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“It is not enough to be in one cage with one self”: The Poetic Subject, Incarceration, and  
Envisioning Abolition

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A thesis  
presented to  
the faculty of the Department of Literature and Language  
East Tennessee State University

In partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree  
Master of Arts in English

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by  
Emily Price  
May 2022

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prison poets

## ABSTRACT

“It is not enough to be in one cage with one self”: The Poetic Subject, Incarceration, and

Envisioning Abolition

by

Emily Price

The Beat poet Bob Kaufman was in many ways nearly destroyed by the state. Forcible electroshock therapy, repeated targeting by police, repeated brutalization by police, and frequent homelessness all threatened to snuff him out, but Kaufman refused to give in. He remained a political beacon of hope for his community throughout his life, asking those around him to envision a world where he could be free. Through his poems, through the poems of Etheridge Knight and Jimmy Santiago Baca, and through contemporary visions of abolition from Angela Davis and community organizers that become ever more relevant as the prison system continues to destroy its subjects, we can look towards a deeply necessary shift. Envisioning the world without prisons is foreign to many, perhaps even unimaginable. However, with the perspectives I will incorporate in this thesis, the necessity and beauty of envisioning abolition is clear.

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My Dog Barks by Jimmy Santiago Baca

Come close, listen: at the door a professor from Flagstaff asks  
can I participate in a conference on prison writing.  
I decline. Conferences are squeamish about truth.  
If your words don't fit their theories,  
if you claim that convicts are people,  
that writing goes deep in the soul, to memories,  
to flesh and blood, that writing has more to do  
with cruel guards and torture chambers, isolation cells  
and chained beating, they become squeamish.

I know a man  
in Paterson, New Jersey; the guy  
wasn't allowed to write a letter  
to his wife after she had their child,  
so he hid himself away and wrote  
a poem in blood.

I visited the house where Thoreau lived once,  
where he wrote of the oppressed and murdered in prison,  
how they're imprisoned because they're poor,  
how they have human rights. He wrote  
about humanity, not just about writing  
as those whose work seems detached  
from their own hearts, not like the conference types  
who believe there is no way to help  
the imprisoned, that it's best to keep them in  
while having workshops on prison writing.

I talk back, think individually;  
this is strictly a conference on writing  
in prison, and if you had writers who'd been cons  
it would make the conference a success.  
But you don't want to hear what they're going through,  
you prefer to translate their suffering into MFA papers,  
to turn their deaths into metaphors,  
to make their real cries and real terror a tone in the text  
that people outside can philosophize about;  
it's only about writing, not what would free these men  
from their tormentors. Besides, if they weren't in prison,  
you wouldn't be able to have a conference, would you?

Come close, listen: I decline the offer  
to pander to suspicions,

decline not to discuss what drives the writing,  
what the writing really means,  
what it means to be a writer in prison in the first place,  
not some yahooing convict with a book  
whose fame is built on kissing ass.  
And while I'm at it, I decline your myth of censorship,  
where every bookstore in the city prints  
handouts about some fool in Podunk or New York  
burning a book: that's not censorship, that's bullshit!

The writing conference definition of censorship  
will hail the work of some gawkish clown  
who's never been behind bars—portray him as a victim.  
Or take that girl born into uppercrust, tsst-tsst  
murmurings. After doing a book on the border,  
right away she's a heroine of the underclass,  
jailed entirely for symbolic purposes.  
O how they offer their wrists to the cop!

Come close, listen: the real definition of censorship  
is when they keep you locked in the *hole*  
for ninety days without light or exercise  
so you have to compose your poems in your head  
and remember them. The real definition  
of a prison writing program  
is when a prisoner has to write  
a poem in blood.

## CHAPTER 1. LOVE AND HISTORY

I begin my thesis with Jimmy Santiago Baca's "My Dog Barks" because I believe it most important to establish what I will not be doing within these pages. I will not turn death to metaphor. I will not ever lose sight that convicts are people. I will not pretend that it is best to keep prisoners in prison. In the path of revolutionaries and abolitionists ahead of me, I will instead follow the voices of the poets I discuss. I will listen to them. I will hear them, and I will envision freedom, and I will fight for freedom. This *I* is really *we*—I want you here with me, saying these words, believing in this future.

When one of my dearest friends spent three years in prison in Wartburg, Tennessee, I spoke to him on the phone as often as I could manage until his October 2021 release. I did not answer often enough, I knew at the time, and I know now, and I will regret always. I had to put a minimum of fifteen dollars on the phone line, and the system was complicated just to pay that amount, and I feared how sometimes I couldn't recognize his voice. He wrote lines, read them to me, started rapping as a hobby and I grew constantly impressed with the way he strung words together even as he fell into the violent spirals of the prison. People who knew him when I did all speak of him dismissively now, in a look-what-he-did-to-himself way. As though he's gone. He is not, though, and does not deserve to be thought of as such. I think of what his life would be like if we were not so reckless as teenagers, if he was not thrown into the cycle when we were all too young to understand what it meant. When he called, I just tried to hear him. Language holds us all to the ground sometimes. I will not offer up my wrists symbolically—I will hold a megaphone up for someone else to shout into. I will echo their chants.

This thesis advocates for prison abolition. The poetry of Bob Kaufman, Etheridge Knight, and Jimmy Santiago Baca bring that stance to life. Because these poems are not metaphors but



are experiences, are real blood and pain and trauma and love; because those behind bars deserve to see their freedom, I envision abolition. Of course, freedom is nebulous—of course, not all those incarcerated are the same or will need the same things or will have the same futures as we look forward towards abolition. Abolition is a process, shaped and constructed by material conditions, but at its core is a radical valuation of human life, of community: love.

In “No Moon Floods the Memory of That Night,” Etheridge Knight writes, “A revolutionary is a doomed man / with no certainties but love and history” (31). We must enter this space with love and with knowledge of that history. Any interpretation I make of these poems is not to dull any element of the poets’ experience. In fact, this thesis aims to let their poems speak for themselves to the fullest capacity. I only want to highlight their work and especially relevant points. I am not seeking to be an authority on prison poetry. The authorities are these poets. Not me. I want to make that abundantly clear because, as Baca notes, this framing of prison poetry towards and for the prison poets is necessity.

Foundationally, a way to understand the application of abolition and the paradoxical nature of the carceral state is through the Marxist philosophical system known as dialectical materialism. The key implication of this system is that historical conditions must determine our interpretation of reality—understanding the context of our historical moment, the material conditions impacting its subjects, is the only way to structure our worldview. This is the materialist element. The dialectical element refers to the contradictions of that materialism and how we must reckon with those. The world is a paradox—capitalism must oppress workers while producing workers, war must convince its subjects that it is the only way to peace—and Marx argues that rather than try to reconcile those paradoxes, those contradictions, we understand them

as a necessary part of life, a driving force of historical change (“Dialectical Materialism”). Thus, the paradox of incarceration.

Michel Foucault describes in his 1975 book, *Discipline & Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, that the prison recreates subjects in order to sustain itself—“the maintenance of delinquency, the encouragement of recidivism, the transformation of the occasional offender into a habitual delinquent”—all sustained and perpetuated by the penal system rather than reformed out of the offenders (272). He describes this encouragement of criminalization as the “failure” of the prison, meaning that if the prison’s goal is to rehabilitate, how are we to understand its active perpetuation of crime? Foucault asks how we can justify such a seeming contradiction, explaining:

Can we not see here a consequence rather than a contradiction? If so, one would be forced to suppose that the prison, and no doubt punishment in general, is not intended to eliminate offenses, but rather to distinguish them, to distribute them, to use them; that it is not so much that they render docile those who are liable to transgress the law, but that they tend to assimilate the transgression of the laws in a general tactics of subjection. Penalty would then appear to be a way of handling illegalities, of laying down the limits of tolerance, of giving free rein to some, of putting pressure on others, of excluding a particular section, of making another useful, of neutralizing certain individuals and of profiting from others. In short, penalty does not simply ‘check’ illegalities; it ‘differentiates’ them, it provides them with a general ‘economy.’ And, if one can speak of justice, it is not only because the law itself or the way of applying it serves the interests of a class, it is also because the differential administration of illegalities through the mediation of penalty forms part of those mechanisms of domination. Legal punishments

are to be resituated in an overall strategy of illegalities. The ‘failure’ of the prison may be understood on this basis. (272)

Foucault’s terminology of the carceral is essential for understanding how this social apparatus functions as constructing the subjects under its power. Foucault describes the carceral apparatus as having three main points—“the politico-moral scheme of individual isolation and hierarchy, the economic model of force applied to compulsory work; the technico-medical model of cure and normalization” (248). This economic model is necessary to understand what Angela Davis describes as the prison industrial complex, and its inherent racism especially in the American context. The Sentencing Project reports that Black men are six times as likely to be incarcerated than white men, and Latinx men are 2.5 times more likely than white men. This discrimination has deep roots. Davis writes:

In the post-Civil War era, emancipated Black men and women comprised an enormous reservoir of labor at a time when planters—and industrialists—could no longer rely on slavery, as they had done in the past. This labor became increasingly available for use by private agents precisely through the convict lease system...and related systems such as debt peonage.” (94)

As such, American carceral systems evolved to continue racist exploitation after the initial abolition of slavery. Slavery was thus legally relegated as a punishment, though its relegation as punishment was designed to perpetuate nearly identical levels of exploitation, now growing into a corporate exploitation rather than an individual one. Capitalism creates that corporate demand, appropriating the legal allowance of such continued slavery to serve economic needs. While this purpose of the prison has been true from its origin, it is especially key for understanding the more recent phenomena of contemporary American mass incarceration—currently, over two

million inmates are incarcerated in the country which is a five hundred percent increase in the past forty years, a staggering number of people and a staggering increase (Sentencing Project). Systems that carry out punishment have, from the beginning, been “situated in a certain ‘political economy’ of the body,” as demonstrated by the American penal system’s focus this capitalist brand of exploitation, rooted in racist exploitation as well (Foucault 25).

The prison, in addition to its racialized violence, enacts gendered violence. This gendered violence moves in all directions, with neither end of the spectrum constituting the norm, as Davis elaborates:

Addressing issues that are specific to women’s prisons is of vital importance, but it is equally important to shift the way we think about the prison system as a whole. Certainly women’s prison practices are gendered, but so, too, are men’s prison practices. To assume that men’s institutions constitute the norm and women’s institutions are marginal is, in a sense, to participate in the very normalization of prisons that an abolitionist approach seeks to contest. (61)

While the poets I discuss here are all three male, I want to ensure to not erase the trauma endured by incarcerated women. The three chosen poets merely operate on a similar comparable conceptual scale that suited their combination here. Incarcerated women experience an irreducible amount of violence, just like their male counterparts and with its own gendered angles which often turns towards sexual assault. Davis takes a depiction of this assault from Assata Shakur’s memoir, who describes a search practice that is performed on all prisoners. Shakur describes this brutal process:

You sit on the edge of this table and the nurse holds your legs open and sticks a finger in your vagina and moves it around. She has a plastic glove on. Some of them try to put one finger in your vagina and another one up your rectum at the same time. (Davis 63)

Davis follows this sickening passage by explaining its significance. As she says, “it exposes an everyday routine in women’s prisons that verges on sexual assault as much as it is taken for granted” (Davis 63). The gendered violence of the prison also contributes to that subconscious, invisible element of the prison as ideological. In this vein, Davis writes, “women’s prisons became as strongly anchored to the social landscape as men’s prisons, but even more invisible” (71). Thus, part of reawakening our subjectivities into consciousness of the prison as an apparatus includes developing consciousness of this gendered violence.

