

**Rapoport Center Human Rights
Working Paper Series**

6/2019

“The Only Panthers Left”: An Intellectual History of the Angola 3

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The Bernard and Audre
RAPOPORT CENTER
For Human Rights and Justice
The University of Texas at Austin



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ISSN 2158-3161

Published in the United States of America
The Bernard and Audre Rapoport Center for Human Rights and Justice
at The University of Texas School of Law
727 E. Dean Keeton St.
Austin, TX 78705
<https://law.utexas.edu/humanrights/>

<https://law.utexas.edu/humanrights/project-type/working-paper-series/>

ABSTRACT

Albert Woodfox, Herman Wallace, and Robert Hillary King, colloquially known as the Angola 3, spent most of their adult lives in solitary confinement, Wallace and Woodfox for the murder of Louisiana State Penitentiary Prison Guard Brent Miller, and King for a separate false murder accusation. They were Black Panther Party members, activists, artists, and writers who used their artwork and intellectual production to protest the unjust systems of incarceration and solitary confinement that they faced as political prisoners. The Angola 3 participated in direct action protest—food and work strikes in particular—but also wrote and created artwork to challenge dominant narratives about the Black Panther Party. I argue that while the members of the Angola 3 do not fit conservative conceptions of intellectuals, they have used intellectual means to redefine the memory of the Black Panther Party and lay claim to their own experiences in prison. The Angola 3's engagement with other prison writers, the black radical tradition, and their own intellectual and artistic production in the years since they were released can also expand our understanding of both the prison arts movement and prison literature writ large.

KEYWORDS:

Memoir; Incarceration; Prison Art; The Black Panther Party; Black Power; Prison Abolition; Prison Organizing

“The Only Panthers Left”: An Intellectual History of the Angola 3

By Holly Genovese¹

“THEIR SPIRIT IS JUST AS STRONG TODAY WAS IT WAS THEN. MY BROTHER USED TO SAY
THEY WAS THE ONLY PANTHERS THAT’S LEFT.”

-MALIK RAHIM²

In March 2019, three years after his release from prison, Alberto Woodfox published the cumulative intellectual product of his incarceration in his memoir, *Solitary*. Woodfox, Herman Wallace, and Robert Hillary King, known colloquially as the “Angola 3,” spent most of their adult lives in solitary confinement, Wallace and Woodfox for the murder of Louisiana State Penitentiary Prison Guard Brent Miller, and King for a separate false murder accusation.³ They were Black Panther Party members, activists, artists, and writers who used their artwork and intellectual production to protest the unjust systems of incarceration and solitary confinement that they confronted as political prisoners.

The Angola 3 participated in direct action protest—food and work strikes in particular—but also wrote and created artwork to challenge dominant narratives about the Black Panther Party.⁴ While the members of the Angola 3 do not fit conservative conceptions of intellectuals, they have used intellectual means to redefine the memory of the

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² Oral Histories of the American South, “Oral History Interview with Malik Rahim, May 23, 2006. Interview U-0252. Southern Oral History Program Collection (#4007),” Documenting the American South, UNC Chapel Hill, May 23, 2006, <https://docsouth.unc.edu/sohp/U-0252/menu.html>.

³ Robert King, while at Angola, was falsely accused of murdering a fellow prisoner. Although the other suspect in the case admitted to acting alone, King was still charged with the crime. His file also noted that he was being investigated for the murder of Brent Miller, though he was not yet in Angola when it took place.

⁴ There is a canon of well-known prisoners and activists who have written while incarcerated, but there are incarcerated and formerly incarcerated people doing important intellectual work with very little visibility, such as Precious Bedell, Michelle Jones, and students in programs like the Alabama Prison Arts and Education Project. The canon of prison intellectuals should not remain tied to a selected few activists but should be broadened to include others such as the members of the Angola 3, who used writing, organizing, and art to reshape ideas about Black Power in the South.

Black Panther Party and lay claim to their own experiences in prison.⁵ The Angola 3's engagement with other prison writers, the Black Radical Tradition, and their own intellectual and artistic production in the years since they were released can also enhance our understanding of both the prison arts movement and prison literature writ large.⁶ Why are the Black Panthers considered activists but not intellectuals (with some specific exceptions, like Angela Davis)?⁷ And how has the term "activist" been used to delegitimize the labor of black intellectuals working in non-traditional settings?⁸ I will attempt to answer these questions.

Though this article will recount the activism and intellectual education of the Angola 3 leading up to and during their incarceration for the murder of prison guard Brent Miller, this article is not a historical narrative of their incarceration nor of the Brent Miller murder.⁹ My primary focus is on the intellectual and artistic products of the Angola 3 and their supporters as carceral resistance, drawing from Robert King's autobiography *From the Bottom of the Heap*, Jackie Sumell and Herman Wallace's project, *The House That Herman Built*, and Albert Woodfox's memoir, *Solitary*. Though different forms—King's a life story, Sumell and Wallace's an artistic conversation, and Woodfox's an engagement with intellectual and activist traditions—they espouse an ideology based in the

⁵ When I refer to "memory" I am talking about the construction of history and its relation to power, see Michel-Rolph Trouillot and Hazel V. Carby, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston, Massachusetts: Beacon Press, 2015).

⁶ I argue that the prison memoir - a genre on its own - is inherently intellectual because of the autodidactic requirements for creation.

⁷ Much of the Black Panther Party scholarship, even the books that engage with the writings and teachings of figures like Huey Newton, Bobby Seale, Eldridge Cleaver, do not contribute to conversations about black intellectual history.

⁸ Holly Genovese, "Our S-USIH Salon Interview with Dr. Keisha Blain," *S-USIH* (blog), January 14, 2019, <https://s-usih.org/2019/01/our-s-usih-salon-interview-with-dr-keisha-blain/>.

