

“Support and Criticism and Many Hours of Trying to Understand and Survive:” Popeye Jackson  
and Revolutionary Abolitionism in the 1970s California Bay Area Radical Prison Movement

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To Popeye.



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<sup>1</sup> Holdt, Jacob. "Our Ultimate Oppression - the Case of My Friend Popeye Jackson." *American Pictures* (blog), n.d. <http://www.american-pictures.com/story/chapter-67.htm>.

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## Introduction

On July 30th, 1975, a group of nine self-described “revolutionaries” including six “ex-convict[s]” assembled into “People’s Court #1” and set out to ascertain the truth behind the conflicting narratives surrounding the murder of prominent Bay Area anti-prison radical Wilbert “Popeye” Jackson.<sup>2</sup> At the end of their 45-page report, they conclude,

Popeye was the perfect founder of the United Prisoners’ Union for he was such a perfect example of all the strengths and flaws of the convicted class. His life may be harshly judged by comrades who have not shared his experiences but should be lovingly remembered by all of us who have walked the big yard.<sup>3</sup>

From the moment he was released from San Quentin in early 1970 to his untimely death in 1975, Jackson was an integral part of the San Francisco Bay Area radical milieu: he was a co-founder and Chairman of the United Prisoners’ Union, a fixture at rallies and protests, Minister of Defense of the Venceremos Organization, the cause célèbre of the “Free Popeye” movement against his parole revocation, and ultimately the victim of a controversial FBI-facilitated murder that shook the movement to its core. As a major force and widely recognized “prison leader,” Jackson haunts both New Left and Bay Area 1970s prison movement history; he is an unavoidable presence who appears constantly in the archival record of movement ephemera but who has, until now, never taken center stage.

The People’s Court’s concern that Jackson would be “harshly judged by those who have not shared his experiences” has been borne out in limited and harshly critical representations of his life. The two major historical accounts of the California movement as a whole are Eric Cummins’ 1994 *The Rise and Fall of the California Prison Movement* and Dan Berger’s *Captive Nation: Black Prison Organizing in the Civil Rights Era*. Cummins’ work presents a harshly

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<sup>2</sup> The People’s Court, “Free Popeye” (People’s Court Comrades, 1975), Kenneth G. Fuller Collection, Box 14, Folder 4, Hoover Institution Library and Archives, 1.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 36.

critical view of the prison movement's radical elements, condemning Jackson as a "convict opportunist" who exploited the prison movement for personal gain; in doing so, he perpetuates problematic assumptions about the limits of legitimate protest and the political legitimacy of Black radicals.<sup>4</sup> Although Berger articulates and legitimizes the prison movement's sweeping critiques of the nascent American carceral state, he only briefly mentions Jackson as a more radical leader in the prison union movement and an eventual casualty of the "internecine battles in the movement's later years."<sup>5</sup> By disregarding Jackson as a serious organizer and theorist, historians have either perpetuated problematic views of Black radical history or overlooked a whole segment of the prison movement made up of presently and formerly incarcerated activists who sought to organize a revolution against their early conception of the American carceral state led by and for the "convicted class."

As if speaking to the future historian, the Court urged their readers to "lovingly" understand Jackson as "a perfect example of all the strengths and flaws of the convicted class."<sup>6</sup> This thesis takes up their imperative and method to compassionately reanimate both Jackson and the revolutionary "convicted class" whom they believe he typified. I will argue that compassionately reconsidering Jackson's life undermines simplistically critical accounts of Black radicalism, sheds light on the particular mechanisms through which California expanded its carceral technologies through its efforts to contain the prison movement, and upends previous readings of the California Prison Union movement by providing a window into a critical but forgotten strain of early abolitionist theory and practice advanced by the self-described members of the convicted class which I call "revolutionary abolitionism." I hope to sketch an intellectual

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<sup>4</sup> Eric Cummins, *The Rise and Fall of California's Radical Prison Movement* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1994), 152.

<sup>5</sup> Dan Berger, *Captive Nation: Black Prison Organizing in the Civil Rights Era*, 1 edition, Justice, Power, and Politics (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2014), 503.

<sup>6</sup> People's Court, "Free Popeye," 36.

and social history of revolutionary abolitionism in the 1970s made visible through the eyes of Popeye Jackson and other members of the convicted class.

The California anti-prison movement emerged out of a much longer struggle for Black liberation. During the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s, jail became a site of ideological formation from which Black activists converged, theorized and disseminated critiques of the state.<sup>7</sup> At the same time, between 1951-1953, a wave of prison riots took place at Soledad, San Quentin, Folsom and Alcatraz Island Federal Prison which set the stage for covert organizing over the next twenty years.<sup>8</sup> As the Civil Rights Movement grew outside, Black activists began to more deliberately radicalize individuals housed in long-term carceral facilities by smuggling in radical reading material, organizing study groups and sharing information about the seismic events taking place across the nation.<sup>9</sup> By the late 1960s and early 1970s, this organizing work led to the publication of writings by incarcerated intellectuals like George Jackson, who saw the prison as a central facet of American statecraft.<sup>10</sup> Incarcerated radicals led a series of revolts—five in 1968, twenty-seven in 1970, and thirty-seven in 1971.<sup>11</sup> Two revolts in 1971 catapulted the movement to the national stage: a rebellion in the California prison San Quentin led by incarcerated intellectual and revolutionary George Jackson and an uprising at Attica Correctional Facility in New York catapulted the movement to the national stage.<sup>12</sup> The events at San Quentin and Attica inspired decades of under-studied resistance within and outside of prison walls—including revolutionary abolitionist organizing by Popeye Jackson’s faction of the UPU and the group of self-proclaimed “revolutionaries” who formed the “People’s Court.”

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<sup>7</sup> Berger, *Captive Nation*, 89-90.

<sup>8</sup> Cummins, *Rise and Fall*, 20.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 76.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

<sup>11</sup> Robert T. Chase, *We Are Not Slaves: State Violence, Coerced Labor, and Prisoners’ Rights in Postwar America* (University of North Carolina Press, 2020), 3.

<sup>12</sup> Robert T. Chase, “We Are Not Slaves: Rethinking the Rise of Carceral States through the Lens of the Prisoners’ Rights Movement,” *The Journal of American History* 102, no. 1 (2015): 73–86, 74.

In *The Rise and Fall of the California Prison Movement*, Eric Cummins argues that the California prison movement fell apart in the 1970s because a naive white Left embraced the violent Black male convict as a messianic revolutionary figure, resulting in a counterproductive celebration of lawbreaking and elevation of problematic figures to leadership positions. He explains that the Bay Area radical Left “loo[ked] to California prisons for their revolutionary leaders, especially inspired by the writings of incarcerated intellectual George Jackson.<sup>13</sup> Jackson became an icon among the Left after the publication of his works *Soledad Brother* (1970) and *Blood on Ice* (1971), the latter of which outlines plans for a socialist revolution led by revolutionary Black prisoners.<sup>14</sup> Cummins contends that Jackson’s theories model brought the movement to an end, as the New Left’s naive obsession with Jackson and other Black revolutionary prisoners resulted in a shift away from organizing for concrete, policy-based changes in favor of reckless and violent terrorism in the name of revolution.