In discussing gendered violence, it is essential to discuss how this division of incarceration perpetuates transphobia. Trans prisoners are “five times as likely to be abused by prison staff” (“Standing with Trans Prisoners”). As of February 2020, there were 4,890 reported trans inmates, with likely many more not part of that statistic for various reasons. Of those 4,890, only 15 are housed according to their lived gender (Sosin). Trans women are forced into prison with men, and as a result, they experience intense transphobia. NBC’s Kate Sosin visited a prison in Chino, New York which houses 78 trans women with 3,572 men. She met with ten of those trans women: nine of whom reported being sexually assaulted behind bars, and five of whom were denied their transfer requests to a women’s prison.

The prison was meant to serve a purpose, which can be easy to forget in the midst of all its brutality. Foucault’s described “technico-medical model of cure and normalization” articulates the punishment apparatus as intended to utilize scientific progress to—obviously—cure and normalize its subjects. As expressed already, this tenet is socially displayed to mislead

subjects of the prison's intent, but the prison must contradict its supposed intention of cure and normalization in order to recreate prisoners.

Foucault traces the emergence of the prison in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries as a phenomena rooted in the evolution of punishment, once a public spectacle, now something hidden (7). This expresses the tenet of the prison as “the politico-moral scheme of individual isolation and hierarchy,” as Foucault describes (248). Thus, in the carceral stage of collective subjectivity, punishment is something hidden in the prison yet omnipresent as a threat, an apparatus looming over us all as an enforcement mechanism that the state uses to instill fear and simultaneously punish and enslave.

Angela Davis describes also how the carceral apparatus enacts its ideology onto subjects who are perhaps not individually impacted by incarceration, those who “tend to think of the prison as disconnected from our own lives” (15):

The prison therefore functions ideologically as an abstract site into which undesirables are deposited, relieving us of the responsibility of thinking about the real issues afflicting those communities from which prisoners are drawn in such disproportionate numbers.

This is the ideological work that the prison performs—it relieves us of the responsibility of seriously engaging with the problems of our society, especially those produced by racism and, increasingly, global capitalism. (16)

The mere presence of such a vicious, exploitative entity borne of inherent discrimination begs the question—what lies beyond this? Davis describes how prison abolitionists in the eyes of most people “are dismissed as utopians and idealists,”—although, that stigma is beginning to shift, which I will expand on below—but Davis understands this dismissal as representative of a larger

truth of collective subjectivity. “The prison is considered so ‘natural’ that it is extremely hard to imagine life without it,” she writes (Davis 9-10).

Abolition entered the broader, popular vocabulary predominantly and unprecedentedly in reference to the police during the Black Lives Matter movement that arose following the 2020 murder of George Floyd at the hands of the state, this time in the form of a Minneapolis police officer. Collectively, many American citizens who had not previously been attuned to such movements asked, what lies beyond this? The answer came in community, in the work of BIPOC activists who had been fighting this fight since long before the immense crowds of that year roiled through the streets, our streets. Abolition may at first sound terrifying, as Angela Davis reminds us. People wonder what replaces the police, the prison.

The answer is love. The answer is community. Support rather than penalization, care rather than threats. Of course, this is a process—dialectical and evolving, unpredictable and circumstantially determined. Yet, envisioning a future without prisons is simple when the individual is once more seen as a part of a community, when we rely on each other and build structures of care. The prison seeks to individualize and divide, to destroy connection and prevent solidarity. Thus, a fluid conception of self—a self that is many things at once, a self that, like Bob Kaufman, “sit[s] opposite every prisoner in every hole”—is the necessary opposition to the prison’s ideology. Through this fluid conception of self, we must envision a future of love and community, an ethic demonstrated through the work of many incarcerated poets but particularly that of Bob Kaufman, Etheridge Knight, and Jimmy Santiago Baca. Their words speak for themselves, but in compilation, we can see an astounding volume of sheer love pouring out into their readers, into their communities. Perhaps this love and solidarity is enough.

Dolorous Echo by Bob Kaufman

The holey little holes  
In my skin,  
Millions of little  
Secret graves,  
Filled with dead  
Feelings  
That won't stay  
Dead.

The hairy little hairs  
On my head,  
Millions of little  
Secret trees,  
Filled with dead  
Birds,  
That won't stay  
Dead.

When I die,  
I won't stay  
Dead.



## CHAPTER 2. BOB KAUFMAN, A KOSMOS

### *The Life of Bob Kaufman*

In his poem “Dolorous Echo,” activist and Beatnik Bob Kaufman writes,  
When I die,  
I won’t stay  
Dead. (22)

The soul of the poet remains living in his work, reaching out like Walt Whitman across time and space to hold the reader. Yet, Bob Kaufman is not a household name. Perhaps it is a totally unfamiliar one. This neglect is an egregious error of canonization, a diminishment of one of American poetry’s most exceptional figures. Kaufman’s work—despite its unique, expansive beauty—has largely slipped into obscurity, though the 2019 publication by City Lights of his collected poems marks a deserved resurgence of his poetic brilliance to the public. This spectacular edition of Kaufman’s complete works provides us also with perhaps the most definitive account of Kaufman’s life in the form of a chronology. Kaufman’s biography necessarily informs a complete reading of his poems, as his political and poetic subjectivity are informed by his experiences with institutional brutality through the carceral system. However, as devorah major (sic) notes, “Bob Kaufman is a man steeped in a mythology sprinkled with a few facts” (ix). The chronology of Kaufman’s life is sometimes contradictory, and sometimes open-ended as the poet made himself that anonymous figure he sought to be. Kaufman’s life is a mythos, not a timeline.

Kaufman was the seventh of thirteen children to a German Jewish father and a Black Catholic mother, born in New Orleans on April 19, 1925 (Folkart, “Chronology”). He was baptized in the Catholic Church in August of the same year, but spent his childhood exposed to

Jewish, Catholic, and his grandmother's Voodoo traditions ("About Bob Kaufman"). After graduating high school in 1942, he began to work for the U.S Coast Guard. At this point, his life becomes for several years merely a series of shipping out and returning ceaselessly, often landing him around New York City. He became a person of interest for the FBI during these years due to his supposed connections to purported Communist Party organizations, namely the NMU Maritime Training School. He was ultimately seen as a "security risk" by the Coast Guard and, as a result, was discharged from service as well as expelled by the union he participated in due to possible drug use, all of which happened in 1951 ("Chronology"). As Mel Clay describes, "A young Black Union organizer was not the most welcomed person around," yet despite his difficulty operating within these spaces, Kaufman's time in this radical work still enabled him to experience solidarity that he carried for the rest of his life (8). Clay continues, "[Kaufman] learned the dreams and fears of his fellow men firsthand in prisons, in meeting halls and in hospital wards" (8). Kaufman's visitations of these spaces are a prelude to his later intimate familiarity with them. These dismissals from his various positions are indicative of some larger truth of Kaufman: his revolution was not to be compromised, for he was unrelentingly true to himself—his desires and ideals, which often positioned him as an outcast in both disciplined revolutionary circles and in more conventional circles.

Kaufman's poetic life takes place primarily in the North Beach of San Francisco. From his initial 1957 arrival until his 1986 death, activist and photographer Jerry Stoll remembers:

He was functioning as a critic of society in a much more social and political way than any of the other poets in North Beach were...it is really clear that people like Ginsberg and the rest of them, when they were political activists, were following Kaufman. They didn't lead Kaufman, he led them. He had the political consciousness." (Henderson 9-10)

Through Kaufman's deep commitments to resistance, he became the embodiment and centerpiece of the Beat movement. Other figures from this movement include Diane di Prima, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Jack Kerouac, Gregory Corso, and perhaps most famously, Allen Ginsberg whose long poem "Howl" prompted a censorship trial in 1957 regarding its purported obscenity. The word Beatnik was first printed in 1958 by reporter Herb Caen. According to some recollections, Caen overheard Kaufman "playfully invent" the word, and thus, the term Beatnik was born and lives (Morgan 145). More importantly than semantics, Kaufman's political consciousness formed the moral center of the movement, leading the way, as Stoll describes, for the other poets to similarly embody the beliefs they expressed in their poetics through on-the-ground activism.

During this time in San Francisco, Kaufman's political activism and its embodiment of his poetic ideals led to frequent run-ins with police; he was even committed to mental health institutions where he forcibly underwent electroshock therapy ("Bob Kaufman"). In 1959 alone Kaufman was arrested by the San Francisco police 39 times, mostly for the asinine charge of disorderly conduct (Peditto). Kaufman refused to view these agents of the state as figures worthy of respect, something they refused to offer him. The poet Paul Landry recounts that a particular cop—named Bigarani—expressed frequent hatred for Beatniks, harassing them at the Coexistence Bagel Shop and often tearing down their poetry, so in response "Bob just stood up and pissed on the guy's pants." Kaufman acted viscerally in opposition to the police defacement of art in his own personalized act of defacement, and his community stood behind him—the "Bob Kaufman Can" was a fixture of the Coexistence Bagel Shop, a container that sat by the door of the business and acted as perpetual bail fund (Henderson 13).

Kaufman's profound yet fluid authenticity manifested in every facet of his persona. Allen

Ginsberg (1920-1996) said of him, “[Kaufman] wasn’t just political, he was metaphysical, psychological, surrealist, and enlightened in extending his care into the whole society of poetry, seeing that as the revolution” (Henderson 7). For Kaufman, revolutionary politics and the written word were inextricable. The poetry was not merely part of the revolution or vice versa—they were simply one. His altercations with police were necessary to him—resistance to the racist, oppressive, carceral state was as much a part of him as his own flesh and bone, as much a part of him as his poetry. His brother George recalls, “He was arrested many times, brutally treated, thrown into jail cells with no heat and freezing conditions and kept there for a long time. But that never stopped him. He still had his own way of thinking” (Henderson 9).