⁹ My sources draw primarily from the perspective of the Angola 3 and their supporters. This was an active choice to prioritize the perspective of those often ignored in historical narratives.

tenets of the Black Panther Party and that is consistent with the Black Radical Tradition, which attempts to reconstruct popular conceptions of the party, humanize the incarcerated, and connect incarceration to the systemic exploitation of Black men.¹⁰

Wallace, Woodfox, and King all used the Black Panther Ten-Point Program as a moral and political guide in their writing and visual art, and relied upon the personal relationships, friendships, and camaraderie they found within the Black Panther Party - and each other - for survival under perilous conditions.¹¹ For the Angola 3, solitary confinement and imprisonment were at once torture and a form of social death.¹² Woodfox, Wallace, and King were deliberately kept from their families and friends, prevented from attending funerals, moved to facilities inaccessible to the majority of their family and supporters, and separated from each other. But at night, when the prison was quiet, Albert Woodfox found solitude in his cell, reading the work of political theorists and African American activists.

At its most basic level, this article questions common conceptions of intellectuals, and especially prison intellectuals. Woodfox, Wallace, and King are often considered lifelong activists, but are rarely considered activist-scholars in the vein of George Jackson

¹⁰ The Louisiana State Penitentiary, colloquially referred to as Angola, opened in 1901 on the site of a former slave plantation. Located in West Feliciana Parish, the 18,000-acre prison farm remains the largest prison complex in the United States. Surrounded on three sides by the Mississippi River, 22 miles Northwest of St. Francisville, the prison complex is rural and isolated. Many prison employees, referred to as “freemen,” reside on the prison complex, living on the “B line.” These operations are entirely reliant on the labor of incarcerated men. In the early 1970s the incarcerated population of Angola was overwhelmingly African American, from New Orleans, and had worked in unskilled labor prior to their incarceration. Accusations of violence, poor living conditions, and mistreatment of incarcerated men, particularly African Americans, have defined the prison for much of its history.

¹¹ The Black Panther Ten-Point Program is a set of guidelines for party members written by Huey Newton and Bobby Seale in 1966.

¹² My conception of social death is informed by both Orlando Patterson’s definition in *Slavery and Social Death*, as well as Stephanie Smallwood’s engagement with conceptions of time, space, and liminality in social death in *Saltwater Slavery*.

and Angela Davis. I want to reconfigure the term “activist-scholar” to allow for more diverse engagement with the work of intellectuals not recognized by the academy. The Angola 3 are both intellectuals and activists, though I choose to focus specifically on their intellectual contributions to Black Power studies. Referring to African American intellectuals as “just activists” is a claim scholars and critics deploy to delegitimize the literary and academic contributions of those working outside both the academy and the traditional literary canon: activists, organizers, incarcerated people and many others. But a recent surge in African American intellectual history has explored activism as a site of intellectual and artistic labor for many African Americans.

Literary scholar Joey Whitfield writes, carceral narratives exist in a space between political text and literature.¹³ He argues “the very idea of ‘prison writing’ as a genre recognizes that the material situation and context of the writer will inevitably impact upon the political content of his or her text.”¹⁴ Whitfield goes on to discuss that even when writing fiction, prison writers are judged as witnesses rather than as creative writers, which has far reaching implications for the ways in which “prison writing” is conceived and analyzed by scholars.

Bruce Franklin, in his classic book, *Prison Literature in America*, argues that the prison itself constitutes the incarcerated as political, that the difference between the “political prisoner” and the “criminal” is a meaningless distinction. Though the Angola 3 are commonly considered political prisoners because of their involvement with the Black

¹³Joey Whitfield, *Prison Writing of Latin America* (New York, NY: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018), 31.

¹⁴ Ibid.

Panther Party, their incarcerated condition itself made them political figures and prison writers.

Similarly, in his book *Soledad Brother*, George Jackson argues that while many incarcerated men do not consider themselves political prisoners when they are first imprisoned, after reading and working alongside other incarcerated people they increasingly understand their incarceration as systemic rather than individual. This is particularly true of the Angola 3, who grew aware of inequality in the prison system after engaging with the Black Panther Party and postcolonial and African American literature.

There is a long history of prison cultural expression in the 20th century, most comprehensively detailed in Lee Bernstein's *America is the Prison*. Bernstein argues that incarcerated people's cultural expressions sometimes challenged racial and social contexts of prison.¹⁵ The peak of this movement took place in the 1970s, when "prison culture of the 1970s demonstrated widespread hopes for collective liberation brought about by a revolutionary movement with incarcerated people among its vanguard."¹⁶ Yet these changes were only the result of social movements: prison education programs were rapidly expanding, with the aid of federal funding for prison education and arts programming.

Bernstein concludes his narrative of black visual arts and literature in the 1980s, when conservative government policies decreased funding for arts and education. The Black Arts and Black Power movements were becoming less visible. But Bernstein's

¹⁵ Lee Bernstein, *America Is the Prison: Arts and Politics in Prison in the 1970s* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 6.

¹⁶Ibid, 7.

ending, structured by government policy and formal activism, doesn't take into consideration the incarcerated people who were imprisoned during the 1970s and remained incarcerated long after the end of Pell grants to prisoners. Nor does his assessment engage with prisons that had no education or arts programs but incarcerated people, like the Angola 3, who flourished there anyway.

The writing and artwork of the Angola 3 is both literary and a reflection of the Black Radical Tradition, engaging with the Black Panther Party, Mao, Marxism, and other radical intellectual frameworks. Still, by focusing only on the political contributions of the art and literature created by these men, scholars of prison literature have ignored the uniquely American literary tradition that they represent. In this article, I will attempt to analyze the work of the Angola 3 as both political texts in the black radical traditions and as literary works unto themselves.