Cummins partly stakes his conclusion on the implosion of the California Prison Union at the hands of a revolution-obsessed New Left dazzled by false leaders—including Popeye Jackson. He argues that union efforts failed because radicals like Popeye Jackson pushed for a futile and “convict-led” revolution rather than policy-focused prison union organizing efforts.<sup>15</sup> Cummins lauds prison union organizing by the California Prison Union (CPU, from which Jackson’s UPU split in 1973) as having the genuine potential to change conditions inside, but argues that “early in the 1970’s it became clear that the movement had simply passed the union by” as organizers and incarcerated individuals flocked to the cause and leadership of Black revolutionary prisoners and ex-prisoners like Popeye Jackson.<sup>16</sup> Cummins almost exclusively

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<sup>13</sup> Cummins, *Rise and Fall*, 151.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 221.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

incorporates quotes and analysis from Jackson's rivals in the CPU, who characterize him as "convict opportunist, plain and simple" who used the movement as a front for otherwise apolitical criminal activities.<sup>17</sup> One CPU member quoted by Cummins lamented that,

Radical chic types... always were... critical of us for not having a radical revolutionary ideology... And therefore when Popeye Jackson came along, these very individuals... sought to... place their ideological baggage on the shoulders of Popeye Jackson, which were not broad enough to carry any baggage, let alone misguided ones.<sup>18</sup>

His argument presents Popeye Jackson as an empty ideological receptacle for the political naivete of the "radical chic types" in the Bay Area left, refusing to engage with Jackson's theories as anything other than the regurgitated ramblings of white radicals.

Cummins' arguments are ultimately informed by specific assumptions about the carceral system and respectable forms of social protest. In critiquing the "radical revolutionary" ideology, he outright rejects the movement's claim that incarceration is a central facet of American white supremacy and continuously suggests that "popular calls for the immediate release of all prisoners" are simply an "unabashed celebration of crime" rather than part of a broader emerging abolitionist critique.<sup>19</sup> He thus condemns the "radical" movement not because of its actual trajectory, but because he personally disagrees with its aims. By condemning the movement's shift in priority from unionization to prison abolition through radical action, he also implicitly argues that substantive change can only come about through organizing for policy change.

Cummins then uses these arguments to deride both infamous Jacksons, framing the split between the UPU and CPU as a devastating blow to the union movement and lamenting that, "in the end,

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<sup>17</sup> Cummins, *Rise and Fall*, 217.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 96.

it would be the plot of a convict's book, not the plan of a union, that the movement was destined to follow."<sup>20</sup>

Published in 1994 at a moment of ever-louder calls for "law and order," Cummins' work performed powerful ideological labor to delegitimize the prison movement's radical critique and Black revolutionary leaders. The enduring popularity of his work is a testament to its polemic power. The book was well-received by the academic community at the time of its publication. For instance, historian Clive Emsley commended the work for condemning "political posturing and fantasizing," while historian Theodore N. Ferdinand went so far as to say that the book "rivals Michel Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* in its marshaling of events in behalf of an interesting, intelligent thesis."<sup>21</sup> The book continues to be widely cited today, especially in more popularly-oriented works by non-historians like Bryan Burrough's *Days of Rage: America's Radical Underground, the FBI, and the Forgotten Age of Revolutionary Violence*.<sup>22</sup> In it, Burrough decries "a phenomenon the author Eric Cummins terms 'convict cultism'... [whereby] convicts who were released from California prisons frequently enjoyed instant hero status in radical organizations."<sup>23</sup> Burrough's own description of the movement centers around George Jackson as a self-interested, violent and problematic false hero of the radical left who inspired needless violence at a moment when social movements were in an obvious decline.

As Burrough's use of his work demonstrates, Cummins also reinforces the problematic practice of condemning incarcerated Black radicals as straightforwardly violent or self-interested criminals; more recently, historians have argued that such characterizations facilitate prison

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<sup>20</sup> Cummins, *Rise and Fall*, 217-221.

<sup>21</sup> Clive Emsley, review of *Review of The Rise and Fall of California's Radical Prison Movement*, by Eric Cummins, *History* 81, no. 264 (1996): 623-24.; Theodore N. Ferdinand, review of *Review of The Rise and Fall of California's Radical Prison Movement*, by Eric Cummins, *The American Historical Review* 100, no. 5 (1995): 1710-11, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2170131>.

<sup>22</sup> Berger, *Captive Nation*, 43 note 30; Burroughs Dan, *Days of Rage: America's Radical Underground, the FBI, and the Forgotten Age of Revolutionary Violence* (New York: Penguin Press, 2015), 840.

<sup>23</sup> Burroughs, *Days of Rage*, 464.

growth by depoliticizing and criminalizing the actions of incarcerated radicals. For instance, in her examination of the 1971 prison rebellion at Attica, *Blood in the Water*, Heather Ann Thompson argues that New York State officials actively concealed that almost all casualties were inflicted by state actors rather than incarcerated rebels in order to publicly portray incarcerated individuals as bloodthirsty and dangerous; she contends that the misuse of Attica's legacy both inspired widespread resistance and reinforced calls for mass incarceration and greater repression within prison walls.<sup>24</sup> Similarly, in her work *Men, Mobs and the Law*, Rebecca Hill observes that as George Jackson's transformative publications elevated him to the status of global revolutionary hero, his opponents portrayed him as an opportunistic and profoundly apolitical "common criminal" to transform his revolutionary credibility into political currency for tough-on-crime policies.<sup>25</sup> Cummins' characterization of Popeye Jackson represents another dangerous flattening of Black radicalism; in one of the few critical reviews of Cummins' work, former Black Panther Reginald Major notes that the piece can more aptly be characterized as "stealth history," with the "distinctive political objective" of "dampen[ing], discredit[ing] and demoniz[ing] the revolutionary potential of African-Americans" by "sham[ing] the black middle-class into comfortable compliance with law and order, [and] condemn[ing] of all black revolutionaries."<sup>26</sup> As Major observes, historical narratives which demonize the thought and actions of Black radicals like George and Popeye Jackson police Black political action in the present, especially by characterizing political activity as self-interested criminality.

By contrast, Dan Berger's *Captive Nation: Black Prison Organizing in the Civil Rights* legitimizes the critique articulated by Black radicals as vital advancements in the broader Black

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<sup>24</sup> Heather Ann Thompson, *Blood in the Water: The Attica Prison Uprising of 1971 and Its Legacy* (Pantheon, 2016), 569.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Reginald Major, "Stealth History: A Political Process: A Review Essay of 'The Shadow of the Panther' by Hugh Pearson and 'The Rise and Fall of California's Radical Prison Movement' by Eric Cummins," *The Black Scholar* 24, no. 4 (1994): 43.

freedom struggle. Berger explicitly envisioned his work as a counter to Cummins' dominant narrative, reflecting that,

The primary historical study available to me was Eric Cummins's (1994) well-researched but deeply problematic *The Rise and Fall of California's Radical Prison Movement*. Like many books concerning events of the 1960s published in the 1990s, Cummins's book treats Black Power as a violent deviation that catered to or was conjured by naïve white leftists.<sup>27</sup>

Berger notes that Cummins' critique of "naïve white leftists" is grounded in a stronger condemnation of the Black Power ideologies they were so "naïve" to heed. His work describes how incarcerated Black radicals articulated a prescient critique of the prison as a "a material institution that disproportionately incarcerated black people and a metaphor that symbolizes the endurance and enormity of white supremacy."<sup>28</sup> After detailing the development of this critique among Southern Civil Rights activists and Northern Black Power organizers, he focuses the majority of the work on George Jackson as the central figure who "made visible a black condition characterized by confinement and the racialization of criminality" and "developed a politics that blended political radicalism, physical militancy, and cultural production in a political framework of revolutionary black nationalism that gained widespread appeal."<sup>29</sup> The second half of his book describes organizing by Black prisoners inspired by George Jackson's theory of revolutionary nationalism. Berger's powerful work both captures the rigorous and prescient critique of the carceral state articulated by incarcerated radicals in the 1970s and resuscitates George Jackson as a central figure in Black intellectual history. However, by focusing on George Jackson's particular theory of revolutionary nationalism and neglecting the ideological contributions of other thinkers like Popeye Jackson, Berger's work inadvertently

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<sup>27</sup> Dan Berger, "Prison Organizing as Tradition and Imperative: A Response to Sarah Haley, Toussaint Losier, and Waldo Martin," *Social Justice* 43, no. 3 (2016): 124.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 46.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 47-48.

mischaracterizes the California Prison Union movement and overlooks the theory and practice of another vital strain of early abolitionist thought circulating in Bay Area radical circles.