Kaufman refused to be anything but himself, and his own subjectivity was constructed around his political thought as much as his poetic consciousness—his 1959 *Abomunist Manifesto* articulates such a truth in its absurdist, aphoristic mode that reflects Kaufman’s own psychological fluidity (“Chronology”). Poet and activist Amiri Baraka (1934-2014) explains that Abomunism was Kaufman “making some kind of excluded radical, a radical outsider force...From the real feelings of being opposed to society, and that the whole society had to be overthrown” (Henderson 11-12). The manifesto itself fills nine pages of Kaufman’s collected work, and merges poetry, prose, and aphorisms into its body. Within it, Baraka’s observations are all present—that opposition to society and desire to overthrow it flows through the work with Kaufman’s poetic ideology, all beneath the mask of absurdism. As Laurence Ferlinghetti (1919-2021) describes Kaufman, he perceived necessarily “the position of the poet as enemy of the state,” and the ideology of Abomunism reflects Kaufman’s notion of the poet within such a role (Henderson 27). The manifesto begins, “Abomunists join nothing but their hands or legs, or other same” (57). In the first line, Kaufman expresses distaste for organizationally-based

ideological structures, likely a response to his experiences with leftist political work where he faced judgment for his lifestyle. The latter part of that first line, though, expresses solidarity. Abomunists do not join organizations, they hold onto their community. In other words, community defines Abomunism rather than some titled, delineated politic. Kaufman's literary consciousness was borne from this radicalism and sense of being an outsider, a sense which was emphasized by his consistent and vicious experiences of police brutality.

In 1960, Kaufman was arrested for walking on the grass in Washington Square Park. Following this arrest, he was shuffled through city jail, Riker's Island, and finally Bellevue Hospital where he was forced to undergo shock treatment (Henderson 16, "Chronology" xxxiii). The hospital staff shaved his head without his consent, and when he returned, he barely spoke and moved his hands erratically as though writing. John Fiske recalls that his hand motions "seemed to be intended to communicate to the cosmos" (Henderson 16). Mel Clay remembers the extended ramifications of this experience for Kaufman:

For the rest of his life he carried the assault of that experience in his body and mind and his poetry dipped into that savage unguarded space where personal identity and dreams collide. (9)

Kaufman's particular trauma during this experience formed a thread, traceable through his work and through his consciousness for the rest of his life.

Kaufman's wife, Eileen, recounts that this repeated brutalization by the police as a result of his art and their racism ultimately took a toll on Bob—he was, she said, "spending so much time in jail being beaten by police that he finally decided to get out of there," and so began his time in New York City in 1960 after being invited to read at Harvard—an event which never transpired (Henderson 14, "Chronology" xxxiii). Instead, he spent his time in New York

spiraling deeper into alcoholism and experimentation with psychedelics, alongside Allen Ginsberg (Henderson 15). As Foye notes, the years Kaufman lived in New York were “filled with poverty, addiction, and imprisonment,” culminating with Kaufman squatting in an abandoned building with his infant son during the winter months (ix). Ginsberg remembers that during a psilocybin trip, Kaufman “wanted some kind of reassurance—historical, cosmic, reassurance. What was going to happen to earth” (Henderson 15)? This period of uncertainty and depression serves as a psychological indicator of what was to come, a prelude to Kaufman’s later vow of silence.

Bob borrowed money from Lawrence Ferlinghetti to fly home to his family in San Francisco in 1963 where he could rejoin Eileen and their infant son Parker. November of the same year brought the Kennedy assassination, which reportedly “prompted a number of horrific visions” for Kaufman and as a result, the poet entered a period of silence that ultimately lasted for ten years (Henderson 16). The change was predicated in his poems, the shift of consciousness that led to such lengths revealed in his final poem before the silence, titled “Small Memoriam for Myself.” The poem, composed of only two tercets, reads:

Beyond the reach of scorn, lust is freed of its vulgar face.

No more blanch of terror at reality’s threat of sadness.

No blend of grief can cause the death of laughter now.

In remembrance of certain lights I have seen go out,

I have visualized pathetic rituals and noisy requiems,

Composed of metaphysical designs of want and care. (150)

Within this brief poem, Kaufman’s characteristically surreal verse outlines a detached

subjectivity. The final line of the first stanza clearly expresses such detachment, yet a nostalgia emerges in the following line. There's a tension in the poem—detachment and attachment, looking forward and looking back. Kaufman left his own memorial, then went into himself.

Yet, those who loved him did not lose hope. During this time, Eileen submitted Bob's old poems to magazines to make them enough to scrape by, supplemented as always by their friends who watched out for them. Eileen recalls, "I never gave up on Bob. I knew he'd surprise us all one day and come out and be as beautiful as ever" (Henderson 18). He spoke again for the first time on the last day of May 1973 by reciting a monologue from T.S. Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral* followed by his first original poem in a decade, "[All Those Ships That Never Sailed]" ("Chronology" xxxiv-xxxv). The poem begins:

All those ships that never sailed  
The ones with their seacocks open  
That were scuttled in their stalls...  
Today I bring them back  
Huge and intransitory  
And let them sail  
Forever.

All those flowers that you never grew—  
that you wanted to grow  
The ones that were plowed under  
ground in the mud—  
Today I bring them back

And let you grow them  
Forever.

All those wars and truces  
Dancing down these years—  
All in three flag-swept days  
Rejected meaning of God— (151)

The poem is triumphant yet melancholic, allowing eternity in all its forevers while still reckoning with darker images such as the mud in the second stanza or the wars in the third. Kaufman's resounding return to his voice is marked by paradox as he weaves together these distant images, of the sea and nature and violence, into a tense whole. The poet harnesses a spectrum of emotional and linguistic texture as the poem continues:

My body once covered with beauty  
Is now a museum of betrayal.  
This part remembered because of that one's touch  
This part remembered for that one's kiss—  
Today I bring it back  
And let you live forever.

I breathe a breathless I love you  
And move you  
Forever.



Remove the snake from Moses' arm... (151)

These stanzas sustain the tension established, transferring the poem's existing realm of paradox into the body itself. Kaufman here shows the individual as a space that harnesses collective experience, the body as something onto which these experiences and traumas are inscribed. Memories are something that can live again, and the body "once covered with beauty" which now is "a museum of betrayal" carries its wounds with it. Then, Kaufman revisits the eternal—love and motion become timeless, and the Biblical reference that the poet employs in the final quoted line reinforces the still-living status of memory, as though Moses's mythos can live again through anyone. This mystical subjectivity is a current throughout Kaufman's work.

Formative to Bob's poetic and political subjectivity were some of his other loves—jazz, mysticism, and community—especially community established through poetry. Foye credits Kaufman with an "absolute" dedication to oral and improvisational poetry, calling him the "quintessential jazz poet" (ix). So important was jazz to Kaufman that he named his only son, Parker, after the musician Charlie Parker (Lindberg). Charles Nyland observes, "For Kaufman jazz seems to have been a force against the destructive. He has some feeling that jazz almost shed a mystical light that enabled one to deal with experiences" (Henderson 9). Yet, Kaufman's love of the oral tradition of poetry did not negate his love of the written word. He stored volumes in his memory, able to reportedly recite from numerous classics at will for hours, which he mixed with his own work indistinguishably as Foye recalls, "for Bob all poetry was one" (Henderson 24).

This communalistic sense informs not only Kaufman's ideals of the poetic canon, but inform his interactions with the poetic community of his contemporaries. His focus on the oral tradition shows his ideal of poetry as communication, as interaction, as togetherness. This same

perception emerged in his politics, for, as established, the poetic and the political were necessarily one to Kaufman—“activists...didn’t lead Kaufman, he led them,” a leader without seeking the role (Henderson 10).

Dr. Charles Nyland, a contemporary of Kaufman’s, was one of the first American academics to seriously evaluate Kaufman’s poetry, understanding it along biographical lines as his poems almost beg to be read. Nyland believes that Kaufman’s surrealist mode “gives him a certain aesthetic distance when he makes use of personal experiences” (Henderson 28). This quality of his work is perhaps rooted in his mysticism, something that the people who loved Bob remember expansively. Kaufman seemed to have unique powers over sound and space. Lynn Wildey, Kaufman’s companion for his final years, recalls him as a genuinely magical being. “He could do magical things with sound, he sat up all night mouthing sounds into the night. With his fingers,” she says, “he could summon something called an ‘electronic’ being. It was ectoplasmic and hovered in the room” (Henderson 26).

Bob Kaufman died of pulmonary emphysema on January 12, 1986. On January 23, in Kaufman’s true communally oriented fashion, a large parade ran through the streets of North Beach, his primary home, where once he was “jumping on cars and shouting his poetry” (Henderson 7). Witnesses recall, “His ashes are scattered in the San Francisco Bay as a rainbow emerges over the skyline” (“Chronology” xxxvii). Kaufman himself is scattered, shouting poetry against that skyline and all skylines, a kosmos who—in his own words—“won’t stay / Dead” (“Dolorous Echo”).

This biographical foundation illustrates what exactly is at stake in a carceral society. As Kaufman writes in his “Jail Poems,” “The defective on the floor, mumbling, / Was once a man who shouted across tables” (47). Kaufman’s activism offers a ground for his radicalism, and the

accounts by those who loved him showed the cost of such viciousness towards Kaufman—once a man who shouted poetry, reduced at one point to only mumbles. All of this could have been prevented, all this trauma at the hands of the state, wounds reopening against the page in Kaufman’s words. As Mel Clay writes, “Find his books and read his poetry—you will feel how much he paid” (7). As Kaufman saw it through his Abomunist lens, organized society must be disrupted and with it so must our faulty, exploitative, carceral-oriented system of supposed justice.

*“Always here somehow”: Kaufman’s “Jail Poems”*

Bob Kaufman’s “Jail Poems” form the epicenter of this brand of poetic subjectivity that is shaped and informed by incarceration. The sequence is composed of 35 sections of varying lengths, from a sprawling stanza to a single line, all written in Cell 3 of the San Francisco City Jail in 1959. “Jail Poems” first appeared in Kaufman’s readings, of course, but was published initially in the *Beatitude* magazine that he founded alongside the poets John Kelly and William J. Margolis, and edited alongside those and other Beats such as Ginsberg, Peter Orlovsky, Jack Kerouac, and more—“Ann Otherkats,” as Kaufman stylizes it on the *Beatitude Anthology* which collected highlights from the journal. This journal forms a crucial part of Kaufman’s legacy, in fact—most Beat histories cite this as his primary achievement in a dismissal of his poetic accomplishments. William Hjortsberg explains in his sprawling and uniquely good-faith biography of Richard Brautigan:

Three poets...decided to publish a ‘weekly miscellany of poetry and other jazz designed to extol beauty and promote the beatific life among the various mendicants, neo-existentialists, christs, poets, painters, musicians, and other inhabitants and observers of North Beach, San Francisco, California, United States of America.’ They named their

nascent effort *Beatitude*, a term meaning perfect blessedness and one designating Christ's pronouncements in the Sermon on the Mount. (154)

"Jail Poems" later appeared in Kaufman's first full collection, 1965's *Solitudes Crowded with Loneliness* ("Chronology"). To allow this work not only the canonical space it deserves but also to allow you, the reader, to engage closely the breadth of the poem, it will appear in full. I will pause between sections to add comments when it feels pertinent rather than between each section because of their variance in length and content. Kaufman begins:

1.