In his book, *Captive Nation*, Dan Berger argues that the “acquisition of literacy, self-education, and knowledge production remain a vital legacy of black prison organizing.”¹⁷ Berger asserts that not all writing by prisoners was subversive, particularly writing encouraged by prison administration or done as a therapeutic venture. For Berger, George Jackson is the pinnacle of the prison intellectual and theorist and alongside Malcolm X served as inspiration and political education for many politically involved prisoners.

Though Berger insists that there is a long legacy of both prison writing and political activism after the surge in the 1970s, the thrust of his book is centered around the 1960s and 1970s. While he counters some of Lee Bernstein and others claims about the

¹⁷ Dan Berger, *Captive Nation: Black Prison Organizing in the Civil Rights Era*, 1 Edition, Justice, Power, and Politics (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014), 226

structural dissolution of prison arts and literature, his periodization reinforces these assumptions.

The work of Herman Wallace, Robert King, and Albert Woodfox developed out of both the ideologies of the Black Panther Party and the Black Arts Movement, a radical artistic movement closely related to the prison arts movement detailed by Bernstein. Although their work was not published until the 2000s, the influence of both the Black Panther Party and the Black Arts Movement, as articulated by Dan Berger, is evident in their work. Like the prison activists across the country that Berger focuses on, Wallace, King, and Woodfox were influenced by Malcolm X, George Jackson, and other prison writers. The Black Panther Party concept of political education was essential to their work, both as organizers and as writers. However, the work of Wallace, King, and Woodfox, all published in the first two decades of the 21st century, demonstrate the legacy of 1970s prison intellectualism that Berger only gestures at.¹⁸

While I argue that Robert Hillary King, Herman Wallace, and Albert Woodfox should be considered in a tradition of African American incarcerated intellectuals, my definition of intellectual is not limited to academia or conservative conceptions of intellectual activity. My definition is greatly informed by the work of Patricia Hill Collins.

¹⁸ There is a growing literature on local chapters of the Black Panther Party and their actions outside the purview of the Oakland branch. Orissa Arend, in her book *Showdown in Desire*, collected first person accounts of both Black Panther Organizing in New Orleans and the interactions between the New Orleans police department and the Panthers. Made clear in Arend's book, primarily through oral history accounts, is that both the New Orleans branch of the Black Panther Party and the Angola 3 acted outside the conditions of the national party. As the national party was thrown into discord by COINTELPRO and splits within the party, the New Orleans Black Panther Party was still actively organizing. Outside of New Orleans history, Judson Jeffries, Alondra Nelson, and other scholars of Black Power have shifted narratives away from Oakland and the national Black Panther Party, instead focusing on the ways in which local chapters interpreted the Ten-Point Platform and ideology for themselves. These books have also focused on the ways in which the Black Panther Party worked to deliver basic services, food, education, and health care to black people across the country.

Hill Collins argues that most African American women intellectuals are found outside of academia, as a rule. Even though I am writing primarily about African American men, her expanded definition of intellectual has largely informed my thinking. She says “developing black feminist thought also involves searching for its expression in alternative institutional locations and among women not commonly perceived as intellectuals. As defined in this volume, black women intellectuals are neither all academics nor primarily found in the black middle class.”¹⁹ I argue that the Louisiana State Penitentiary served as “an alternative institutional location” for the intellectual activity of the Angola 3 and their supporters.²⁰

Organizing at Angola

Albert Woodfox and Herman Wallace formed a Black Panther Party chapter in the Louisiana State Penitentiary in 1971 to protest dangerous and unsanitary living and working conditions, as well as frequent violence. Woodfox and Wallace (and later King) ensured that Black Panther Party organizing was a means to improve the often violent and inhumane conditions at Angola and organized hunger strikes, educational classes, and attempted to stop violence among the incarcerated. Their writing and activism have

¹⁹ Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2008), 17.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

reflected attempts to redefine the legacy of the Black Panther Party.²¹

Woodfox and Wallace's organizing in Angola focused on ending sexual abuse and rape, as well as improving literacy and education levels and the inhumane food and housing conditions within the Louisiana State Penitentiary. Albert Woodfox asserted that by enlisting incarcerated men in strikes and protesting violent conditions the Angola 3 tried to instill a "sense of self-worth, a sense of purpose and direction and trying to help them stop being institutionalized and we just hopefully inspired hope in a lot of people around us."²² Herman Wallace and Albert Woodfox emphasized that the Angola chapter of the Black Panther Party focused on education, which mirrored the tutoring and political education classes offered by the New Orleans branch of the Black Panther Party. The Angola chapter offered tutoring in reading, writing, math, and philosophy.²³ Much of the population of the Louisiana State Penitentiary at the time came from low-income backgrounds and worked in unskilled jobs prior to serving time in the Louisiana State Penitentiary.²⁴

Another condition that Woodfox and Wallace decried, according to Woodfox, was

²¹ In recent years, there has been important work in intellectual history that stretches the bounds of the field, notably Nikhil Pal Singh's *Black is a Country*. Even while expanding the bounds of intellectual work to examine the role of African Americans, Singh remains tied to the traditional bounds of intellectualism as he primarily focuses on academics and writers. *Toward An Intellectual History of Black Women* argues for intellectualism in varied spaces and styles and broadens the scope of what it means to be an African American intellectual. While not written as an explicitly intellectual history, *Captive Nation* by Dan Berger proves not only the intellectually significant contributions made by the incarcerated, but shows their influence on scholars such as Michele Foucault. Intentional or not, Berger's geographic limitations reinforce false ideas about southern exceptionalism and the false dichotomy between Black Power and the non-violent Civil Rights Movement. Black Power began in the south, has its origins in the intellectual tradition of Civil Rights in the south, and the Black Panther Party had chapters across the South. By examining the intellectual contributions of the Angola 3, the intellectual significance of Black Power in the south is made explicit and allows the South to reclaim some of this history. While there is no other academic analysis of the Angola 3's organizing, Lydia Pelot-Hobbs' University of New Orleans Masters thesis "Organizing for Freedom: The Angola Special Civics Project, 1987-1992" is the only other work to take on prison organizing specifically in Angola.

