyond it. Baca writes:

I wrote all about it—about the people I had loved or hated, about the brutalities and ecstasies of my life. And, for the first time, the child in me who had witnessed and endured unspeakable terrors cried out not just in impotent despair, but with the power of language. Suddenly, language, through writing, my grief and my joy could be shared with anyone who would listen. And I could do this all alone; I could do it anywhere. I was no longer captive of demons eating away at me...(ibid.:103)”

In addition to using writing as a way to confront and exorcise his past demons, Baca also uses writing to, “share with anyone who would listen.” Like all people who write to family and friends from prison, the words he created within the prison geography, which he shared with people outside prison, enabled him to build a bridge to carry his voice and mind beyond the space of prison. And he did this by fostering connections with people that read his letters and poetry. This bridge was important for two reasons: (1) it made it possible for Baca to alter his relationship with prison by using words as a way to connect with people outside of prison. (2) his words illuminate the oppressive conditions and punitive aspects of prison life; they bring those that have never stepped foot into a prison, inside. Indeed, because the prison is an institution that is physically disconnected from the population, carceral script bridges the divide between the world inside prison and the world outside. Baca’s imaginative space was so vivid that he created a world where bars could no longer hold him. “At night I flew” and “visited houses where lonely women brewed tea and rocked in wicker rocking chairs listening to sad Joni Mitchell songs” (ibid: 104).

In his epistolary space Baca mapped his own world, created his own population and had total autonomy. Within the “continent of people I knew and mapped”, Baca was the designer and architect of this world, keeper of the key. And most of all, he could be “free” in this place. Through writing Baca was able to “launch into an endless journey without boundaries or rules...” It is worth restating here that Baca does this against the backdrop of a disciplinary and restrictive geography. Baca imagines this world in opposition to the one in which he lives. It’s a world of bars cages and razor wire, a space of hostility and indifference. Baca’s dreams, therefore, are not only attempts to escape; they also enabled him to transform his relationship to incarceration, if only momentarily.

Through writing Baca was transformed. He writes that with each draft over which he vigorously labored, the “bleak lucidity of hurt” that characterized much of his life, and most epically the pain he endured from his incarceration, were laid bare (Chevigny 1999: 103). In the exercise of writing, Baca finds that he can, on his terms, confront the hurt and pain of his own experience in an unmediated setting. This is why Baca argues that writing became his way of “escape” (ibid.: 103). Though his body remained confined, his mind could launch into “an endless journey without boundaries or rules” (ibid.: 103).<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> To imagine another reality, particularly in the face of a punitive carceral order, requires strength. Political prisoner Kathy Boudin gives voice to this idea in her poem about death row prisoner Mumia Abu-Jamal. She writes, “I wonder how you grow a life in a row called death” (ibid.: 303). Boudin answers this query in the very next stanza of the poem, “is it true not enough hours in the day exist to write all the articles in your mind/ that sleep takes you away from finding legal points to save the lives of others on your tier/ that life is full when you are full of life.” This poem illustrates how a full life is possible in a world where growth is stunted institutionally and spatially. Abu-Jamal’s and Boudin’s possibility for living a “full life” is possible through writing that not only challenges the legitimacy of prison, but injustice anywhere (Chevigny 1999: 303).



Carceral script mobilizes counter-carceral analyses and imaginative cartographies *through sites of detention*, showing the complexities that shape prose. To be clear, I am not arguing that there is something redeemable or even remotely romantic about prison. Politically progressive carceral script emerges from prison not because the conditions created in prison enable writing, but in spite of the architecture, rules and ubiquitous punitive logic that undergirds the institution. The very existence of this prose should in no way offer credibility to the institution. Progressive carceral script always demands its own death; its continued existence means that the institution that helped to mobilize it still functions.

Progressive carceral script is a political response to systematic dehumanization. The imaginative dreaming that emerges from these writings cannot be controlled; it creates critical spaces within the carceral landscape that enable prisoners to speak to the world on their own terms, transgress the spaces that hold them, and foster connections. The walls, bars, razor wire, mechanisms of surveillance, spatial isolation, and architecture, paradoxically, do not stifle prison prose. Rather through using writing create alternative geographies that foster connection, provide flights of freedom and use the walls around them to create bridges.