I am sitting in a cell with a view of evil parallels,  
Waiting thunder to splinter me into a thousand me's.  
It is not enough to be in one cage with one self;  
I want to sit opposite every prisoner in every hole.  
Doors roll and bang, every slam a finality, bang!  
The junkie disappeared into a red noise, stoning out his hell.  
The odored wino congratulates himself on not smoking,  
Fingerprints left lying on black inky gravestones,  
Noises of pain seeping through steel walls crashing  
Reach my own hurt. I become part of someone forever.  
Wild accents of criminals are sweeter to me than hum of cops,  
Busy battening down hatches of human souls; cargo  
Destined for ports of accusations, harbors of guilt.  
What do policemen eat, Socrates, still prisoner, old one?

This first stanza is Kaufman at his most compressed and potent—vicious, surreal images

shriek around complex ideological implications, rendering a haunted yet empathetic landscape. These fourteen lines, a sonnet against its own history, establish a fluid speaker. This speaker is very much Kaufman but in his spiritualistic way, he is everywhere at once. The specificity of his experience grounds the poem within his personhood—later, specific references to his cell solidify this reading as autobiographical—but he perceives his own self in this universalized way, multiplied through solidarity. This sequence of poems is defined by that desire to “sit opposite every prisoner in every hole”—one self, for Kaufman, is insufficient. He seeks to “become part of someone forever” through solidarity, forming a plural self in opposition to the state as “Wild accents of criminals are sweeter to me than hum of cops” suggests. Kaufman’s poetic subjectivity expresses the unity of the carceral subject in opposition to the state, a relationship established by the state as Foucault tells us, but a relationship that the state’s subjects may still appropriate in the form of resistance.

Within this poem, overlaid onto all these potent moments of empathy are also experiences of intense pain and trauma. These dual tonalities bind the whole of the sequence together, creating the surreal atmosphere that characterizes Kaufman’s work through their paradox. Particularly the midsection of the stanza embodies such a tone of pain. The aggression of the “bang!” that closes the fifth line marks the intensity of the subsequent images—a “junkie,” a “wino,” graves, even stating clearly “Noises of pain.” Yet, these noises “Reach [the speaker’s] own hurt” so that he may “become part of someone forever.” The shared suffering shapes the unity found.

This stanza closes with a question—“What do policemen eat, Socrates, still prisoner, old one?” The effect of this conclusion is plural. First, it subverts the Socratic method by applying the method to Socrates himself. The Socratic method involves a persistent questioning of

everything until satisfactory answers are reached, and Kaufman takes this method and asks Socrates a question instead. The mere presence of Socrates in this poem as if still living also establishes several elements of the poem's reality. Additionally, as Socrates died after incarceration after a death sentence by way of poisoning. This question of what policemen eat calls back to the poison that the philosopher drank—perhaps, then, the policemen eat this poison as well. Through this relationship with Socrates, we see Kaufman creating solidarity with Socrates through their shared experience of incarceration, which paints a solidarity larger than time itself. Finally, the presence of this question frames the rest of the sequence. “Jail Poems” from its second installment to its thirty-fifth could be seen either as a response to this question, or the question could be seen as unanswered, an ambiguity hovering over the subject throughout the remainder of the sequence. This dual reading seems enforced by Kaufman's insistence on the self as fluid. Perhaps, then, these readings of the question should be viewed as simultaneous truths. Following this question, Kaufman continues:

2.

Painter, paint me a jail, mad water-color cells.

Poet, how old is suffering? Write it in yellow lead.

God, make me a sky on my glass ceiling. I need stars now,

To lead through this atmosphere of shrieks and private hells,

Entrances and exits, in ... out ... up ... down, the civic seesaw.

Here—me—now—hear—me—now—always here somehow.

On the back of Kaufman's collected poems, a quote from Douglas Kearney asserts, “To call these poems ‘surreal’ seems, now, to muffle Kaufman's prophetic genius. He saw us, our images in pools of blood, milk, and saxophone spittle.” This second stanza, of pain and

infinitude, indicates Kearney's observation. Kaufman's surrealism is not an abstract, impassible one—rather, the surrealism grounds the poetry in reality. Surrealism is reductive—of course the atmospheric quality of Kaufman's verse renders a strange landscape, but to dismiss it as abstraction is to deny its implications. Kaufman's perception depicts in unfamiliar language material circumstances. Kearney describes his prophetic genius—Kaufman who saw the future and the past and now materializes in this stanza, prophetic indeed. Like a prophet, Kaufman asks a God for guidance—stars to trace the path through pain. “God, make me a sky on my glass ceiling,” he requests.

Like the first stanza, this stanza incorporates a question, this time in the second line which positions it very near the question from the opening stanza's final line. Throughout the sequence, this poem's communicability is reasserted. There is a constant dialogue present in the piece, as if speaking directly to a multitude. Here, Kaufman asks, “Poet, how old is suffering?” Kaufman here references the poet in a sort of Platonic sense—the poet as ideal being, a form to which all poets aspire, like the abstraction of the painter present in the first line. Perhaps, that is. Kaufman, as we've already seen, views the self as fluid within the body of this poem, and as such, the poet in this line could be seen as the speaker himself, constantly in flux.

The last two lines of this stanza are of interest as well. The “civic seesaw” and its arbitrary pattern shows Kaufman's disdain for state proceedings and their dehumanizing machination. The final line takes the rhythm established by the seesaw and turns it into a mantra of sorts, manipulating homophones into richly alive images through “Here—me—now—hear—me—now—always here somehow.” Kaufman reasserts the timeless fluidity of the self, made infinite through solidarity. The constant presence is a comfort, someone to stand with you. What we can *hear* when we listen for Kaufman is physically *here*. The eternal spirit of the poet is not a

figure of speech, but an observable reality through this incantation of sorts. The poem continues:

3.

In a universe of cells—who is not in jail? Jailers.

In a world of hospitals—who is not sick? Doctors.

A golden sardine is swimming in my head.

Oh we know some things, man, about some things

Like jazz and jails and God.

Saturday is a good day to go to jail.

Once more, this stanza begins by questioning. The speaker, Kaufman, Socrates, the listener—all meld together like this. Who asks and who listens? It seems that each does both, shifting between forms and bodies, shifting between each other. These questions solidify further the ethic of the poem by critiquing the distribution of power by the state. This line of questioning particularly stands apart due to its having a clear answer, the first time in the poem that Kaufman has denoted a necessary response to the question which not only provides a rhetorical shift, but also further unifies the speaker and the listener, the asker and answerer. The rhetorical shift indicates a certainty that has been absent in the previous stanzas, when the speaker first expresses desire for communion with other prisoners, then speaks to a God, seeking guidance towards this goal.

This third stanza feels at first more particular, but it expands as well before contracting again all in these few lines. The rhetorical shift that results from the opening lines showcases the binary power structure under the state—jailers as those who are not subject to the jail, doctors are those who are not subject to illness. The state offers power to these figures, ensuring their freedom from the things they enact as compensation. The next three lines move back into



consciousness—a golden sardine, jazz and jails and God all meandering through the lines before the stanza halts. Kaufman continues:

4.

Now they give a new form, quivering jelly-like,  
That proves any boy can be president of Muscatel.  
They are mad at him because he's one of Them.  
Gray-speckled unplanned nakedness; stinking  
Fingers grasped toilet bowl. Mr. America wants to bathe.  
Look! On the floor, lying across America's face—  
A real movie star featured in a million newsreels.  
What am I doing—feeling compassion?  
When he comes out of it, he will help kill me.  
He probably hates living.

5.

Nuts, skin bolts, clanking in his stomach, scrambled.  
His society's gone to pieces in his belly, bloated.  
See the great American windmill, tilting at itself,  
Good solid stock, the kind that made America drunk.  
Success written all over his street-streaked ass.  
Successful-type success, forty home runs in one inning.

Stop suffering, Jack, you can't fool us. We know.

This is the greatest country in the world, isn't it?

He didn't make it. Wino in Cell 3.

This stanza incorporates decidedly American imagery, inverting that familiarity into critique—America itself is a drunk here, once successful but now spoiled. This broadly critical attitude towards America as an entity is necessary for understanding the scope of the poem's critique of the state as a sovereign function, but the closing line of this stanza is equally necessary to fully construct the speaker of the poem. This conclusion is what merits a paragraph of its own for this stanza. In my discussions of the first two stanzas, I mention a moment in the poem that merits a reading of Kaufman as speaker. "Wino in Cell 3" is that moment. The note that follows this poem's inclusion in Kaufman's *Collected Poems* mentions that the poems were written in Cell 3 of the San Francisco City Jail in 1959. Thus, the wino in Cell 3 who did not make it *is* Kaufman. We know from "Dolorous Echo" that when he dies, he will not stay dead. He died in jail, but did not stay dead. Following this revelation, the poem resumes:

6.

There have been too many years in this short span of mine.

My soul demands a cave of its own, like the Jain god;

Yet I must make it go on, hard like jazz, glowing

In this dark plastic jungle, land of long night, chilled.

My navel is a button to push when I want inside out.

Am I not more than a mass of entrails and rough tissue?

Must I break my bones? Drink my wine-diluted blood?

Should I dredge my old sadness from my chest?

Not again,

All those ancient balls of fire, hotly swallowed, let them lie.

Let me spit breath mists of introspection, bits of me,

So that when I am gone, I shall be in the air.

7.

Someone whom I am is no one.

Something I have done is nothing.

Someplace I have been is nowhere.

I am not me.

What of the answers

I must find questions for?

All these strange streets

I must find cities for,

Thank God for Beatniks.

Walt Whitman, grandfather-poet, lover, in “Song of Myself”—in which he, or the speaker, is not just himself but fluid and many; everyone at once—tells us “I bequeath myself to

the dirt to grow from the grass I love, / If you want me again look for me under your boot-soles” (1339-40). Kaufman turns this sentiment immaterial in stanza six—“when I am gone, I shall be in the air.” If Whitman is the poet of the soil, Kaufman is the poet of breath—what fills the lungs with smoke or with poetry or with chants at a protest, swirling around us all, flowing in and out of our bodies. Yet, this triumphant close is preluded with pain—the paradox of Kaufman’s own self emerges within this stanza.

He sustains the paradoxes established into the the seventh stanza, which offers a compression from the previous. The lines are clipped and verbally straightforward, though their content remains elusive. Once more, Kaufman reasserts the fluidity of the subject in this stanza—“I am not me”—but he also grounds that fluidity within community—“Thank God for Beatniks.” From here, the poem continues:

8.