Berger and other historians have flattened the history of prison union organizing in California into the theory endorsed by only one of two major union factions. For instance, historian Robert Chase describes that the 1970s prison union movement “attempted to deliver the tactics of labor mobilization behind bars.”<sup>30</sup> Similarly, Berger contrasts prison unionist ideology with the prisoner-as-slave theory advanced by Black nationalists like Ruchell Magee; whereas Magee and others imagined the prisoner as a slave to capture the “system of racial bondage” that characterized Black life and subjectivity, Berger contends that prison unionists emphasized “labor issues as primary elements of incarceration.”<sup>31</sup> Although he recognizes that the Prisoners Union’s ideology was “an indirect rebuke” of Popeye Jackson’s radicalism, he does not detail Jackson’s alternate revolutionary theory, simply characterizing him as “a former prisoner with black nationalist politics who had recently been kicked out of the Prisoners Union for allegedly stealing money from the organization.”<sup>32</sup> He incorrectly describes the UPU as a group that “sought to develop a class identity among the incarcerated and improve the terms of employment for those behind walls” without challenging “the prison’s inherent legitimacy.”<sup>33</sup> While this description aptly describes the theory of moderate prison unionists, it does not correctly capture the concept of a revolutionary “convicted class” articulated by the radical segment of the prison union movement best represented by Jackson’s faction of the UPU. Jackson and others merged the revolutionary theory of Black nationalists with the concept of a union among the “convicted class” to create the theory of revolutionary abolitionism.

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<sup>30</sup> Robert T. Chase, “We Are Not Slaves: Rethinking the Rise of Carceral States through the Lens of the Prisoners’ Rights Movement,” *The Journal of American History* 102, no. 1 (2015): 73–86, 76.

<sup>31</sup> Berger, *Captive Nation*, 369.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 370.

Revolutionary abolitionists saw the prison system as a vital component in a constantly expanding set of state technologies which inflict economic, physical and epistemological violence on certain bodies labeled as deviant in order to produce a “convicted class” of individuals structurally barred from living a full life. Proponents of revolutionary abolitionism argued that by producing an existentially degraded “convicted class,” carceral technologies create and enforce racial, wealth and gendered hierarchies. Because of their generative role that prison systems serve in cementing such hierarchies, revolutionary abolitionists argued that all carceral structures must be abolished—specifically through revolution. They defined the revolution broadly, urging both armed struggle and the everyday revolutionary practice of collective care; the term “revolutionary” connoted individuals committed to the total restructuring of social relations against carceral state violence and in furtherance of human life.

Recently, scholars have called upon historians to reconstruct the important political lineage of organizing against carceral institutions. For instance, radical criminologist Tony Platt writes that, “the carceral state has been the site of extraordinary creative output... [which] has generated a wide variety of ideas about how to change, and in some cases eliminate, penal institutions” but criticizes the lack of a “repository of knowledge, lessons learned, strategies to share,” emanating from such histories, arguing that “we spend too much time reinventing ourselves.”<sup>34</sup> This thesis contributes to a growing body of literature that reconstructs the rich abolitionist organizing lineage in American social movement history. The history of 1970s revolutionary abolitionism reveals a surprising continuity between organized efforts to overthrow the state and attempts to abolish carceral systems. This runs counter to Berger’s contention that,

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<sup>34</sup> Tony Platt, *Beyond These Walls: Rethinking Crime and Punishment in the United States* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2019), 373.; Zhandarka Kurti, “Starting a Dialogue: From Radical Criminology to Critical Resistance: An Interview with Tony Platt,” *Journal of World-Systems Research* 27, no. 1 (March 21, 2021): 136–48, <https://doi.org/10.5195/jwsr.2021.1051>, 143.

Abolitionism... was at the heart of 1970s prison radical discourse but was marginal to its organizing strategies. More common among those who saw the prison as a form of slavery were calls for revolution: campaigns to free prisoners as a step toward undermining the authority of state power.<sup>35</sup>

Whereas Berger presents “revolution” and “abolition” as two separate organizing strategies, I specifically chose the term “revolutionary abolitionism” to describe a theory that endorses revolution as an organizing strategy to abolish the carceral state. The organizing strategies practiced by Popeye Jackson and other members of the revolutionary convicted class both complicate straightforward understandings of radical movement history and offer powerful suggestions for organizing in the present.

Finally, the history of revolutionary abolitionist organizing suggests an alternate reading of the prison movement’s decline. Berger’s excellent analysis of the broader prison movement inadvertently mischaracterizes its end as the consequence of intra-movement conflicts rather than state incursions. Berger writes that,

The late 1970s was a hard time for black prison organizing... The long list of casualties in California from internecine battles in the movement’s later years—Fay Stender, Fleeta Drumgo, Huey Newton, Fred Bennett, James Carr, Popeye Jackson, and several others, on top of the many who had been killed by the state—scared many committed activists and would-be activists away from prison organizing there and facilitated an expanded push for “law and order.”<sup>36</sup>

Berger aptly observes the impact that Jackson’s murder had in bolstering the “expanded push for ‘law and order,’ but mischaracterizes him as a casualty of the movement’s internal conflicts of the late 1970s rather than another Black revolutionary “killed by the state.” As this thesis will prove, Jackson was almost certainly directly or indirectly killed by federal authorities; the so-called intra-movement conflicts which incited his murder were fanned if not created by state incursions into the spaces outside prison walls. Indeed, the majority of the violent battles he

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<sup>35</sup> Berger, *Captive Nation*, 379.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 404-537

describes can only be understood within an environment of state-facilitated paranoia and terror which extended the violent logic of prison life to the movement outside of prison walls. However, by failing to contextualize this explosion of violence within the lives of its human actors and their particular entanglements with the state, historians' explanations inadvertently perpetuate the very narratives about the criminality of Black activists which they sought to disprove. At the same time, they uphold a problematic notion that the movement was brought to a halt because of the untamable violence of its presently and formerly incarcerated leaders. Analyzing Popeye Jackson's murder as the outcome of the expansion of carceral logic beyond prison walls offers one powerful example of how the movement's eventual destruction was facilitated by state forces rather than intra-movement conflict or poor organizing strategy.

Chapter 1 will focus on the People's Court's analysis of Popeye Jackson in order to simultaneously reconstruct his life, examine the trajectory of California's carceral institutions through his eyes, and describe the People's Court's articulation of revolutionary abolitionist theory and practice. Chapter 2 will present a longer history of the development of revolutionary abolitionism from its emergence in the 1970 Folsom prison strike through its final articulation by Jackson's United Prisoners Union, ending with a discussion of the UPU's revolutionary organizing strategies. Finally, Chapter 3 will describe how various interlocking state institutions used the parole system, the Special Services Unit of the California Department of Corrections, and federal agents to destroy the movement by extending carceral logic into the movement outside prison walls; I will conclude by demonstrating that the FBI played a key role in facilitating Jackson's murder.