²² Interview with Albert Woodfox, Jimmy O'Halligan, *Angola 3-Black Panthers and The Last Slave Plantation*, NTSC (Mpress Records, 2008).

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Louisiana Department of Corrections Statistical Report for Fiscal Year 1972-1973.

the Louisiana State Penitentiary's procedure of pushing incarcerated men's meals underneath the cell door. The food was often exposed to grime on the floor and falling debris from the door would often land on the food. Woodfox and Wallace first petitioned the prison to put food slots in the doors, a very common practice, but when they received no response from prison officials, they began to organize.²⁵

Robert Hillary King argues that the Angola 3 sought to improve the lives of those incarcerated at Angola. King asserted, "We struggled for better food, we struggled for privileges, and I think we were trying to beatify a prison, but what we are trying to do was make sure it was fit for human beings to at least subsist."²⁶ For the Angola 3, an attempt to beautify the Louisiana State Penitentiary signified restoring the rights to food, healthcare, physical safety, and education.

The Brent Miller Murder

On April 17, 1972, Angola prison guard Brent Miller was stabbed to death in the Pine 1 Dormitory of the Louisiana State Penitentiary. Only 22 years old at the time of his death, Miller was well-known at Angola and in the nearby town of St. Francisville because of his family's long history working at the prison. In the aftermath of Miller's death, approximately 150 incarcerated African American men were placed in maximum security cells and interrogated. Shortly thereafter, many of the Angola prison guards threatened to strike if suspected "black militants" were not housed separately in maximum security.²⁷

Originally, Louisiana state prosecutors claimed that Albert Woodfox, Herman Wallace, Chester Jackson, and Wilbert Montegut walked into the Pine 1 dormitory at the

²⁵ Interview with Albert Woodfox, Jimmy O'Halligan, *Angola 3-Black Panthers and The Last Slave Plantation*, NTSC (Mpress Records, 2008).

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ *Baton Rouge Advocate*, 1972. "Angola Quiet After Threat of Walkout." April 23.

Louisiana State Penitentiary at 7:30 AM on April 17, 1972 and stabbed prison guard Brent Miller to death 32 times. All white male juries (that would later be challenged in court) swiftly convicted Albert Woodfox and Herman Wallace of the crime. An officer provided an alibi for Gilbert Montegut that allowed his release on a minor charge. Chester Jackson accepted a deal for a minor charge and subsequently testified for the state. Two weeks after the murder of Brent Miller, Robert Hillary King was transferred from the Orleans Parish Prison to the Louisiana State Penitentiary. King was immediately placed in closed cell restriction, accused of the murder of an incarcerated person, while unbeknownst to him, he was also investigated for the Brent Miller murder, a murder he was not present for.²⁸

Through subsequent trials and investigations, it was proven that Warden Murray Henderson had bribed prisoners with cigarettes and other goods to coerce testimony against Wallace and Woodfox. Fingerprints found on weapons and other evidence were never tested by the prison. And when Albert Woodfox went to trial again in the 1990s, the ex-wife of former warden, Murray Henderson, sat on the jury.

Much of the original murder conviction relied on the testimony of another incarcerated man, Hezekiah Brown, who changed his story multiple times.²⁹ Brown claimed that he was making coffee in the dorm alone with Miller, when the four men came in and began stabbing him. Documents were later discovered proving Warden Henderson had supplied cigarettes to Brown after the trial.

²⁸ Robert Hillary King, Interview with the author, June 24, 2014.

²⁹ Hezekiah Brown was serving a life sentence for serial rape at the time of the murders.

Warren Casby, one of those who organized with the Angola 3, was also questioned about the murder and was specifically asked if he was a member of the Black Panther Party.³⁰ Casby emphasized the Angola 3's efforts to eradicate violence and improve education within the Louisiana State Penitentiary and did mention the narratives of violence and danger presented by the prison guards and Warden. There as not merely a lack of evidence to support their conviction, but violence was also antithetical to the work the Angola 3 had been doing as Black Panthers.

The Angola 3 as Intellectuals and Activists

The Black Panther Party Ten-Point Platform states that “we want freedom for all Black men held in federal, state, county, and city prisons and jails,” part of an ideological emphasis on prison abolitionism within the party. Prison abolitionism and activism were foundational to the ideology of the Black Panther Party. This commitment to prisoner rights activism only increased as prominent members of the party were incarcerated. Included in the platform is also the statement, “We want education for our people that exposes the true nature of this decadent American society. We want education that teaches us our true history and our role in the present-day society.” Throughout the platform, the words “power” and “decent” are repeated throughout and given rhetorical significance. The panthers wanted “land, bread, housing, education, clothing, justice and peace.” The panthers espoused Marxist ideas and connected them to tangible issues of inequality in the United States. Significantly, these goals are distinct from images perpetuated about the Black Panther Party and clarify the ideological connections between the Angola 3 and the Black Panther Party.

³⁰ Warren Casby, Interview with the author, June 27, 2014.

In the Black Panther Party Ten-Point Platform, the Panthers argued for the necessity of quality education, employment opportunities, universal healthcare, and prison abolitionism for African Americans. The platform was both a political and intellectual manifesto, and a means of survival for incarcerated Black Panthers. Herman Wallace wrote, “I honestly don’t think I could have survived these many years in solitary had it not been for the structure of the Black Panther Party’s Ten Point Program. You have to have a belief structure to survive and the strength and truth of the Ten-Point Platform has kept Albert, Robert, and myself strong enough to withstand the unremitting torture of 32 years of solitary for a crime we did not commit.”³¹

The Ten-Point Platform was at its core an intellectual critique of institutionalized racism across the United States. The Black Panther Party powerfully challenged both the non-violent Civil Rights movement and inequities imbedded within capitalism in the United States. Many members of the Black Panther Party were prolific writers in their own right.³² That is not to say that the Angola 3 accepted all of the philosophies of the Black Panther Party, but it was from the Ten-Point Platform that the Angola 3 developed their own goals, methods, and intellectual products in prison. Woodfox and Wallace adapted the ideas present in the platform and implicit in the actions of the New Orleans Black Panther Party to the Angola chapter.