All night the stink of rotting people,  
Fumes rising from pyres of live men,  
Fill my nose with gassy disgust,  
Drown my exposed eyes in tears.

9.

Traveling God salesmen, bursting my ear drum  
With the dullest part of a good sexy book,

Impatient for Monday and adding machines.

10.

Yellow-eyes dogs whistling in evening.

11.

The baby came to jail today.

These stanzas sustain the tonal paradox of the poem, morphing between the grotesque and the lighthearted. The pause here is because of the eleventh installment. This is once more a clear biographical reference, to Parker Kaufman, Bob's only son, whose October 13 birth in 1959 would make him very much an infant at this point.

12.

One more day to Hell, filled with floating glands.

13.

The jail, a huge hollow metal cube

Hanging from the moon by a silver chain.

Someday Johnny Appleseed is going to chop it down.

14.

One day Adolf Hitler had nothing to do.

All the Jews were burned, artists all destroyed,

Adolf Hitler was very bored, even with Eva,

So he moved to San Francisco, became an ordinary

Policeman, devoted himself to stamping out Beatniks.

Stanza thirteen offers an image of the jail as precariously suspended, and as a manmade institution. The last line offers also a justification for an abolitionist reading of this work—the jail is manmade and unstable and hollow, but it can be chopped down in a simple motion. The fourteenth stanza, meanwhile, calls upon Kaufman’s Jewish background—which, though he was not actively practicing in adulthood, often appears in his writing and was a regular part of his upbringing alongside other religious traditions—as he ties oppression by the police to oppression by the Nazis. This comparison aligns the genocidal actions of police with perhaps the most significant genocide in the recent collective consciousness—not more significant than any other in its ramifications, but rather, in its recollection value.

15.

Three long strings of light

Braided into a ray.

16.

I am apprehensive about my future;

My past has turned its back on me.

17.

Shadows I see, forming on the wall,

Pictures of desires protected from my own eyes.

18.

After spending all night constructing a dream,

Morning came and blinded me with light.

Now I seek among mountains of crushed eggshells

For the God damned dream I never wanted.

19.

Sitting here writing things on paper;

Instead of sticking the pencil into the air.

20.

The Battle of Monumental Failures raging,

Both hoping for a good clean loss.

21.

Now I see the night, silently overwhelming day.

22.

Caught in imaginary webs of conscience,

I weep over my acts, yet believe.

23.

Cities should be built on one side of the street.

24.

People who can't cast shadows

Never die of freckles.

25.



The end always comes last.

26.

We sat at a corner table,

Devouring each other word by word,

Until nothing was left, repulsive skeletons.

27.

I sit here writing, not daring to stop,

For feat of seeing what's outside my head.

28.

There, Jesus, didn't hurt a bit, did it?

29.

I am afraid to follow my flesh over those narrow

Wide hard, soft, female beds, but I do.

30.

Link by link, we forged the chain.

Then, discovering the ends around our necks,

We bugged out.

Stanzas fifteen through twenty-nine migrate into aphoristic, imagistic territory, emphasizing the surreal atmosphere that had previously taken a bit of a backseat to Kaufman's more grounded stanzas. The past and future, the trauma of incarceration, and the act of writing all make appearances within this segment of the sequence. Worth noting is stanza twenty-six, when solidarity reemerges into the poem. Language here becomes the substance of the self, stripping bodies into skeletons when the words are gone. Language also is the grounding force of community in this stanza.

Stanza thirty, meanwhile, observes the nature of labor. If read solely from a perspective of incarceration, Kaufman reveals the corruption of prison labor as sustaining the carceral penal system. If expanded to view all labor in this light, though, Kaufman critiques the nature of wage labor under capitalism as sustaining the oppression of the working class. This dual consciousness suggests Kaufman's overall political stance and, as such, I believe the stanza merits reading in both of these senses. The poem continues:

31.

I have never seen a wild poetic loaf of bread,

But if I did, I would eat it, crust and all.

32.

From how many years away does a baby come?

33.

Universality, duality, totality...one.

34.

The defective on the floor, mumbling,

Was once a man who shouted across tables.

35.

Come, help flatten a raindrop.

These final installments help solidify all the existing conversations around subjectivity, humanity, solidarity, and spirituality that are traced throughout the sequence of poems. The clever aphoristic mode sustained through these closing lines unifies the tonal variance between stanzas thirty-one and thirty two with the sincerity of the following three installments.

“Universality, duality, totality...one” creates a holistic worldview, uniting competing perspectives into a singularity. Stanza thirty-four, meanwhile, simply portrays the trauma that carceral punishment can inflict upon the subject. The man in this couplet could be Kaufman, who is recalled by many as mumbling when once he shouted, but that view of Kaufman usually is not

seen until later in his life. Kaufman could have written into his own future here, which, with this poet, is within the realm of possibility. However, this observation could also be about someone around him, in an expression of empathy for the man's display of trauma and to draw the readers into the extended pain of incarceration in such a visceral way.

The poem ends with creation and destruction, solidarity and ambiguity—a continued expression of paradox. “Come, help flatten a raindrop.” This request for help expresses Kaufman's core view of community within poetry, or within incarceration. However, the absurdity of flattening a raindrop contrasts that tone—in true Kaufman fashion, the paradox between surreal and solidarity ends this great sequence.

“Jail Poems” illustrate Kaufman's poetic subjectivity—solidarity, surrealism, absurdity, paradox, and more stretch throughout its tight to sprawling variety. These poems crystallize a subject of trauma but also of triumph: Through connection and community, Kaufman can envision abolition as Johnny Appleseed chops down the jail, or as he sits across from every prisoner in every hole. The eternity of Kaufman can be found there, sitting cross-legged on the ground and listening to his comrades in their cells.

*Sneeze Political: Selected Kaufman Poems*

Kaufman, of course, wrote beyond “Jail Poems.” His entire body of work contains this surreal yet grounded power, an eternity within his verse. No selection could contain the energy of his poems. However, the following poems encompass more relevant aspects of his poetic subjectivity that demonstrate concepts already established within their lines. First, his poem “Would You Wear My Eyes?” depicts brutally and fantastically the body as a space of inflicted trauma, literalizing its wounds, inscribing it with history (29). Kaufman writes:

My body is a torn mattress,  
Disheveled throbbing place  
For the comings and goings  
Of loveless transients.  
The whole of me  
Is an unfurnished room  
Filled with dank breath  
Escaping in gasps to nowhere.  
Before completely objective mirrors  
I have shot myself with my eyes,  
But death refused my advances.  
I have walked on my walls each night  
Through strange landscapes in my head.  
I have brushed my teeth with orange peel,  
Iced with cold blood from the dripping faucets.  
My face is covered with maps of dead nations;  
My hair is littered with drying ragweed.  
Bitter raisins drip haphazardly from my nostrils

While schools of glowing minnows swim from my mouth.

The nipples of my breasts are sun-browned cockleburrs;

Long-forgotten Indian tribes fight battles on my chest

Unaware of the sunken ships rotting in my stomach.

My legs are charred remains of burned cypress trees;

My feet are covered with moss from bayous, flowing across my floor.

I can't go out anymore.

I shall sit on my ceiling.

Would you wear my eyes?

This poem renders Kaufman's body as a landscape, creating in dual natural images and manmade images a paradox—the body as a place of pain and also of life, charred and littered and dank, yet growing or sunned or with “schools of glowing minnows” which can only read as beautiful. The viciousness is also home to a magic. Kaufman retreats into himself in this poem, yet still reaches out, asking the reader to wear his eyes. Whether this means that Kaufman would see through their eyes or them see through his is ambiguous and, likely, irrelevant. Either direction of connectivity still reveals the breadth of Kaufman's communal understanding of this trauma processing.

The following poem, “War Memoir: Jazz, Don't Listen to It at Your Own Risk,” creates a thread that we can follow into the work of Etheridge Knight, a discussion of whom follows this chapter (140-1). The thread is jazz—Kaufman often performed his poetry to jazz, and named his son for jazz. The historically Black art form was central to Kaufman's subjectivity, an

embodiment of expressive freedom that inspired Kaufman and Knight as well in multitudinous ways. The poem reads:

In the beginning, in the wet  
Warm dark place,  
Straining to break out, clawing at strange cables  
Hearing her screams, laughing  
“Later we forgot ourselves, we didn’t know”  
Some secret jazz  
Shouted, wait, don’t go.  
Impatient, we came running, innocent  
Laughing blobs of blood and faith.  
To this mother, father world  
Where laughter seems so out of place  
So we learned to cry, pleased  
They pronounced human.  
The secret jazz blew a sigh  
Some familiar sound shouted wait  
Some are evil, some will hate.  
“Just jazz, blowing its top again”

So we rushed and laughed.

As we pushed and grabbed

While jazz blew in the night

Suddenly we were too busy to hear a sound

We were busy shoving mud in men's mouths,

Who were busy dying on living ground

Busy earning medals, for killing children on deserted streetcorners

Occupying their fathers, raping their mothers, busy humans were

Busy burning Japanese in atomiccolorcinescope

With stereophonic screams,

What one-hundred-percent red-blooded-savage would waste precious time

Listening to Jazz, with so many important things going on

But even the fittest murderers must rest

So we sat down on our blood-soaked garments,

And listened to Jazz

lost, steeped in all our dreams

We were shocked at the sound of life, long gone from our own

We were indignant at the whistling, thinking, singing, beating, swinging



Living sound, which mocked us, but let us feel sweet life again  
We wept for it, hugged, kissed it, loved it, joined it, we drank it,  
Smoked it, ate with it, slept with it,  
We made our girls wear it for lovemaking  
Instead of silly lace gowns,  
Now in those terrible moments, when the dark memories come  
The secret moments to which we admit no one  
When guiltily we crawl back in time, reaching away from ourselves  
We hear a familiar sound,  
Jazz, scratching, digging, bluing, swinging jazz,  
And we listen  
And we feel  
And live.

This poem, in Kaufman's body of work, is relatively accessible. He appropriates the biblical creation narrative to center jazz and laughter as essentially human lifeforces. This notion of creativity and joy as the necessary human elements explains the presence of violence in their absence. Even soldiers open back up when exposed to jazz. The title is sincere—the cost of not listening to jazz is a loss of humanity. Thus, the music's centrality to Kaufman's poetic subjectivity and his perception of the value of creation cannot be overstated.

That view of creation—music, poetry, art—as central to human consciousness ultimately has political ramifications through its communal nature. If creativity forms community, then the political must follow from that communal structure in resistance to the state. As established, Kaufman views the poet as necessarily oppositional to the state because the state resists creative impulses in order to suppress its subjects, and the poet is precisely one such creative around which a community could foster that spirit. With these implications in mind, so that I might develop further a portrait of Kaufman’s political ideology, I will go over in greater detail some extended selections from his *Abomunist Manifesto*.