Reconstructing the theory of revolutionary abolitionism necessitates collecting and articulating the particular insights and theories posited by a heretofore unexamined positionality

within radical prison movement history: the perspective of the “convicted class,” or the broad swath of activists who were circuitously ensnared in various systems of confinement. Historians of American radicalism have imagined the existence of “inside,” “aboveground” and “underground” spheres within the movement, whose members each occupy a positionality that affords them distinct and particular vantage points to theorize the carceral state. For instance, in *Fugitive Life: the Queer Politics of the Prison State*, Stephen Dillon analyzes the writings of radical activists who “went underground” in the 1970s—a space he describes as “a vast network of safe houses, under-the-table jobs, and transportation networks” operating beyond the gaze of state surveillance.<sup>37</sup> Dillon contends that the fugitive’s position beyond the emerging neoliberal carceral and epistemological schema made them “the site of a dramatic reimagining of freedom that points the way out even as life is increasingly surrounded.”<sup>38</sup> Similarly, Rodriguez builds upon the concept that incarcerated individuals have unique knowledge of the carceral system advanced in the 1970s by examining the insights generated by incarcerated radicals “inside.”<sup>39</sup> More traditional social movement histories analyze them from the perspective of the “aboveground;” that is, those individuals whose lives have not (yet) begun to be defined by the threat of carceral immobilization.<sup>40</sup> However, those involved in the prison movement of the 1970s rarely inhabited any single sphere at a given moment; instead, the vast majority of organizers found themselves in and out of various carceral institutions, leaving prison only to find themselves re-arrested on parole violations or ensnared in an almost equally restrictive web of confinement on the outside. Such individuals inhabited a distinctly liminal space of simultaneous freedom and immobility, subject to constant surveillance by parole boards and

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<sup>37</sup> Stephen Dillon, *Fugitive Life: The Queer Politics of the Prison State* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018), 35.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

<sup>39</sup> Dylan Rodriguez, *Forced Passages: Imprisoned Radical Intellectuals and the U.S. Prison Regime* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minneapolis Press, 2005), 24.

<sup>40</sup> See, for example, Thomas Borstelmann’s summary of 1970s activism in *The 1970s*.

conditions which dictate the terms of their supposedly “free” existence. I contend that the unstable positionality of the “convicted class” renders them uniquely capable of witnessing the extension of carceral technologies from the early to mid 1970s. Reconstructing the experiences of the “convicted class” thus reveals the distinct ways in which the state deployed and invented technologies to extend its reach beyond prison walls and into the realm of the personal, interpersonal and political.

## Chapter 1

“From a Heroin Dealing Pimp Who Left a Trail of Suffering in His Wake to a Brother Others Could and Did Love:” Popeye Jackson, the California Carceral Web and the People’s Court

Towards the beginning of the People’s Court’s analysis of Popeye Jackson’s life and death, a woman named “Sheevy” remarked that, “once you started looking at the prison system, you could really see Popeye. He was a human being that was *horribly* involved in that system.”<sup>41</sup> Her words conjure up the surreal image of a dismembered man whose very personhood has been usurped by impossibly transubstantiated carceral flesh. In their effort to differentiate between fact and fiction to ascertain the truth behind Jackson’s brutal assassination, the Court sought to articulate precisely how carceral systems shaped both individuals and community life in an effort to disentangle the real Jackson from his complex and nearly translucent carceral web. The People’s Court presents a devastating analysis of how Jackson’s lifelong experiences of confinement “warped” his “consciousness;” Sheevy’s assertion that you could “see” Jackson by looking at the prison system elucidates the Court’s broader contention that Jackson internalized the violent logic of prison life and inadvertently reproduced that violence unto himself and his community. However, the narrative arc of their report ultimately concludes that, “Popeye had changed...[through] the force of love... revolutionary practice was his salvation and was slowly unleashing higher levels of awareness.”<sup>42</sup> The People’s Court thus simultaneously envisioned the extent to which the carceral state constitutes captive bodies as degraded subhumans and urged loving “revolutionary practice” as the solution. In doing so, they articulated a revolutionary abolitionist conception of the prison system as a set of technologies which are fundamentally destructive to human life and thus must be abolished through revolutionary struggle. They define

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<sup>41</sup> People’s Court, “Free Popeye,” 5.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 20-37.

revolution as the practice of acting according to a logic of care antithetical to that which motivates the prison system, and imagine their own compassionate reconstruction of Jackson's life as the practice of revolutionary abolitionist justice. At the same time, the People's Court's prescient study of the effects of captivity on Jackson's life offers a unique lens into the expanding carceral network that ensnared Black San Franciscans in Jackson's lifetime, from 1930-1970. This chapter will thus reconstruct the interlocking narrative of Jackson's life, the California prison system, and the People's Court's theory of revolutionary abolitionist praxis.

On June 8th, 1975, the murders of revolutionary prison organizers Wilbert "Popeye" Jackson and Sally Voyer raised the paranoia crackling in the air of the Bay Area's radical scene to a fever pitch. Four days prior, a loosely defined underground guerilla group called the New World Liberation Front published an "open letter" on the community radio station KPOO questioning his loyalty to the cause for receiving "privileged treatment by the Adult Authority" and "projecting a capitalist image."<sup>43</sup> The next day, the *San Francisco Chronicle* received a memo from the NWLF claiming responsibility for his murder; hours later, another NWLF communique negated the legitimacy of the first memo.<sup>44</sup> The contentious case shone a national spotlight on the Bay Area's radical community: even the *New York Times* reported that California police were "baffled" by his killing and wondered whether he was murdered by the NWLF, the Aryan Brotherhood, or police counter-intelligence agents.<sup>45</sup> Among the left, the "confusion sown by the state + the media" prompted a flurry of conflicting responses from nearly every well-known underground and aboveground group in the prison movement.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Steve Long, "NWLF Didn't Kill Popeye Jackson," *Berkeley Barb*, June 13, 1975.

<sup>44</sup> "Nothing Is More Precious Than..." 1/4 7 1/2 ips, *Nothing Is More Precious Than...* (San Francisco, CA: KPFA-FM, June 14, 1975), Nothing is More Precious Than... Collection, Freedom Archives.; "Radicals Killed Prison Reformer, Communique Says," *Los Angeles Times*, June 11, 1975.

<sup>45</sup> "California Police Are Baffled by the Killing of Black Prison Reform Advocate," *New York Times*, June 29, 1975, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

<sup>46</sup> "Nothing Is More Precious Than..." ; Long, "NWLF Didn't Kill."