### **Reimagining the Geography of Prison**

Using the polymorphous spaces that are part of the prison's geography, politically progressive prisoners oppose the logic of disciplinary power by reimagining and repurposing the geography of the prison, fostering spaces of resistance in the process. Prisoners like Angela Y. Davis illustrate that alternative geographies—ones that foster openness and connection—do exist in prison. In the oppressive space of prison, prisoners find ways to re-make and reimagine the geography and architecture of prison.

Davis's description of jail illuminates why prisoners used their imagination to transform its geography. When she was captured in New York in 1971, Davis was sent to the New York Women's House of Detention in Greenwich Village. Built in 1932 and closed in 1974, the jail was one of the oldest for women in New York. Ethel Rosenberg was held there. Davis describes the jail as a "tall archaic structure" surrounded by red brick gates. The tall aging concrete structure that towered over the gates smelled of must and lacked adequate light. The ubiquitous concrete amplified the sounds of the jail. Screams, key jingling, doors slamming were a constant soundtrack. Dirt lined the concrete floors in the intake room and outside the cells, which many prisoners sat on. The showers were unsanitary. And the cells were equally as bad. Davis describes her cell as "no more than four and a half feet wide" and eight feet long, with an "iron cot bolted to the floor." It had a small skink, toilet with no lid, which sat at the foot of the bed. They were all arranged in a straight line, with an iron door that closed her in.

This geography made imagination the first and perhaps most important tool in remaking and repurposing prison space.<sup>8</sup> Davis illustrates this point in her writings from prison.<sup>9</sup> For Davis, re-imagining the prison architecture enables her to *repurpose and transform* prison space which results in fostering connections among prisoners and the broader community. By turning “walls” into “bridges”, Davis uses the geography of the prison to foster links with activists on the other side of the wall. Walls became tools that she, in no small way, used to interact with the world around her and fight for her life. For example, while incarcerated, Davis diligently worked on her own defense, frequently meeting with her legal team and other activists (which culminated in a powerful opening statement during her trial). She edited a book on political incarceration in the United States (Davis, 1971). She spoke about her case and the broader political movement; giving interviews to U.S. and international press. And began to formulate the analysis of incarceration that has significantly influenced how scholars and activists think about prison. Davis’s autobiography is, in many ways a blueprint for fostering political connections between “inside” and “outside.”<sup>10</sup>

Davis also illuminates the practical ways in which the architecture of prison is not fixed. Having spent two years in jail in New York and California, Davis became aware that despite living under the regulation of prison space, alternative—less regulated and punitive—spaces exist inside. For example, makeshift curtains of newspaper could obscure the guards’ vision while women used the toilet. Creating a private space to do something many consider simple—using the toilet—has significance, since prison architecture was created with the purpose of monitoring all activity. Re-organizing prison space to enable prisoners to have privacy, countering the ubiquity of surveillance, creates sites where authorities do not have total control and provides a respite from the hegemony of prison officials. Theresa Dirsuweit in her article on carceral space in South Africa, contends that resistance practices like the one Davis deploys—small scale transgressive practices—what Dirsuweit calls the “desire to subvert the constant supervision of

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<sup>8</sup> In her autobiography Davis writes: “...I would sometime imagine that all the preparations that were being made at night ward off those creatures were the barricades being erected against the larger enemy.” (Davis 1974: 49)

<sup>9</sup> Even as she speaks to the transformative possibilities of imagination on prison architecture, her political and intellectual work is aware of the material consequences of incarceration. In both her Autobiography and later intellectual work Davis illustrates that the architecture of prison is also the result of massive economic and political shifts and forged, in no small part, by racism and racist policies. See (Davis, 2002).