Here, I will focus primarily on three projects: Robert King’s autobiography *From the Bottom of the Heap*, Herman Wallace and Jackie Summel’s *The House That Herman Built*, and Albert Woodfox’s memoir *Solitary*. The Angola 3 and their supporters have

³¹ Herman Wallace, 2003 letter to Coalition to Free the Angola 3 in Orissa Arend, *Showdown in Desire: The Black Panthers Take a Stand in New Orleans* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2009).

³² See *This Side of Glory* by David Hilliard, *Panther Baby* by Jamal Joseph, *Revolutionary Suicide* by Huey Newton, *Soul on Ice* by Eldridge Cleaver.

developed serious critiques of solitary confinement, the incrimination of Black Power, and mass incarceration in the United States.³³ Their work is in conversation with that of Malcom X, George Jackson, and other well-known prison writers of the 1960s and 1970s. Notably, although the Angola 3 were first incarcerated during the prime of the prison arts movement, these projects have only come to fruition within the last twenty years.

One of the most recognized art projects associated with the Angola 3 is *The House That Herman Built*, a collaboration between artist Jackie Sumell, a New Orleans based artist who focuses on political issues and activism in her work, and Herman Wallace. The project eventually produced an interactive website, documentary, and book. In 2003, Sumell asked Wallace, “What kind of house does a man who has lived in a six-foot-by-nine-cell for over thirty years dream of?” What followed was a relationship, primarily conducted via letters, in which Wallace designed his dream house. Sumell hoped that this project would continue to bring awareness to solitary confinement practices within the United States.³⁴ The book that was published as part of this project included sketches and drawings of Herman Wallace’s dream house, as well as the letters that had passed between him and Sumell throughout the process. This project served as a creative and intellectual outlet for both Herman Wallace and Jackie Sumell while also critiquing the loss of life implicit with the use of solitary confinement.

³³ Before his death, Wallace wrote short essays and poetry asserting his freedom, with the intention of bringing awareness to the cruelty of solitary confinement. A series of documentaries have been created by left-leaning activist organizations working to free the Angola 3 that have helped to publicize their story and project a counter narrative to that of the Wardens including *The Angola 3: Black Panthers and the Last Slave Plantation* in 2008 and *Hard Time: A Film: The Story of Robert King, A Remarkable Man and the Only Freed Member of The Angola 3* filmmaker Ron Harpelle uses the documentary to illustrate that there is more to the life of Robert Hillary King than the Angola 3. Anita Roddick, founder of the Body Shop published the writings of both Herman Wallace and Albert Woodfox in a book *A Revolution in Kindness*. Roddick’s anthology, thematically linked by kindness as an organizing principle, allowed both men room to express their political views and stories, in relation to kindness.

³⁴ The House That Herman Built. <http://hermanshouse.org> (accessed March 2015).

In 2002, Jackie Sumell and Herman Wallace developed and designed Wallace's dream house. The project began as Sumell's MFA thesis at Stanford, but developed into an online project, book, and documentary. This analysis will primarily focus on the text *The House That Herman Built*, which anthologized the letters written from Herman Wallace to Jackie Sumell throughout the project. In his letters, Herman Wallace emphasized his allegiance to the Black Panther Party and his politics in this text, but the focus is much about the human cost of solitary confinement and mass incarceration than activism in and of itself. In these letters Wallace does not only design his dream home but also articulates his critiques of the criminal justice system. Implicit in the design of the house is his distrust of the government and his investment in political prisoners.

Wallace's dream home was shaped by his time incarcerated and his political ideology. Wallace wrote, "I prefer the house made of wood, not because of beauty but too easily set afire and escape to the tunnel and bunker to safety in case of a serious attack."³⁵ His allegiance to radical politics and time incarcerated left an indelible mark on the way he designed his house. Wallace also wanted a wall of portraits of political prisoners, past and present. His radical politics would be integral to the design of the space. He wanted his dream home to advance his political allegiances and commitments. These portraits were central to Wallace's vision of home.

Herman wanted *The House That Herman Built* to connect to the cause of the Angola 3, and to "the struggle" more broadly.³⁶ He wrote to Sumell, "you are finding your voice in the struggle and what is wrong with using it, or rather launching it from the

³⁵ Herman Wallace, "December 9, 2002," in the *House That Herman Built*, ed. Jackie Sumell and Herman Wallace. (Stuttgart: Akademie Schloss Solitude, 2006).

³⁶ *Ibid*, 1.

strength of the Angola 3?"³⁷ Even when Sumell wanted to focus on the house as a form of expression for Wallace, Wallace saw the value in every project being the connection to the Angola 3, the Black Panther Party, and the oppression of African Americans through incarceration.

Wallace used the project to argue against southern exceptionalism and emphasize the political prisoners found across the United States and internationally. He also argues that his membership in the Black Panther Party was a direct result of police brutality, mass incarceration, and systemic injustice. Wallace connected the house not just to his own case, but to the broader issues with mass incarceration and political prisoners in the United States.