### **Abomunist Election Manifesto**

I Abomunists vote against everyone not voting for anyone.

II The only proposition Abomunists support are those made to members of the opposite sex.

III Abomunists demand the abolition of Oakland.

IV Abomunists demand low-cost housing for homosexuals.

V Abomunists demand suppression if illegal milk traffic.

VI Abomunists demand statehood for North Beach.

VII The only office Abomunists run for is the unemployment office.

VIII Abomunists support universal Frinkage

IX Abomunists demand split-level ranch-type phonebooths.

X Abomunists demand the reestablishment of the government in its rightful home at ?

## **BOMS**

II      Movies about inventors' lives and glass encased historical

documents do not move me as much as drinking or

hiccupping in the bathtub.

III     Filled with green courage we sneezed political,

coughing our dirty fingernails for President.

Not all lines in this bear equal weight, of course. Kaufman's characteristic tonal variation is at perhaps its most dramatic in this manifesto, necessarily imparting the absurd into his politic. The election portion critiques electoralism and bureaucracy persistently in I, II, X; and demands community autonomy in VI. The "Boms" portion criticizes the overvaluation of material objects in favor of experience, though a bit mockingly. The mocking tone continues, placing the President at the butt of the joke. Any American electoral politics strewn throughout the manifesto surface like this—comically and absurdly, a caricature of their inherent absurdism in reality. These excerpts demonstrate a relentless critique of American social ideology and politics, placing an emphasis instead on the absurd, highlighting the absurdism in our political sphere while focusing closely on our collective need for community and autonomy. Through this approach, echoing his observations in "War Memoir," Kaufman asks us to lighten up while still keep in our sights the end goal—freedom. Kaufman urges us to embrace laughter.

No Moon Floods the Memory of that Night by Etheridge Knight

No moon floods the memory of that night  
only the rain I remember the cold rain  
against our faces and mixing with your tears  
only the rain I remember the cold rain  
and your mouth soft and warm  
no moon no stars no jagged pain  
of lightning only my impotent tongue  
and the red rage within my brain  
knowing that the chilling rain was our forever  
even as I tried to explain:

“A revolutionary is a doomed man  
with no certainties but love and history.”  
“But our children must grow up with certainties  
and they will make the revolution.”  
“By example we must show the way so plain  
that our children can neither go right  
nor left but straight to freedom.”  
“No,” you said. And you left.

No moon floods the memory of that night  
only the rain I remember the cold rain  
and praying that like the rain  
returns to the sky you would return to me again.

### CHAPTER 3. “EVERYTHING IS POLITICAL, EVERYTHING IS AESTHETICAL, AND EVERYTHING IS ETHICAL”: THE LIFE OF ETHERIDGE KNIGHT

#### *The Lives of Etheridge Knight*

“I died in Korea from a shrapnel wound, and narcotics resurrected me. I died in 1960 from a prison sentence and poetry brought me back to life,” reads the back cover of Etheridge Knight’s first poetry collection, the 1968 volume *Poems from Prison* (“Knight”). Knight, like Kaufman, refused to stay dead—he came back twice. In this resurrection, Knight’s poetic subjectivity became informed by his carceral environment. Knight (1931-1991) was born in Corinth, Mississippi. He dropped out of high school to serve in Korea where he became addicted to drugs (Rowell 973). He was only seventeen when he gave up his gun, telling his Company Commander, “I refuse to be involved in this kind of shit anymore. You got me over here about to be killed, about to have me kill someone, and it has nothing to do with me” (Rowell 974). In a sense, this echoes Kaufman’s biography—Knight, too, traveled then settled, embracing his unconventional background within his poetic project as an integral source of that creative impulse while simultaneously enacting his ethical convictions.

“I am not like you; I don’t have academic credentials,” Knight explains, “I did not finish high school. I live by poeting. I live from the people” (Rowell 969). Yet, this embodiment of the poet was not Knight’s foundation until after his imprisonment, though he was known even before his imprisonment as an “accomplished reciter of ‘toasts,’” a traditional Black poetic form consisting of “long, memorized, narrative poems” (“Knight”). Knight describes his toasts as writing about things which happened around him, remembering that, later, his fellow inmates would ask him to recite these toasts “after supper, like a social hour in jail” (Rowell 974).

A 1960 robbery conviction led to Knight’s eight-year sentence at the Indiana State Prison

("Knight"). Knight recalls, "I began to define myself as a poet in prison" (Rowell 974). Knight's prison poetry is known to focus "on imprisonment as a form of contemporary enslavement and looks for ways in which one can be free despite incarceration" ("Knight"). Patricia Liggins Hill observes that for Knight, the manipulation of space and time are at the forefront of his conception of imprisonment, indicating that "specifically, what Knight relies on for his prison poetry are various temporal/spatial elements which allow him to merge his personal consciousness with the consciousness of Black people" ("Knight"). This racial consciousness permeates Knight's poetic ideology and the structure of his life. His perspective of art is similarly formed in this way. Knight explains, "white society denies art, because art unifies rather than separates; it brings people together instead of alienating them" ("Knight"). The ideological institution of individualism is instilled by white society, and disrupted through community, reunification—through art, in this case as Knight expresses.

This provides another deep link between Knight and Kaufman, a dedication to their activism and to art as a unifying force within that ethic. Knight quotes the poet Gwendolyn Brooks, who expresses, "just being Black in this country and walking down the street is a political act." Knight, however, expands the sentiment further: "Everything is political, everything is aesthetical, and everything is ethical" (Rowell 966). Knight's poetic consciousness falls along these lines—even involuntarily, each line or word or poem makes a political statement, and aesthetic commitment, and an ethical choice. This political space is not something that Knight or Brooks chose. It's, rather, an inescapable imposition of the racially defined social order into which subjects are inevitably placed. Knight's acute awareness of this superstructure inhabits his creative ideology.

Charles H. Rowell asks of Knight in an interview conducted in Knight's Indianapolis

home in the later 1970s, “Now that you are no longer incarcerated, do poems come easier for you?” Knight replies, “Actually, it was no easier, because in all the real senses I am still in prison” (Rowell 976). The carceral state inhabits not only the prison itself, but the continuation of the subjectivity it creates. One never truly leaves incarceration. As Knight writes in his poem “Cell Song”:

can there anything  
good come out of  
prison (9)

Rather than a true question, this stanza at the poem’s close indicates Knight’s statement in the interview—the prison remains. Nothing good can come out of prison because there is no coming out of it. At this point in the interview, Knight says to Rowell that he would like to “articulate a minute,” and it seems only right to preserve that articulation as Knight expresses the prison’s deep and constant effect:

If I can articulate a minute: To make a poem or to preach a sermon or to create in any sense, you become extremely aware. I think it is what the Greeks meant when you are caught up in the Muses. For the Nigerians, among the Yoruba people, there is a word which refers to the power taking over you. In other words, you become extremely aware. It's that you are able to relate to the whole world what you see and hear. Prison is a very painful reality. If you walk into a meadow and see flowers, while the sun is shining brightly, and you are in love with a young girl, you are extremely aware then, too. Those things you are aware of are pleasant. You are just as aware when you are caught up in prison, but there ain't no flowers. That's painful. All of us are going to try to avoid pain. That's why it's harder. You can sit and write about the sunset and love; or sit, watch the

sun go down on the sea, and that does not hurt-that ain't painful. That's why it is hard. It's difficult. (Rowell 976)

Knight takes beauty and juxtaposes the same intense awareness with something much grimmer. There is no escape from pain in prison, Knight recognizes, and that forcible encounter with such pain can never fully subside.

With Knight as with Kaufman, the poem is a political space necessarily, as demonstrated by the communal space created through art in its opposition to individualistic societal norms. Carceral subjectivity manifests into that deep political consciousness through the poems themselves, enacting a collectivized consciousness in a space of deep pain and trauma. Thus, at the core for both poets is that solidarity. Knight writes in “Cop-Out Session” of what he’s done in his life, a catalog of actions. He writes that he has been “confused, fucked up, scared, phony and jive / to a whole / (sic) lot of people,” but, he asks of the reader “Haven’t you? / In one way or another?” Kaufman does not want to “be in one cage with one self.” He wants “to sit opposite every prisoner in every hole” (“Jail Poems”). In 1959 as Kaufman wrote “Jail Poems,” Knight was only months away from the start of his prison sentence. Kaufman sat opposite him, somewhere in that manipulated time and space of carceral punishment, with state lines separating them but poetry uniting them. They did not know each other in life—that we know of, anyway—but their experiences held them together.

*Love and Freedom Are One: Selected Knight Poems*

If you glance through Knight’s main selected volume, *The Essential Etheridge Knight*, perhaps the most immediate observation will be of variety—his poems stretch form, manipulating tiny lines or sprawling ones, in installments or long stanzas or short stanzas or strangely staggered experiments. Knight formed language as thought a tactile thing, which is



visible cleanly on the surface of his various and magnificent body of work. As such, any small selection will fail to capture that constant energy possessed by his poems. The following selections demonstrate, though, the relevant qualities for this thesis—his communally focused ideology, his perception of incarceration, and the potent love that overshadows it all.

First, like “Jail Poems,” I’ve included in its entirety this haiku sequence which reflects on various moments in prison, pausing between sections for commentary when relevant. True to the form’s distant origin, these poems crystallize a single instance. In its conventional anglicized form, a syllabic structure of five syllables, then seven syllables, then five syllables per line of a tercet forms the entire poem. However, this syllabic form results from this anglicization. Knight’s “Haiku” subverts the syllabic at certain moments in the sequence, adhering more essentially to that initial intent of the haiku as moment more closely than to the additional formal requirements, thus placing these poems often closer to the original notion (17-8). Knight begins:

1.

Eastern guard tower  
glints in sunset; convicts rest  
like lizards on rocks.

2.

The piano man  
is stingy at 3 a.m.  
his songs drop like a plum.

The second haiku here serves as the first formal disruption, and it seems no coincidence that it falls during a musical reference as the final line here contains six syllables. Like Kaufman,

Knight found immense inspiration in the historically Black creative form of jazz music. Jazz often subverts musical convention, flowing freely through experimental musical forms and unconventional rhythms. Thus, what better place to subvert a conventional rhythm in a poetic form than when referencing music? The sequence continues:

3.

Morning sun slants cell.

Drunks stagger like cripple flies

On jailhouse floor.

This third haiku is notable because it begins a different capitalization pattern that resurfaces in stanzas six through nine. In fact, this variance in capitalization is a pattern in Knight's work overall. In such a carefully constructed form, we can only assume that this capitalization is intended, and, in the next Knight poem I will discuss, that intentionality remains evident.