In response to this turmoil, a group of “comrades” who were “mostly ex-cons” assembled into “People’s Court #1” and attempted to “uncover the truth so that the fighting in the movement could be ended and unity restored.”<sup>47</sup> They described themselves as “the first time a group of revolutionaries in *our* movement has assumed the individual and joint responsibility for so designating themselves.”<sup>48</sup> A separate group of six investigators collected documents and sought out individuals who could provide testimony in the weeks following Jackson’s murder, while the actual People’s Court assembled for 6 hours on July 30 of 1975 to hear and assess the evidence as presented.<sup>49</sup> Using the standard “is it reasonable to conclude?,” members ultimately voted to adopt fifteen conclusions and rejected one.<sup>50</sup> The Court then published these conclusions with additional “analysis and summary” in a 45-page booklet distributed by a larger group of at least thirty-five revolutionaries called the “People’s Court’s Comrades.”<sup>51</sup>

The People’s Court’s analysis is shaped by their understanding of the prison as one element in a “broader system of oppression” which is structurally destructive of human life. In one of their conclusions, they contend that, “Popeye made many errors but the ultimate guilt belongs to a system of oppression responsible for the black ghetto and the Department of Corrections. He spent the greatest part of his life under their influence and his consciousness was corrupted and warped.”<sup>52</sup> They viewed the “black ghetto and the Department of Corrections” as two facets of the larger carceral state which had gripped and shaped Jackson from a young age; thus, in order to “lovingly” understand his actions as contextualized by the material facts of his existence, they observe that “it was necessary to go all the way back to the beginning.”<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> The People’s Court, “Free Popeye,” 3.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 37-44.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 44.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

Drawing upon official documents and testimonials from Jackson's friends and community, the Court described Jackson's life trajectory as he moved between various states of confinement.

Jackson's infancy was marked by poverty, loss and love. According to his FBI file, he was born to Marguerite and Wilmert Jackson in Louisiana on November 27th, 1929, one month and one day after the Wall Street Crash of 1929 triggered the Great Depression of the 1930s; his mother died a year after his birth, in 1930.<sup>54</sup> Based on the testimony of "Brother Karl [who] grew up in the same neighborhood," the People's Court writes that, "the infant Popeye was suffering from extreme malnutrition when he was abandoned by his mother."<sup>55</sup> Regardless of whether Jackson was abandoned or orphaned, his "extreme malnutrition" suggests that his first year in the world was characterized by economic hardship and possible neglect. Karl continues that, "his grandmother took him into her home in San Francisco's Fillmore Ghetto and he grew up on the streets."<sup>56</sup> His close friend Jacob Holdt remembers his mother as a woman who "every single week... had brought him cake in prison" and who "suffered a total breakdown in front of the coffin."<sup>57</sup> It is possible that Holdt mistook his young grandmother for his mother; in either case, what emerges in the overlap is a vague contour of a woman who fed, raised and loved Jackson since infancy and carried that love with her past his death.

Growing up in the Fillmore during the Great Depression, Jackson would have lived among San Francisco's small and economically depressed Black community. In 1930, the city's Black population totaled only 3,803, almost half of whom were gathered on the strip of Fillmore street between McAllister and Sutter in a section of the Western Addition.<sup>58</sup> Jackson likely grew

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<sup>54</sup> U.S. FBI San Francisco Office, *Wilbert Jackson*, June 6, 1972, 3.

<sup>55</sup> The People's Court, "Free Popeye," 3..

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>57</sup> People's Court, "Free Popeye," 3; Jacob Holdt, "Our Ultimate Oppression - the Case of My Friend Popeye Jackson," *American Pictures* (blog), n.d., <http://www.american-pictures.com/story/chapter-67.htm>.

<sup>58</sup> Albert S. Broussard and Prof Albert S. Broussard, *Black San Francisco: The Struggle for Racial Equality in the West, 1900-1954* (University Press of Kansas, 1993), 30.

up in and around the neighborhood's crumbling mansions with Gothic arches, Byzantine domes and mansard roofs; the remnants of the city's Golden Age converted into multi-unit boarding homes which had by then deteriorated into the most substandard housing in the city.<sup>59</sup> His neighborhood was diverse and vibrant but riddled with the difficulties of Great Depression life; Black San Franciscans suffered disproportionate hardships during the Depression, as the Black unemployment rate tripled between 1930 and 1937.<sup>60</sup>

With the onset of World War II, Jackson witnessed the exponential rise of the city's Black population and corresponding increase in efforts to police Black life. In the onset of World War II, San Francisco became a focal point of Black migration as the "largest shipbuilding center in the world" where employment opportunities abounded; from 1940-1945, San Francisco's Black population grew by more than 600%.<sup>61</sup> Migrants found lodging in the Fillmore's crowded but affordable rentals, and the neighborhood became the music and cultural hub of San Francisco's black community, dubbed the "Harlem of the West."<sup>62</sup> From the early to late 1940s, an adolescent Jackson would have found the streets of his neighborhood vitally alive. At the same time, the influx of Black migrants prompted city officials to police the boundaries of space that Black bodies could inhabit. As historian Marilyn Johnson explains, the social ruptures brought on by wartime migration included "changing urban demographics, overtaxed city services, the transformation of civic culture, and the increased autonomy of migrants, women and youth."<sup>63</sup> City officials "cracked down" on crime by enacting measures to more closely surveil women,

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid.; Broussard, *Black San Francisco*, 36.

<sup>60</sup> David Kipen, "Western Addition," in *San Francisco in the 1930s: The WPA Guide to the City by the Bay*, ed. Federal Writers Project of the Works Project Administration (University of California Press, 2011), 0, <https://doi.org/10.1525/california/9780520268807.003.0019>. Broussard, *Black San Francisco*, 114.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 133.

<sup>62</sup> Nikki Jones and Christina Jackson, "'You Just Don't Go Down There': Learning to Avoid the Ghetto in San Francisco," in *The Ghetto: Contemporary Global Issues and Controversies* (Boulder, CO: Routledge, 2012), 87.

<sup>63</sup> Marilyn S. Johnston, *The Second Gold Rush: Oakland and the East Bay in World War II* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1993), 181.

young people and San Francisco's growing Black population.<sup>64</sup> All major West Coast cities enacted youth curfews and used vaguely-defined vagrancy laws to reassert control over public space.<sup>65</sup> Jackson's first forays into the small freedoms of early adolescence were thus met by a concerted effort to remand him from public space: according to Holdt, Jackson was first arrested at the age of ten.<sup>66</sup> The beginning of Jackson's adolescence was thus paradoxically marked by the growth of Black public life and his exclusion from public space – trends that would continue for the remaining thirty-five years of his life.

The boom of wartime industry and an increased desire to police growing non-white populations also spurred the creation of the California Department of Corrections (CDCR) to pioneer a new “rehabilitative” model of penology which captured and controlled the human body in new matrices of power. After World War II, the fledgling field of criminology developed theories of the “criminal” as a “socially maladapted” figure in need of a “cure.”<sup>67</sup> American sociologists theorized that criminality resulted not from a fundamental rejection of the “social contract” by an enemy of the state, but a lack of opportunity to conform: rehabilitation thus entailed equipping their “patients” with the tools necessary to succeed and achieve culturally accepted goals.<sup>68</sup> From the 1940s to the mid-1960s, the CDCR officially operated according to this medical model of punishment, framing the correctional system as a means to “rehabilitate” its “sick” inmates. San Quentin's new warden Clinton Duffy reimagined what he described as “the once bloody battle ground where brutality was the rule” to be a “huge, modern laboratory for the study of criminals and crime.”<sup>69</sup> California prisons simultaneously studied the “criminal”

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<sup>64</sup> Johnston, *Second Gold Rush*, 183.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 184.

<sup>66</sup> Holdt, “Our Ultimate Oppression.”

<sup>67</sup> Rita Shah, *The Meaning of Rehabilitation and Its Impact on Parole: There and Back Again in California* (New York: Routledge, 2017), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315474533>.

<sup>68</sup> Cummins, *Rise and Fall*, 13.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

as a scientific subject to assess what had caused them to go awry, and provided them with behavior-centric treatment geared towards producing socially compliant citizens.