Wallace wrote:

In 1971, I became a member of the Black Panther Party for self defense as a result of systemic discrimination, police brutality, murder and the disproportion of African Americans in prison. The struggle for survival for African Americans in the USA is not founded in any particular location. Our struggle is international. For 33 years I have been kept in a very small cage because I refuse to renounce my political views.³⁸

When describing his experiences while incarcerated, Wallace often referenced scholars and prison writers. Wallace wrote "throughout my prison life, I think I've managed to endure the worst that could happen to the human psyche and emotions. George Jackson spoke of this also in his 'blood in my eye book' when he said had a developed a

³⁷ Herman Wallace, "March 18, 2003," in the *House That Herman Built*, ed. Jackie Sumell and Herman Wallace. (Stuttgart: Akademie Schloss Solitude, 2006), 1.

³⁸ Herman Wallace, "April 1, 2003," in the *House That Herman Built*, ed. Jackie Sumell and Herman Wallace. (Stuttgart: Akademie Schloss Solitude, 2006), 1.

‘proud flesh.’”³⁹ During the artistic process, Wallace theorized his own life within the work of writers like George Jackson.

Lost potential was another theme of the *The House That Herman Built*. What would someone who had been incarcerated for much of their adult life want in a home? What would they want to do with their time and their life? Not only was solitary confinement seen as cruel by both Sumell and Wallace, but the project sought to engage with questions of lost humanity. I argue that the narrative of lost potential portrayed by Sumell and Wallace is a form of social death, as informed by Saidiya Hartman, Orlando Patterson, and Stephanie Smallwood.⁴⁰

Herman Wallace’s images of home, as dictated to Jackie Sumell, mirror Malcolm X’s telling of his memoir to Alex Haley. Although contemporaries of Malcolm X saw Alex Haley as merely a ghost writer, he is often considered an intellectual collaborator on the project. The image of Haley simply transcribing a memoir was a rhetorical device as much as it was a methodology. By looking at the ways in which Haley worked with Malcolm X to create a collaborative memoir, we can see the legacies of this methodology in the work of Herman Wallace and Jackie Sumell.

Herman Wallace’s construction of a home, as someone who was imprisoned in solitary confinement, is informed both by his connection to the black freedom struggle, as

³⁹ Herman Wallace, “December 7, 2004,” in the *House That Herman Built*, ed. Jackie Sumell and Herman Wallace. (Stuttgart: Akademie Schloss Solitude, 2006), 1.

⁴⁰ See Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America, Race and American Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), Stephanie E Smallwood, *Saltwater Slavery: A Middle Passage from Africa to American Diaspora* (Cambridge, Mass.; London: Harvard University Press, 2008), and Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1982).

well as historic and literary conceptions of land and home ownership for African Americans. In his article, “Behold the Land,” Jarvis Mcinnis argues that in W.E.B. Dubois’ novel, *Quest Dubois*, articulates an alternative plantation myth that allows African Americans to be “intelligent farmers” and significantly, owners of land.⁴¹ This emphasis on knowledge and self-determination as articulated by land and home ownership has been significant in an African American literary canon. William Modellmog argues that Charles Chesnut’s use of home ownership in his stories “The Sway Backed Horse” and “The Partners” was an attempt to reconfigure black home ownership, something Chesnut saw as inherently contradictory.⁴²

For African Americans, home and land ownership has long taken on a larger significance—one of resistance, reconfiguration of identity, and of creating “a black south.” In designing his dream home while incarcerated, Herman Wallace was acting to resist his carcerality.

Like Herman Wallace, Angola 3 member Robert Hillary King was able to use writing to present his ideology and life story. King wrote his autobiography, *From The Bottom of the Heap*, to tell his own story and theorize his own life. The significance of King’s autobiography is not the atypical nature of his work, but its ordinary nature; the work is one of many autobiographies written by Black Power activists contending with the meaning of Black Power. Literary scholar Patrick Alexander contends that King’s

⁴¹ Roy W. Copeland, “In the Beginning: Origins of African American Real Property Ownership in the United States,” *Journal of Black Studies* 44, no. 6 (September 2013): 646–64.

⁴² William Modellmog, “Lawful Entitlements: Chesnut’s Fictions of Ownership,” *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 41, no. 1 (1999): 47–69.

work is part of a broader canon of “prisoner abuse narratives.”⁴³ For Alexander, a “prisoner abuse narrative” theorizes prison as radicalized social control and forms an oppositional discourse surrounding incarceration.⁴⁴

King first wrote his autobiography while incarcerated in the Louisiana State Penitentiary. During his time in the Louisiana State Penitentiary, King read widely from books being passed throughout the Louisiana State Penitentiary, including *Native Son* by Richard Wright, which he claims as one of the most important books he read while incarcerated.⁴⁵ According to King, once he became “politically conscious” he pursued an education while in prison.⁴⁶ King read Frederick Douglass, Richard Wright, Franz Fanon, Karl Marx, Engels, Lenin, Malcom X and Martin Luther King Jr. King was also deeply influenced by other incarcerated writers like Eldridge Cleaver and George Jackson.

Christianity was central to King’s worldview. He read the Bible several times while incarcerated in the Louisiana State Penitentiary, something that he differed on from Woodfox and Wallace. For the first time, King was reading about ideas and philosophies that he supported. King said, “the world had become smaller to me,” after reading and learning from intellectuals and writers who believed in his ideals.⁴⁷ Disillusioned by the non-violent Civil Rights movement, these works helped King discover and articulate his

⁴³ Patrick Elliot Alexander, *From Slave Ship to Supermax: Mass Incarceration, Prisoner Abuse, and the New Neo-Slave Novel* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2018), 12.

⁴⁴ Patrick Alexander, *From Slave Ship to Supermax: Mass Incarceration, Prisoner Abuse, and the New Neo-Slave Novel*, 15.

⁴⁵ Robert Hilary King (Member of Angola 3), in interview with the author, June 2014.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

newfound political beliefs. King gained a radical education through books while incarcerated.⁴⁸ King's readings reinforced notions that had motivated him to join the Black Panther Party and discredit some of the myths about the violence of the Black Panther Party: the importance of equitable education, housing, and other resources for African Americans.