This stanza is also notable for its tonally neutral portrayal of drunks in jail. Though the comparison to "cripple flies" may imply a negative representation, the haiku's clipped nature causes a removal from judgment. Instead, the tone of this observation reads as just that—an observation, not a condemnation or judgment, but as a neighbor. "Morning sun slants cell" eliminates ownership. The subjects of the poem are all leveled like this, and the lack of control of the subjects is emphasized by this refusal to claim. Knight resumes:

4.

To write a blues song

is to regiment riots

and pluck gems from graves.

This stanza is truly Kaufman-esque, not in a derivative sense, but rather in the sense of wonder that comes from the shared elements of consciousness that emanate off of various great poets such as these two. Here, a surrealistic juxtaposition of images establishes paradox in the poem's body—regimenting chaos, gemstones from death—against the backdrop of the blues. It shows music as uncapturable energy, an unwritable paradox. The poem continues:

5.

A bare pecan tree  
slips a pencil shadow down  
a moonlit snow slope.

6.

The falling snow flakes  
Cannot blunt the hard aches nor  
Match the steel stillness.

7.

Under moon shadows  
A tall boy flashes knife and  
Slices star bright ice.

8.

In the August grass  
Struck by the last rays of sun

The cracked teacup screams.

9.

Making jazz swingin

Seventeen syllables AIN'T

No square poet's job.

Stanza seven here is a prelude to the violence that will emerge later in Jimmy Santiago Baca's narrative, a direct engagement with what some might call unpoetic subject material, but that these poets refuse to categorize as such. They depict their experiences in full, allowing the violence to be an element of their creation as much as the sentiment. The poem closes, once again, with music—a thread that ties Knight's sequence to Kaufman's and to itself. Jazz takes on its own life within these poets, a creative force like a muse itself.

The next poem includes a clearer articulation of Knight's conception of solidarity, his political line, and freedom as it emerges through his poetic ethos. This poem, "And tell me poet, can love exist in slavery?" takes on a tone like a sermon, enveloping spiritual language with clear ethical pronouncements before closing softly (85). Knight writes:

Come then Poet, and sing

To me a TRUE SONG

Of white doves circling the horizon—

Of Guitars strumming the evening calm.

Can we forget, poet,

The right and wrong

Done, the gushing blood,  
The broken bone  
Shattering the moon-night,  
The exiled son,  
The fugitive daughter?

O Poet, your tongue  
is split and as still  
as the Stone  
In the Belly of the Great Mother.  
She has always known:  
*Love and Freedom are One!*  
( All the rest is, at best—  
A melted ice cream cone. )

Notice especially here that Knight's capitalization varies at the beginning of each line. The bright, prying tone of the first two adopt the more conventional capitalization, while the last stanza varies, as the two uncapitalized lines soften before the triumphant entry of the Great Mother. In fact, this poem culminates into that third from last line—love and freedom are one. This poem is a great unifier, pressing the poet to question their own forgiveness and knowledge, acknowledging finally that the poet cannot know. The wisdom of the poet falls short in the face of this Great Mother of the final stanza, who offers us this solidarity. Love and freedom portrayed as necessarily each other suggests a similarly communal ethic to that of Kaufman's "Jail Poems." Love cannot be without freedom, and freedom cannot be without love. The peace demonstrated

in the earlier two stanzas against such questioning, disbelieving tones is ultimately tossed aside in favor of a more potent love—established through freedom, which must be won. The struggle thus supersedes the saccharine ice cream cone of the poem's opening, conquering the Romantic notions of the poet to offer something bigger.

I Am Offering this Poem by Jimmy Santiago Baca

I am offering this poem to you,  
since I have nothing else to give.  
Keep it like a warm coat  
when winter comes to cover you,  
or like a pair of thick socks  
the cold cannot bite through,

I love you,

I have nothing else to give you,  
so it is a pot full of yellow corn  
to warm your belly in winter,  
it is a scarf for your head, to wear  
over your hair, to tie up around your face,

I love you,

Keep it, treasure this as you would  
if you were lost, needing direction,  
in the wilderness life becomes when mature;  
and in the corner of your drawer,  
tucked away like a cabin or Hogan  
in dense trees, come knocking,  
and I will answer, give you directions,  
and let you warm yourself by this fire,  
rest by this fire, and make you feel safe

I love you,

It's all I have to give,  
and all anyone needs to live,  
and to go on living inside  
when the world outside  
no longer cares if you live or die;  
remember,

I love you.

## CHAPTER 4. 'AS FREE AS THE WIND': THE REBIRTH OF JIMMY SANTIAGO BACA

### *The Life of Jimmy Santiago Baca*

Jimmy Santiago Baca was born in 1952, of Chicano and Apache descent (“Baca”). “At thirteen years old I found myself behind bars for the first time,” he remembers of his stint in a detention center following his parents’ abandonment of Baca and his siblings, a time when he was “a ward of the state, a piece of property” (*Stand* 20, 27). Yet, this was not to be his last time behind bars, as the cyclical oppression of the carceral system pulled Baca into its hold. Baca recalls in his 2001 memoir *A Place to Stand*, which chronicles his experiences with incarceration in its various forms throughout childhood and adulthood, that even at age thirteen he had “begun to feel early on that the state and society at large considered me a stain on their illusion of a perfect America” (29). His teens were characterized by these early experiences with confinement and abandonment, moving around often and making his way by selling drugs. He spent seven years in prison starting in 1973 (“Baca”). He was not yet a poet.

Similarly to Knight, Baca’s craft evolved during his time incarcerated. However, Baca could not read at all prior to entering prison. Through books and letters sporadically appearing over the course of his imprisonment, Baca taught himself to read and write, meticulously, word by word and letter by letter. He remembers copying a religious pamphlet sent by Harry, a man who found him from a list of inmates without family distributed at a Christmas mass (*Stand* 183). His correspondence with Harry allowed Baca to experiment with words, parsing his way through their unfamiliar grounds. “With writing,” he remembers from this time, “it seemed, if you opened one faucet of words, a hundred more would come on” (*Stand* 186). Poetry attracted him from early in this process, as Baca recalls:

Sometimes I’d pick a word and string nonsense words after it to see what kind of



meaning came from the random arrangement. Then a particular word would catch my attention and ignite memories. I would try to recall the memory vividly in language, spending hours crossing out and rewriting. (*Stand* 185)

This early associative, play-like approach to the language, grounded in the personal, shapes Baca's ethos of language as "transformative and generative"—language itself as a force of renewal ("Baca"). Words became a life force for Baca, a poetic consciousness constructed around harnessing the original, vivid energy of memory. As the poet explains in an interview with John Keene:

A remarkable thing occurred to me when I came upon language, and I really began to provoke language to decrease me and then to give birth to me again. What I experienced was this: when you approach language in this being-reborn sense, you approach language in the way that the Hopis approach language, which is that language is a very real living being. That's how I approach language. I approach it as if it will contain who I am as a person. Now, when language begins to work itself on you and make certain demands of you, it begins to ask you to risk yourself and walk along its edge. When it does that and you do that, the Yoruba people in Africa have a symbol that they create, and it's made out of bamboo leaves, gold, and rosary beads on it and so forth, and it curls up on itself. This symbol has a think made so that it's almost like a gourd. It curls all the way around itself and goes back into the thick base, and this is the gift that they give men who have given birth to themselves... Which is what happened with me—I gave birth to myself.

For Baca, then, language was the catalyst of this totalizing rebirth, a transformation through the poetic into a new person. Baca was singularly devoted to pursuing language in this way—he protested by refusing to work in the prison until they allowed him to go to school for his GED

during his sentence, a reasonable request which he was repeatedly denied at the hands of prison officials. This refusal to work landed Baca in solitary multiple times in an attempt to break him, to force him to give up his dream of learning and back into prison labor (*Stand* 162-3). The toll that solitary took on Baca is depicted in his memoir in brutal, necessary detail. He recounts “frenzied periods of paranoia” that involved hallucination and insanity, darkness and loss of control, masturbation, and the loss of his sense of self (*Stand* 125-6). Another inmate told Baca, “There is no future, no past, only the moment; you will do what you have to do. You didn’t exist before coming here; your life before here never happened” (*Stand* 131).

Baca’s experience in prison was outlined by this consistent, targeted brutality and dehumanization, like much of his life before. He writes, “I don’t know when the process of criminalization began for any one of the kids I hung out with or woke up with in a prison cell,” describing that he views his own criminalization as originating with his mother’s initial abandonment (*Stand* 31-2). Criminalization here is an essential term—Baca’s unrelenting memoir chronicles exactly how the state creates carceral subjectivity, how systemic oppression wraps its hands around its subjects from childhood and grips. Baca’s racial identity shapes his experience here, yet also provides him a path to liberation within his poetry. By processing memories of his people and through reading historical texts sent to him by his outside correspondents, he became in touch with his ancestry:

I felt the many lives that had come before me... I felt all my people, felt them deep in the hard work they did, in faint and delicate red-weed prairie flowers, in the arguments over right and wrong, in my people’s irascible desire to live, which was mine as well. I felt their will growing inside me and would ultimately let me be as free as the wind. (*Stand* 152-3)

Baca found here a timeless solidarity. Through engagement with his own recollections and indigenous history, Baca's poetic consciousness gains strength through such desire to live.

Baca published his first poems while still incarcerated, after becoming through a chain of suggestions a pen pal of Norman, a poet in California, and later Virginia, another poet and friend of Norman's (*Stand* 202, 238). Virginia, writing Baca from North Carolina, became through her long poem-letters a source of romance for Baca, who wrote similarly back (*Stand* 247).

Virginia's nickname to Baca was Mariposa, correspondent of his long poem series "The Mariposa Letters." These two poets not only provided a space for discussion of craft and feedback on Baca's work—at this point, he was writing poems consistently—but they also sent him books and suggestions for submissions. He began writing poems for other prisoners in exchange for items from the commissary, while simultaneously writing two chapbooks for two different small presses (*Stand* 248). This time in his life also brought him into correspondence with the poet Denise Levertov who was instrumental in his early publications, and who later wrote in an introduction to Baca's *Martin & Meditations on the South Valley*, "He draws directly on personal and documentary material rather than more distanced fictive constructions; and he writes with uncontested passion: detachment is not a quality he cultivates" (xiii). Baca explains of a humorous poem about a party, "I wrote poems for convicts, and the poems belonged to them" (*Stand* 250). That sense of collective ownership articulates further Baca's concern with those many lives, history imposed onto the individual, and communal social structures.

Baca became different than the state tried to make him—not because he is stronger or better or smarter than the others, but by coincidence. The home Baca created for himself through poetry sustained him in a different vein than the sustenance many find in prison, and the prison itself spent Baca's sentence doing all it could to rob him of that energy. Baca explains, "I became

a different man, not because prison was good for me, but in spite of its destructive forces” (*Stand* 4). In his poem “My Dog Barks,” Baca discusses an invitation to a conference on prison writers.