The CDCR hired “psychiatrists, psychologists, physicians, dentists, sociologists, vocational counselors, educators, chaplains, clerical custodial and other assistants” to “appraise the man’s personality, his mental condition and social history, his criminal behavior and its probable cause.”<sup>70</sup> Upon entry, incarcerated people were subject to a battery of psychological tests and questionnaires by the Reception-Guidance Center, while their families were asked to write letters answering questions like, “was this man a good mixer?” or “what is the subject’s attitude toward schoolwork?”<sup>71</sup> The results of this questionnaire both determined the prison to which the individual was housed and served as a baseline from which their “improvement” was assessed. While inside, incarcerated people were subject to programs like “bibliotherapy” which involved working through a set of closely regulated “Great Books” of Western civilization like the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*.<sup>72</sup> Other programs strove to condition prisoners to use their bodies in a “useful” manner by participating in jobs seen as a performance of civic duty—jobs which ranged from “forestry and road camps” to participation in medical experiments.<sup>73</sup> Indeed, one prison official argued in favor of medical experimentation on incarcerated people by asserting that, “whether they would admit it or not – it gives them a sense of doing something worthwhile.”<sup>74</sup> In administering such programs, prison staff were expected to collect a lengthy dossier on the inner thoughts and beliefs expressed by incarcerated individuals which was thought to reflect their

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<sup>70</sup> California Adult Authority, “Adult Authority: Parole Philosophy, Policies and Program” (Sacramento, California, May 1961), <https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/102201870>, 15.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 17-26.

<sup>73</sup> Assembly Select Committee on Corrections, “The Status of Biomedical Experimentation in California’s State Prisons” (San Francisco, CA: California State Assembly, January 28, 1977), <https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/000093537>, 5; Adult Authority, *Adult Authority*, 17.

<sup>74</sup> Assembly Select Committee on Corrections, 5.

“progress” back towards a socially adapted innermost self.<sup>75</sup> This progress was compared against their initial intake evaluation to determine whether incarcerated individuals were sufficiently cured in preparation for their release; this comparison was undertaken by a newly all-powerful body: the Adult Authority.

California’s Adult Authority was a body of “experts” with the sole power to curtail or lengthen an incarcerated person’s otherwise indeterminate sentence. California’s 1917 Indeterminate Sentence Law in 1917 required that every person be sent to prison for an unspecified period of time until they had “demonstrated” their readiness to re-enter society.<sup>76</sup> In 1944, then-Governor Earl Warren reinvigorated this system with the Prison Reorganization Act which created the Adult Authority, a newfound parole board composed of experts like educators, sociologists, attorneys, and law enforcement personnel.<sup>77</sup> Each individual incarcerated in a California correctional institution went before the Adult Authority yearly to have their sentence assessed based on the dossier of information collected by correctional officers on their physical and psychological “progress” within the institution.<sup>78</sup> Once released, every incarcerated person was put on parole for a set period of time and expected to go before the Adult Authority for periodic reassessment.<sup>79</sup> Consequently, carceral institutions became a critical mechanism through which “socially deviant” individuals were dissected and categorized into endless files which sought to capture the carceraly reconstituted intricacies of personhood that were used both to determine their “rehabilitative” treatment and continued conformity upon release.

At the end of the war, employers pushed Black workers out of shrinking war industries in disproportionate numbers, inaugurating a new decade of economic depression in the Fillmore;

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<sup>75</sup> Shah, *The Meaning of Rehabilitation*, 33;

<sup>76</sup> Cummins, *Rise and Fall*, 11.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>78</sup> Shah, *The Meaning of Rehabilitation*, 33.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

Jackson found structure and monetary opportunities as the leader of a gang called the Lucky 20s.<sup>80</sup> People's Court member Karl testified that "he and Popeye belonged to street gangs that were friendly," remembering,

The Lucky 20's were a typical street gang of the late 40's and the 50's, non-political and non-racist. Popeye was the leader and they were into boosting and sneaking into movies, that kind of thing. Later, they were shaking-down merchants and getting into robberies. I was kinda on the same trip myself... I looked up to him

The Lucky 20s were the major Black gang in the Fillmore at the time.<sup>81</sup> Karl's testimony paints them as a social group; jazz singer Etta James was part of the Lucky 20's for a year in 1950 with Jackson, and recalled that she joined in search of that "family feeling in gangs."<sup>82</sup> Boosting and robbery also allowed the group of Black youths to make a profit in a space where employment opportunities were vanishingly small. Jackson's gang operated within the increasingly economically dissolute Fillmore, which middle-class white and Black leaders increasingly scrutinized as "a cesspool of crime and vice."<sup>83</sup>

Increasingly anxious about the thousands of unemployed Black residents of San Francisco, city officials addressed what they considered a "civic problem" with heightened policing which would permanently capture Jackson in the growing California carceral net.<sup>84</sup> The San Francisco District Attorney launched an investigation into "the Negro and his relationship to crime in San Francisco" in 1947, finding that San Francisco's Black residents represented a disproportionate percentage of arrests for vagrancy, gambling, narcotics violations, burglary and

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<sup>80</sup> Broussard, *Black San Francisco*, 210; Jones and Jackson, "You Just Don't," 88.; People's Court, "Free Popeye," 4.

<sup>81</sup> Joseph L. White and James H. Cones, *Black Man Emerging: Facing the Past and Seizing a Future in America* (Boulder, CO: Routledge, 2013).

<sup>82</sup> Etta James, "Etta in the Fillmore," *The New Fillmore*, February 2012, [https://newfillmore.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/02/2012\\_02.pdf](https://newfillmore.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/02/2012_02.pdf).

<sup>83</sup> Jones and Jackson, "You Just Don't," 89.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, 81.

homicide in San Francisco.<sup>85</sup> Vagrancy was the major force behind disparate arrest rates: Black residents were twice as likely to be arrested for vagrancy, and more than twice as likely to be held for bail after arrest.<sup>86</sup> As a result, from the mid-1940s on, Jackson's life was structured by incursions of the carceral state. His FBI file reports that "the Subject's California Department of Corrections case history... reflected that the Subject was first arrested at age 17, and following a period of military service, from which he was dishonorable discharged, on January 31, 1950, he began serving a one to fifteen year sentence for second degree burglary on September 20, 1951."<sup>87</sup> The People's Court narrates that,

At age 16, Jackson was charged by the Juvenile Court with cutting another boy. He got off. A year later, he threatened the principal of his high school with a knife; this time he got probation. Two weeks later, he was charged with petty theft when he and another boy tried to steal a bottle of wine and was committed to the Log Cabin Ranch School, a semi-detention institution of the period. Nine months later, he was kicked-out for disobeying the rules and did his first time, in the Juvenile Detention Home. After release, he was again busted for shop-lifting and was forced to enlist in the army as an alternative to Youth Authority Prison. In the army, he was busted for grass, and did a year in the stockade. He got a dishonorable discharge. In 1951, when Popeye was 21, he was caught in the act of burglarizing a drugstore. His pockets were full of cosmetics and cigarettes. Because of prior record, including narcotic violation, he was given the maximum sentence: 1 to 15 years. The indeterminate sentence in action: *11 years* of a man's life for stealing cosmetics and cigarettes."<sup>88</sup>

Jackson served the whole of his indeterminate sentence, suggesting that he was seen by the CDCR prison officials as an especially unruly subject.<sup>89</sup> He was rearrested almost immediately after his release: the People's Court recounts that, "released in 1962, the 32 year old Popeye was out less than 90 days. This time, the take was two dollars and some pennies, a wristwatch, and a partially smoked pack of cigarettes. The florist got pistol-whipped and Popeye got 5 years to life."<sup>90</sup> All accounts make clear that Jackson spent the majority of his life moving between

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<sup>85</sup> Broussard, *Black San Francisco*, 223.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, 223-224.