Inspired by the literature he was reading, King started writing his autobiography in 1987, which would become *From the Bottom of the Heap: The Autobiography of Black Panther Robert Hillary King*. According to King, he wanted to be able to write his "own epitaph" and wanted to tell his own story.⁴⁹ The influences of both Malcolm X's *Autobiography* and George Jackson's *Soledad Brother* are evident in *From the Bottom of the Heap*. George Jackson famously theorized incarceration as an extension of a slavery, a framework still used by many African American prisoner rights activists. Both Malcolm X and George Jackson emphasize their reading lives while incarcerated, particularly the reading of radical and communist texts. This tradition of auto-didacticism within prison continued with King's self-study and writing and are apparent in the comparison between incarceration and slavery articulated in King's autobiography. The influence of these writers is evident throughout King's analysis. King's ideas about oppressive prisons were shaped by George Jackson's theories. Additionally, King's critiques of capitalism are informed both by the Black Panther 10 Point Platform and the work of Marx, Engels, Lenin, and other theorists.

⁴⁸ Robert Hillary King (Member of Angola 3), in interview with the author, June 2014.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

The narrative produced in *From the Bottom of the Heap* was an act by King to define his own life. King intentionally links elements of institutionalized racism, segregation, and violence in his upbringing to his later involvement in the Angola 3. He also makes clear that his interest in the Black Panther Party was related to their opposition to police brutality, and the emphasis on helping low-income African Americans. King's biography also served as a form of protest after his release. When King was released in 2001, he committed to working for the freedom of Woodfox and Wallace, and his writing was only one way in which he helped to spread the word about this injustice.

King opened his autobiography with "I was born in the U.S.A, born black, born poor. Is it then any wonder that I have spent most of my life in prison?"⁵⁰ King theorizes his own life story, asserting that his life and eventual incarceration was a product of structural inequality and racism. This recognition of his incarceration, and the mass incarceration of African American men more generally, as systemic and institutionalized white supremacy is one of the main arguments put forth in Robert Hillary King's autobiography.

King wrote

after cleaning up my act, I needed something to replace what I had cast off. A void developed, and deepened. Feeling clean and empty, I attempted to fill this void by reading. At first I read everything I could get my hands on, the bible included. And then (for a while) I ceased reading everything but the bible. Thus, I was introduced to religion and Christianity like never before. It touched that part of me in which I had previously felt nothing or which no one could touch.⁵¹

⁵⁰ Robert Hillary King, *From the Bottom of the Heap: The Autobiography of Black Panther Robert Hillary King*, (Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2012).

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 140.

A commitment to Marxism, and “collective living” is essential to King’s ideology articulated in *From the Bottom of The Heap*. “It was through this prison communication system that I met Cathy, Leah and Elaine. Top Cat was a source of strength to many of the prisoners, and she was my greatest inspiration. In her letters to me, she uttered the party's doctrine as if she had written it herself and her in depth knowledge of Marxism was second to none.”⁵² These conversations inspired King’s own reading of Marx, Engels, Lenin and other theorists.

King, like the other members of the Angola 3, articulated for a different understanding of the Black Panther Party and a distancing from the trends and changes in the national party. While the “power structure” believed that the Black Panther Party stood for “gangsterism,” King joined the party to combat institutionalized racism. King wrote

contrary to what the power structure would have us believe, the Black Panther Party's ideology was not cut from the block of gangsterism. Rather, its ideology defined the overall black experience in America-past and current-and provided Blacks and other oppressed peoples in America with alternative ways of resisting American style repression politically, economically, racially and socially-by any means necessary-as advocated by one of the party's benefactors, Malcolm X.⁵³

King makes it clear that his priority was resisting the oppression of African Americans and fighting poverty, policing, incarceration, and sub-standard housing. King frames his autobiography as a case study of the oppression of African Americans and mass incarceration. For King, his life is but one example of the many lives of African Americans controlled by the American criminal justice system.

⁵²Ibid., 162.

⁵³Ibid., 164.

Like Robert Hillary King's autobiography, Albert Woodfox's *Solitary* is an exemplar of the carceral narrative. In his book on prison writing, Bruce Franklin argued that the carceral narrative was descended from the slave narrative—a uniquely African American literary form.⁵⁴ Woodfox is not unique in placing his narrative within a canon of black prison writing, or in a broader societal reckoning with mass incarceration. Woodfox's memoir is significant for its quotidian nature and the ways in which it explores black power, the prison arts movement, and the relationship between activism and artistic and literary work in the African American community.

Woodfox never denies that he committed crime. Indeed, he writes about his experience with theft, drugs, gangs, and violence as a young man in segregated New Orleans. Still he does something more profound: he argues that he deserves redemption and forgiveness anyway. Woodfox, unlike members of the New York Panther 21 that he met while in the Tombs, was not originally incarcerated for *political* crimes. Still, that does not mean that his incarceration was not in itself a political act.

Woodfox had already been incarcerated and escaped from prison before he was sent to the Tombs in New York City. Though he didn't realize it at the time, he was incarcerated alongside members of the New York Panther 21 (Assata Shakur was also a member). This is where he was introduced to the beliefs of the Black Panthers and ideas about collective living, though it is often assumed he learned these ideas from Oakland leaders.

In his memoir *Solitary*, Albert Woodfox, like King, frames his work within the writings of intellectuals and activists like Sojourner Truth, Malcolm X, and Frantz Fanon.

⁵⁴ H. Bruce Franklin, *Prison Literature in America: The Victim as Criminal and Artist*, Expanded ed (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989).

Even as he discusses his early life, before his involvement with the Black Panther Party, he frames it in terms of structures of institutional racism and the prison industrial complex.