Baca writes:

If your words don’t fit their theories,  
if you claim that convicts are people,  
that writing goes deep in the soul, to memories,  
to flesh and blood, that writing has more to do  
with cruel guards and torture chambers,  
isolation cells  
and chained beatings, they become squeamish. (152)

In this poem, Baca reasserts his established ethical mode and poetic goal that he formed during his time in prison. His poems are for convicts because that is the truest poetry for Baca—language is physical when it comes from this space, where words are all he had. Any writing on poets in prison should humanize, empathize, and aim for freedom, Baca asserts, continuing to explain the “conference types” as those who believe “there is no way to help / the imprisoned, that it’s best to keep them in” while capitalizing on that trauma through “having workshops on prison writing” (153). Thus, writing on prison ought to focus on the convict as person, as subject to state violence, and with the freezing of incarceration as finality. Baca fights the one-dimensional notion of convict, fights the academic notion of prison as a necessity—not only through his own embodiment of these ideals but by expanding his reach outward, offering space to others with stories like him.

Since his release, Baca has published numerous volumes of poetry, become a father, and become a passionate workshop facilitator in prisons as well as in more conventional venues. His program Cedar Tree launched in 2004, which is “a literary nonprofit designed to provide writing

workshops, training, and outreach programs for at-risk youth, prisoners and ex-prisoners, and disadvantaged communities.” Baca continues to embody and share the safety he found in language, offering space for creation to people that the state seeks to claim.

*Seeds: Selections from Baca’s “The Mariposa Letters”*

All the elements of Baca’s biography shine out of his poems as unignorable light, blinding and honest. His poems “The Mariposa Letters,” written in correspondence with the poet discussed above, serve as a crystallization of the realizations in his memoir as he experienced them at the time in prison (1-25). This sequence is excerpted below:

88.

I sit here now  
and watch the many faces of men  
scuttle up from their black dark dens  
I see so many come from hiding places  
and now that I have finished my spiritual battle  
and am strong enough, have survived my own weaknesses  
I sit here at the portals of a destroyed being  
and everything is calm, a tender lawlessness rules  
and now my first step is a step of a breathing man  
who has the grace of a wild beast  
and I sit here, watching the world, the prison  
and find I am richly blessed with  
so many things to find out, to touch and hear  
with so many men in rags and broken souls

who crawl up with dusty shoes from gutters  
and carry blades in their pockets  
but they are flowers than have survived their thorns  
in dry baked ground  
and I see them and I am strong enough to hear them  
and I raise myself from contemplation and walk  
toward them, to learn their language of sorrows  
that hold songs like stars in their heart  
songs that tell of lives and feelings that have been stomped on and drowned  
songs are the magic that keeps men alive when nothing else will

I begin to sing to them  
and my song is that they must sing  
as I step forward, onward  
through a throng of thorny men  
leading them, taking them with me.

90.

I have silenced my poetry and tongue to hear the clear  
screams in the night of men slicing their throats  
of victims being beaten by men I know,  
of the clanging of prison gates and voices of tyranny  
while writing my poetry I have met dark eyes.

91.

someday the muscles of the universe  
shall convulse into orgasm and beauty

198.

I have picked the seeds out of my rotting life

Like Knight and Kaufman, here Baca sees beauty in his fellow incarcerated folk. As he writes, “they are flowers that have survived their thorns.” This section, number eighty-eight, solidifies Baca’s perspective of the incarcerated subject as inherently valuable. It also indicates a Foucaultian notion of the prison as the world, permeating every aspect of our collective subjectivity. Grounded in the text, however, is love—not just pain. Spiritualism connects Baca to these other inmates, allowing him to hear them, “to learn their languages of sorrows,” to sit opposite every prisoner in every hole alongside the eternal spirit of Kaufman. Baca’s deep love of language resuscitates not only himself, but the others as he sings to them.

Later, in section ninety, he silences himself so that he may listen and bear witness to the brutality of the men he knows. His poetry and language are a bright spot to him, yet this poetry is unflinching in its commitment to encompass the darkness as well. Baca takes darkness and inverts it, faithful that poetry and love will carry the community into beauty spasmodically and suddenly. These poems almost defy interpretation—Baca offers himself up clearly on the page. The poem lays itself bare.

## CHAPTER 5. NO CERTAINTIES

The pathway to abolition must be paved by currently and formerly incarcerated folks. Thus, we can look to contemporary prison poets to see how these spirits have continued to be embodied, to see who Kaufman sits across from now. There are numerous projects supporting incarcerated writers, including phoebe's (sic) Incarcerated Writers Project, Iron City Magazine, the Minnesota Prison Writing Workshop, PEN America. All these projects provide a space to incarcerated creators to feed their craft and amplify their voice. However, the existence of these programs should not imply their accessibility—I know with certainty that no such thing exists in the Wartburg prison that I heard about for years. Even within such programs that exist to circulate the work of these writers, we can see the elitism that Baca describes in his poem “My Dog Barks,” back where this thesis began, when he writes:

this is strictly a conference on writing  
in prison, and if you had writers who'd been cons  
it would make the conference a success.  
But you don't want to hear what they're going through,  
you prefer to translate their suffering into MFA papers,  
to turn their deaths into metaphors,  
to make their real cries and real terror a tone in the text  
that people outside can philosophize about;  
it's only about writing, not what would free these men  
from their tormentors.

At the core of this thesis are those incarcerated individuals. Read their writing, seek out their perspectives, listen. Through projects like Prison Pen Pals or Friends 4 Prisoners, you might even read their writing from the source. Hear these stories and refuse to let the prison become a



passive ideological force that you perceive as other. Move the prison into the forefront of your consciousness, and with it move freedom into the forefront. The prison pervades all our subjectivities, forces us to see it as the only way. However, through all this love and solidarity, through honest readings of incarcerated writers, through community, we must necessarily fight for freedom. Abolition is not a clean trail, a definitive vision. Abolition is a process. There is no perfect methodology, only an evolving path. It is a path worth carving.

One of the most valuable and simplistic resources for abolition comes from 8toAbolition.org, a website compiled to express in eight points both the ideology behind and the pathway towards the abolition of police and prisons. While this thesis has focused on the prison itself and the ways that it functions to torment its subjects, the police are also an arm of its repressive force and as such, to achieve prison abolition, police abolition is a necessary component. By breaking down abolition into these points which are, in a dialectical materialist capacity, informed by our current historical conditions, the writers of this site manage to make this concept supremely accessible. The eight points are as follows:

1. Defund Police
2. Demilitarize Communities
3. Remove Police From Schools
4. Free People From Jails And Prisons
5. Repeal Laws that Criminalize Survival
6. Invest in Community Self-Governance
7. Provide Safe Housing For Everyone
8. Invest In Care, Not Cops

All of these could potentially be met with what-if questions, hypothetical scenarios but the

writers of this website often anticipate this and meet them with a counter-example. Perhaps most key to address is the case of sexual assault, or similarly violent crimes to which this could be related at least in a penal sense. The hypothetical goes something like this: But where do you put the rapists? The murderers? Surely they don't just go free! Of course, these are perfectly reasonable things to wonder. But, this hypothetical is interesting, as it disregards that already more often than not, rapists do go free. RAINN reports that only two percent of rapists ever spend time in prison. Clearly, the justice system is already failing victims of sexual assault. Even if these individuals were prosecuted under our existing system, the likelihood of recidivism rather than actual personal growth renders even that possibility somewhat useless in terms of preventing further instances of the crime. We know that prisons are not vessels of change or growth, but self-sustaining machines. As a result of insufficient structural support for victims, though, community structures have already emerged to resolve this in a microcosm of an abolitionist future.

These community structures practice a form of accountability known as transformative or restorative justice. As the terminology suggests, this is not centered on a penal mode, but rather on creation and strength. The Restorative Justice Network defines the practice:

Restorative justice is a response to wrongdoing that prioritizes repairing harm and recognizes that maintaining positive relationships with others is a core human need. It seeks to address the root causes of crime, even to the point of transforming unjust systems and structures.

The three core elements of restorative justice are the interconnected concepts of Encounter, Repair, and Transform. Each element is discrete and essential. Together they represent a journey toward wellbeing and wholeness that victims, offenders, and

community members can experience. Encounter leads to repair, and repair leads to transformation.

One community structure that practices restorative justice is called Philly Stands Up, a Philadelphia collective that works with sexual assault cases, though more various models of these practices can be found under the “Models” section of the 8 to Abolition site. Philly Stands Up expresses their mission as follows:

Philly Stands Up is small collective of individuals working in Philadelphia to confront sexual assault in our various communities using a transformative justice framework. We believe in restoring trust and justice within our community by working with both survivors and perpetrators of sexual assault. We believe that sexual assault comes in many forms and we are doing what we can to actively combat it.

We work with people who have assaulted others to hold them accountable to the survivor(s) and restore their relationships within their communities. In dealing with perpetrators, we seek to recognize and change behavior, rather than ostracizing and allowing future assaults elsewhere. We support their healing process, and challenge them on their behavior in order to prevent future assaults.

We also work to educate ourselves and others on issues that contribute to sexualized violence. To encourage awareness building, we provide support for other groups and collectives as well as host workshops in Philly and elsewhere.

We are a group that survivors can come to for help and support. We will always support survivors and ensure survivor autonomy, where they will always be in control of how a situation is dealt with.

This depiction of their approach may seem vague, but that is, in some sense, the point. There is no perfect framework for how to approach restorative justice. Rather, the practice adapts to suit the circumstance and involved parties. Instead of placing every person deemed somehow wrong into the same environment to undergo the same punishment and same torture, community-centered justice adapts because communities know each other. That collective knowledge of subjectivity allows justice to adapt into what is needed by the community.

Rather than these hypotheticals that pretend our current penal system is not only reforming those who commit harm but pretend also that our current penal system cares about victims, I urge a different what-if. What if we lived in a world where we trusted our neighbors, knew them, loved them? Where, when someone wronged another member of our community, we sat with each other and worked through the discrepancy in a healthy and fulfilling way? What if, in demilitarizing our schools and the state, we no longer have to militarize ourselves in return? What if people did not have to fight tooth and nail for a place to live? Would any of the what-ifs that counter those eight points be remotely feasible with these preceding conditions met?

Etheridge Knight asks us, “Haven’t you [been fucked up...to a lot of people]? / In one way or another?” When Bob Kaufman asks us, “Would you wear my eyes?” in his poem’s titular line, he invites us into an imagination shaped by pain, but, as “Jail Poems” reveal, that very imagination can lead us toward an ultimate vision of love, of community, of solidarity. These poets ask us, what if we rooted our justice in empathy? What if we imagined something better? What if we fought for that vision?

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