<sup>87</sup> "Wilbert Jackson: Extremist Matters."

<sup>88</sup> People's Court, "Free Popeye," 4.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*

varying states of confinement, from isolated juvenile detention facilities to military barracks to lengthy prison terms. He counted himself among the growing number of Black men incarcerated in California, where the Black prison population spiked from 19.9 percent in 1951 to 29.8 percent in 1970; Jackson spent the entirety of those nineteen years moving between various maximum security carceral facilities.<sup>91</sup> After detailing the circumstances that paved the way for Jackson's decades of incarceration, the People's Court analyzed how his experiences in captivity contextualized the person he was upon release.

The Court argues that prisons deny incarcerated individuals any semblance of autonomy through the constant threat of violence. They describe that,

San Quentin even takes from you the power to decide when you will eat or shower or take a shit, and the experience can fill you with a great need to control people and events. Following a long established practice, Popeye adopted the tactics of his oppressors and used intimidation to fulfill his need for power. If he could make you afraid of him, he was in control.<sup>92</sup>

Their analysis evinces the total negation of autonomy that characterizes prison life by specifically relaying that incarcerated people are denied the power to "decide" when to perform the most intimate and fundamentally human bodily functions like "eat[ing]... shower[ing]" and even "tak[ing] a shit." The image of a man denied the liberty or privacy to relieve himself affectively conveys the violating and dehumanizing experience of captivity which negates the simple freedoms that define human existence. The Court identifies violent "intimidation" as the ultimate "tactic" through which prisons exercise such totalizing control over their captive subjects; incarcerated individuals are forced into a position of complete vulnerability when held in captivity by armed guards whose presence always carries with it the threat of violence and demands total obedience.

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<sup>91</sup> Cummins, *Rise and Fall*, 64.

<sup>92</sup> People's Court, "Free Popeye," 4-5.

In their discussion of Jackson's behavior after his release, the Court argues that nineteen years in captivity taught him to assume the same position over others that prison guards asserted over him. The self-abnegation inherent to a lengthy experience of confinement compelled him to reassert his personal autonomy through "control [of] people over events" using the very same carceral tactic of "intimidation." In prison, Karl contends that Jackson was "known as a pressure artist" who was "really into dropping his bully hand" - in other words, Jackson navigated prison life by using threats of violence to bring others under his control. The Court connects this to his reputation as "an expert in the arts of deception and intimidation" as an organizer in the prison movement who could never be reasoned with because, as one prison union organizer put it "it'd be a fight."<sup>93</sup> In doing so, they compellingly suggest that the violence of prisons reproduces violence in the outside world.

Indeed, the Court goes on to describe the prison as a space that imbues all interpersonal connections with the same logic of violence and exploitation that characterizes the dynamic between captive subject and prison guard; a logic which Jackson continued to follow once outside. They denounce "the ruts of hatred and fear that are everyday experiences in the joint," suggesting that incarcerated individuals are compelled to view all others with a disdain that manifests as either "hatred" or "fear;" the two emotions are mutually constitutive sides of the same violent logic with which prisons imbue interpersonal relationality. At the same time, prisons make genuine connections difficult when every captive subject is denied access to his basic needs and thus compelled to use others as a means to such ends. They describe that Jackson "was a big yard hustler who was motivated only by self interest; his brothers and sisters were his marks." The authors invoke the prison's "big yard" as a space where "brothers and sisters"

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<sup>93</sup> People's Court, "Free Popeye," 6-8.

become “marks” rather than people, suggesting that Jackson’s experiences in prison lead him to approach all others with the same stature necessitated by confinement.

Finally, the Court posits that incarceration shapes how individuals conceptualize race and gender, facilitating interpersonal oppression outside along such lines. They describe Jackson as being “twisted and warped by almost 2 decades in that woman-less, mad world” where any perceived femininity suggested weakness. Karl testified that Jackson was known inside as an “intimidator of queens,” or gender non-conforming individuals; once outside, Sister Sheevy describes that, “he used to treat me in a very authoritarian fashion which I considered personally degrading... he seemed to think that’s the way men spoke to women.” Similarly, Karl describes that at the time Jackson was in Folsom, “interracial *anything*: living in the same cell, eating at the same dinner table, fucking, sucking, or just about anything - except for money hustle on the yard - was segregated.”<sup>94</sup> In the context of this racially charged space, they contend that Jackson evolved into a “double racist” who “hated white men and black women.”<sup>95</sup> Their analysis exposes a prescient conception of prisons as spaces that structure and produce stratified race and gender relations in the outside world.

However, rather than conclude this distressing dissection of the contentious figure that incarceration had “warped” Jackson into, the Court rejects his disposability by describing how “revolutionary practice” empowered Jackson to counter and upend his own internalized carceral violence. The court defines a “revolutionary” as “*a sister or brother whose actions are in the interests of the people.*”<sup>96</sup> They argue that revolutionary practice is any action that “springs from revolutionary consciousness,” or a logic of care exactly opposite to the violent logic of carceral systems. Towards the end of their report, the Court describes that by rallying behind Jackson to

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<sup>94</sup> People’s Court, “Free Popeye,” 5.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*.

defend him against the threat of parole revocation in 1975, members of the prison movement performed the “revolutionary practice” of care which countered the violence that defined Jackson’s experiences in prison. They write that,

Cons who have done much time know that it takes awhile to catch-up after you’re back among normal people. Only positive experiences can reorder your awareness and lift it from the ruts of hatred and fear that are everyday experiences in the joint. The love of comrades is an unfamiliar experience that cannot be immediately or easily accepted. Popeye - now hero of the revolution - had begun the last year of his life, but something had changed. Somewhere in the middle of being in jail, the trial, or the revocation hearing, Popeye had changed. Something had entered his head that was more powerful than a bullet - the force of love.

They thus describe the “positive experiences” which result from “revolutionary practice” by others as a force powerful enough to reverse the damage wrought by incarceration. Ultimately, they imagine collective care as a fundamental component of the ultimate “revolution” against the carceral state, concluding that, “a smile or a small kindness stands on the same level as offering one’s life for the cause if it springs from revolutionary consciousness.”<sup>97</sup>

The People’s Court’s description of Jackson reflects what this thesis describes as a revolutionary abolitionist ethic; while they acknowledge the harm he caused, they refuse to condemn him as a disposable individual. Instead, they sought to locate the source of Jackson’s interpersonal violence within the carceral institutions that had systematically stripped away his humanity for almost two decades, placing the “ultimate guilt” on the “system of oppression responsible for the black ghetto and the Department of Corrections” rather than the individual who had been “twisted and warped” by carceral violence. Moreover, they do not present Jackson as a permanently damaged subject; instead, they reconfigure him as a person with the limitless potential to improve through experiencing and undertaking the “revolutionary” act of care. Ultimately, they describe Jackson as “a perfect example of all the strengths and flaws of the

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<sup>97</sup> People’s Court, “Free Popeye,” 35.

convicted class,” situating him within a larger group of individuals who were systematically dehumanized by incarceration but who undertook “revolutionary” struggle against the carceral logic they carried within—and the physical prison structure without. The next chapter will focus on the revolutionary abolitionist theory and practice of Jackson’s own United Prisoners’ Union, which sought to unite the convicted class towards a revolution against the carceral state.