Woodfox begins *Solitary* with his early life and includes a period of transformation—when he was introduced to the Black Panther Party while incarcerated in New York City’s toms. He also uses education— particularly his reading and writing—as part of this narrative. Similar to the ways in which other captivity narratives are structured, Woodfox’s chapter on education, reading, and writing is a turning point. It is both a literal description of his education and introduction to the ideas of Fanon, Mao, George Jackson, Marx, and other radical thinkers, as well as a connection to African American captivity narrative. Woodfox wrote “behind our resistance on the tiers, Herman, King, and I knew that education would save us.”⁵⁵ This was not education for class mobility or career prospects. It was not education for rehabilitation. They saw education as a radical possibility, as articulated by Paulo Freire.

Prominently mentioned throughout his memoir are the works of both Malcolm X and George Jackson, writers, intellectuals, and activists who helped Woodfox theorize his time in solitary confinement. After joining the Black Panther Party and beginning to read widely, Woodfox understood his incarceration as a systemic issue rather than an individual one— something that George Jackson articulated in *Soledad Brother*. For Woodfox, education was his salvation. Education allowed him to contextualize his life and activism as he struggled through his time in solitary confinement. He wrote, “I had to come to

⁵⁵Albert Woodfox, *Solitary: Unbroken by Four Decades in Solitary Confinement. My Story of Transformation and Hope*, First Hardcover Edition (New York: Grove Press, 2019), location 1651.

prison to find out there was great African Americans in this country and this world and to find role models.”

Prominent in discussions of social death is the cutting of familial ties and relationships. Although prison, and in particular CCR, was a challenging environment to develop emotional ties, Woodfox was close to both Robert King and Herman Wallace, his mother (who died in 1994), and other members of his family. He also developed relationships with activists like Malik Rahim, who he had known in Orleans Parish Prison, as well as Anita Roddick and Marina Drummer. These connections—established through formal and informal channels of communication through the prison—allowed Woodfox to resist the oppressive structures of Solitary Confinement.

Woodfox concludes with a plea for an involvement in social justice organizing, for engagement with issues of the carceral state. He also continued the theorization done by George Jackson when he wrote, “I knew I wasn’t a criminal anymore. I considered myself to be a political prisoner.”⁵⁶

The Angola 3 as Symbol

Though Wallace and Woodfox narrated their own stories, other activists also told the story of the Angola 3. Some of them were, like Malik Rahim, Marina Drummer and Orissa Arend, close friends of the Angola 3 or involved with the New Orleans Black Panther Party. Others, like Bruno and David Cenou, were involved in non-governmental organizations focused on human rights violations, like Amnesty International.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 1189

Panthers in the Hole, published by Amnesty International, was not written by or for the members of the Angola 3. Though Robert King wrote an introduction to the English translation (it was originally published in French) and the words of King, Woodfox, and Wallace were quoted at length, it was not their work. The graphic novel by Bruno and David Cenou (translated from French to English) seems to have little to do with the story of the Angola 3 or their relationship to the Panthers. In contrast to the conflict, depth, and horror featured in Woodfox's *Solitary*, King's *From the Bottom of the Heap* and *The House that Herman Built*, "Panthers in the Hole" uses the Angola 3 and other Black Panthers as symbols for mass incarceration in the United States writ large. Though the quotes featured throughout the graphic novel were taken directly from court testimony, interviews, and published writing, the narrative of the Angola 3 was made into a black and white story of good and evil, with Amnesty International's stamp of approval. Patrick Alexander argues that agency reports and projects of Non Governmental Organizations including Amnesty International focus on exploitation at the expense of the agency of the incarcerated and that the "loss of voice is continuous with antebellum practices."⁵⁷

Panthers in the Hole is an example of Amnesty International co-opting the life stories of the Angola 3, three formerly incarcerated African American men, to emphasize the cruelty and severity of incarceration in the United States, and more specifically, in Louisiana. By casting the blame for incarceration on the United States, the French are seemingly absolved of their own issues regarding racial inequality and incarceration.

⁵⁷ Patrick Alexander, *From Slave Ship to Supermax: Mass Incarceration, Prisoner Abuse, and the New Neo-Slave Novel*, 54.

This is not to say that the United States does not have a problem with incarceration, a problem that is statistically more severe than that in many other countries. But instead of focusing the personal struggles of the Angola 3 and their families, the graphic novel uses them to illustrate statistical data and to cast Louisiana as backwards.

The graphic novel does not tell the story of three people whose lives were transformed by their incarceration and activism, but instead reduces the Angola 3 to representations of cruelty. By framing the story of the Angola 3 with statistics about incarceration in Louisiana, *Panthers in the Hole* reduces King, Woodfox, and Wallace to symbols of oppression in the United States and perpetuates stereotypes of the “barbaric South.”⁵⁸

Conclusion

The artistic and intellectual work of the Angola 3 is essential to our understanding of the persecution of the Black Panther Party in the United States, the collective understanding of the experience of solitary confinement, and the ways in which the Angola 3 have continued the intellectual work of the Black Radical Tradition long after the disbanding of the Black Panther Party and the end of the Prison Arts Movement.

While the Black Panther Party officially disbanded in the early 1980s, the Angola 3 remained active in redefining their legacy in the intervening decades. When taken together, the projects produced by the Angola 3 represent a movement in which the Angola 3 has become both a cause célèbre and the center of an attempt to redefine the meaning of Black Power and emphasize the immorality of the criminal justice system. By focusing on incarcerated people as intellectuals as well as activists we can recognize their historic

⁵⁸ Heather Ann Thompson, “Blinded by a ‘Barbaric South’: Prison Horrors, Inmate Abuse, and the Ironic History of American Penal Reform” in *The Myth of Southern Exceptionalism* ed. Matthew Lassiter and Joseph Crespino (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

intellectual and artistic contributions.