<sup>10</sup> In her memoir, she recounts her 1971 trial conspiracy trial in which the state of California accused her of involvement in the Marin County courtroom raid. With the aid of public support and a host of political organizations—forming the Committee to Free Angela Davis—she successfully argued against the state. The case demonstrated the ways in which collective political solidarity among a cross-section of progressive organizations can challenge the power of the state. At her trial, bridges built among the Black radical movement, the Communist Party, feminists, students, and the emerging anti-prison movement, grew into a multi-racial, progressive political organization that was dedicated to fighting political repression across race, class, and gender lines. Davis said she was keenly aware of what her case represented. “I could not be satisfied with my freedom alone”, said Davis (Davis 1974: 346).

those in authority”, are the kinds of resistance strategies mounted against the controlling apparatus of the prison (Dirsuweit: 1999, 73).

Carving out space for consciousness rising and organizing illustrates how imprisoned intellectuals repurpose the carceral geography. These spaces allowed Davis and other prisoners to talk about racism, the Black revolutionary struggle, capitalism, socialist life in Cuba, and America’s imperial ambitions (Davis 1974: 48, 61-62). Opposing the institutionalized ignorance prisons mandate, the women in the jail turned the jail’s corridors and recreational space into a learning center where the women could inquire about Black radicalism and a host of other left-wing political issues. A major reason the prisoners were able to transform these spaces was because of the politics of their speech. Black radicalism has been instrumental in shaping not only the political imagination, but also geographies. Black radicalism transformed American’s perception of space, place, and mobility by, for example, making Black geographies the sites for Black life and political organizing. And as Black radicalism filtered throughout Black communities, Black people remade public space to serve a different political agenda. They did this by occupying the public space in protest, creating “liberated communities”, “freedom schools”, and temples to house their radical fervor. In short, “Black radicalism...is about the alternative geographies,” and the “remaking of spaces” (Tyner 2006: 8).

The conversations about Black radicalism among the women Davis was incarcerated with did more than spark the political imagination; it also remade the space that held them. Black radicalism helped to repurpose the space of the prison corridors and recreational room, turning them into critical spaces of political engagement, solidarity and consciousness raising, becoming a liberated community that could not be controlled by jail officials. The conversations on Black radicalism transformed their relationship to the disciplinary and punitive geography of prison, by enabling their political imaginations to transgress the bars that held them. As a result these parts of the prison became locations where a kind of schooling happened; where women in the prison could get news about the political struggles happening. It was a space for them to learn about the politics of these movements. And think critically about the ideas and goals that underwrote them.

For instance, conversations, which took place in these spaces was responsible for altering their relationship to incarceration. Many of the women Davis was incarcerated with were forced to stay in jail simply because they did not have the money (sometimes as little as fifty dollars) to pay for bail. In the aftermath of the political conversations, the women in the jail with the assistance of feminist organizations outside the jail organized a bail fund. Women on each corridor of the jail elected women who would receive the funds from the outside organization. To keep the organization running, the woman released from jail worked for the fund, helping to raise money and developing the organization (Davis: 64).

## Spatializing Hope

This essay has demonstrated how progressive prisoners reimagine, repurpose and remake the disciplining and despotic geography of prison. Within these spaces, progressive prisoners reimagine their relationship to prison and dream of counter-carceral spaces.

Again, I caution the reader not to walk away believing that prisoner writing legitimatizes prison—it does not. Rather, I hope the reader will look at the spaces that prisoners create via their writing as contradictory. They are spaces that—like the post-industrial landscape that was the midwife of hip-hop—have grown out of tensions between carceral space and the desire to be heard, to make connections with others, and to reimagine their relationship to the carceral world that holds them.

Ruth Wilson Gilmore argued that, “a geographic imperative lies at the heart of every struggle for social justice” (Gilmore 2002: 16). Wilson’s insightful analysis is not only a reminder of the connection between social justice and geography, but also, for our purposes, it helps to illuminate the connection between writing in the American prison and geography. Prisoner writing is an attempt to carve out a place of humanity in a world not fit for humans; a place of freedom in an un-free world; an assertion of the right of the captive to be creative and expressive, to dream and to build bridges with the world beyond prison.

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