## Chapter 2

### “POWER TO THE CONVICTED CLASS IN REVOLUTIONARY STRUGGLE:” The Development of Revolutionary Abolitionism in the California Prison Union Movement

In the March/April 1975 issue of the United Prisoners Union’s newspaper *Anvil* published less than two months before his murder, Popeye Jackson wrote, “we, as members of the convicted class, are twisted and mangled in the vice of a cruel system that cares little for human life.”<sup>98</sup> Incorporating the vantage points of presently and formerly incarcerated radicals, Jackson and the revolutionary abolitionists in the UPU understood the carceral state as a “cruel” and life-negating system which exercises diffuse technologies of violence to continuously reproduce the economic and social degradation of what they termed the “convicted class.” They describe the convicted class as a group historically subjected to the same cycle of violence that “prisoners the world over have endured since the first man was enslaved,” invoking the concept of slavery to gesture towards the technologies of dehumanization deployed by the state throughout American history to maintain social hierarchies.<sup>99</sup> The United Prisoners’ Union’s notion of a “convicted class” was thus grounded not in a critique of exploitative labor practices, but a prescient conception of the carceral state as an expansive set of immobilizing technologies that produce and reproduce racial, gender and class hierarchies by inflicting economic, physical and epistemological violence on certain bodies labeled as deviant in order to produce a “convicted class” of individuals structurally barred from living a full life. Based on this analysis, Jackson and other U.P.U members worked to forge a union that would bring “POWER TO THE CONVICTED CLASS IN REVOLUTIONARY STRUGGLE” against the carceral state.<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>98</sup> Jackson, “History of the UPU,” 3.

<sup>99</sup> “CPU Preamble,” *Anvil*, June 1971, California Prisoner’s Union Collection, Freedom Archives.

<sup>100</sup> Popeye Jackson, “Prisoners’ Rights,” *Anvil*, May-June, Popeye Jackson Collection, Freedom Archives, 2.

This chapter will describe the development of a revolutionary abolitionist critique of carceral systems articulated by self-identified members of the convicted class. I will begin by describing the origins of the theory of a degraded and exploited convicted class originating in the 1970 strike at Folsom prison. I will then describe the evolution of the prison union movement outside as it formed and subsequently split into two factions with divergent theories of social change. The California Prison Union organized to attain civil rights through legislation; meanwhile, the more radical United Prisoners Union headed by Popeye Jackson pushed for armed and everyday revolution by the convicted class to overturn the prison system in pursuit of an abolitionist future.

The theory of revolutionary abolitionism emerged partly out of the specific anti-carceral critique and union-based organizing strategy articulated by the incarcerated radicals who organized a strike at Folsom Prison in 1970. On November 3, more than 2,000 of those incarcerated at Folsom refused to work or leave their cells.<sup>101</sup> The guards responded to the strike with extreme force. One striker noted that, “there are guards everywhere... it looks like an armed camp with a militia.”<sup>102</sup> Heavily armed prison guards beat strikers, forced them to stand naked outside and used food as leverage to bring the strike to a halt.<sup>103</sup> Yet the strength of radical unity within the prison prevailed. By November 14, one striker remarked, “the men have never been so united.”<sup>104</sup> Strikers looted to secure food and arsenal, coordinating their efforts through an underground radio station which could be accessed at all levels.<sup>105</sup> Whereas unified resistance necessitated mutual recognition of incarcerated individuals as human subjects, the guards’ violent tactics were geared towards breaking down resistance by negating the incarcerated

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<sup>101</sup> Dan Berger and Toussaint Losier, “Revolution: The Prison Rebellion Years, 1968-1972,” in *Rethinking the American Prison Movement*, 1st ed. (Routledge, 2018).

<sup>102</sup> “Folsom Strike Notes,” November 14, 1970, Folsom Strike Collection, Hoover Institution Library and Archives.

<sup>103</sup> Berger and Losier, “Rebellion.”

<sup>104</sup> “Folsom Strike Notes.”

<sup>105</sup> Ibid.

rebels' embodied humanity, typifying the form of abuse they had inflicted upon the captive bodies at Folsom for decades.

The “Folsom Prisoners Manifesto of Demands and Anti-Oppression Platform” written by strikers both puts forth thirty-one demands to change specific prison conditions. The demands included critiques of brutal prison practices, including “a change in medical staff and medical policy and procedure” at the Folsom Prison Hospital where inadequate medical services had produced “fatal results,” the “end to the tear-gassing of prisoners who are locked in their cells,” and an overarching “end to the escalating practice of physical brutality being perpetrated upon the inmates of California State Prisons at San Quentin, Folsom, and Soledad Prison.” The strikers also demanded legal rights, such as the power to “form or join Labor Unions” and the “constitutional rights of legal representation at the time of all Adult Authority hearings.” The original version of the demands included a critique of political repression in prisons, pushing for not only “an end to political persecution, racial persecution and the denial of prisoners to subscribe to political papers,” but also that “all condemned prisoners, avowed revolutionaries and prisoners of war be granted political asylum in the countries under the Free World Revolutionary Solidarity Pact;” this demand was removed at the urging of eventual CPU organizer John Irwin, who felt that it would lead the public to write the strikers off as “stupid fucking Marxists who want a revolution.”<sup>106</sup> Irwin was more interested in the eight demands about prison labor. The manifesto’s labor-centric demands included that “industries be allowed to enter the Institutions and employ inmates to work eight hours a day and fit into the category of workers for scale wages,” the right of incarcerated individuals to “support their own families,”

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<sup>106</sup> Eric F. Cummins, “Iron Gag. A Chronicle of San Quentin Prison, 1950-1980: Book Suppression, Inmate Resistance, and the Rise and Fall of the Prison Movement Left” (Ph.D., United States -- Pennsylvania, University of Pennsylvania), accessed October 28, 2022, <https://www.proquest.com/pqdtglobal/docview/303882976/abstract/BF739C3322B3479APO/1>, 445.

the requirement that “all institutions who use inmate labor... conform with the state and federal minimum wage laws,” an “update of industry working conditions to standards provided for under California law,” the “establishment of inmate workers’ insurance plan[s]” and “unionized vocational training program[s].” Irwin’s early criticism of the more politically-oriented demands foreshadowed the eventual division of the ultimate branches of the union movement; Irwin and other CPU members disregarded the demands that reflected the legacy of Black Power radicalism as “very forcefully asserted irrationality,” hoping instead to organize a traditional labor union of incarcerated individuals.<sup>107</sup>

Contrary to Irwin’s racially charged critique of the Folsom strikers’ “irrationality,” the manifesto reflects their profound understanding of how such carceral violence produces a degraded convicted class. In his work *Discipline and Punish* published in 1975, French philosopher Michel Foucault notes that although prison revolts of the 1970s were sustained by “minute material details” regarding the everyday facts of prison life, those details represent “revolts, at the level of the body, against the very body of the prison.” Indeed, the Folsom strikers write that, “the Folsom Prison Program in its structure and conditions have been engraved on the pages of this Manifesto of Demands with the blood, sweat, and tears of the Inmates of this prison.”<sup>108</sup> Their demands touch at the core mechanisms through which those incarcerated at Folsom were structurally dehumanized by the “structure” and “condition” of the prison program dictating the terms of their captivity, condemning the corporeal violence of “fatal” medical procedures of the Folsom Prison Hospital, the “tear-gassing of prisoners who are locked in their cells” and critique the psychological effects of captivity.

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<sup>107</sup> Cummins, “Iron Gag,” 446.

<sup>108</sup> “The Folsom Prisoners Manifesto of Demands and Anti-Oppression Platform,” November 3, 1970, Folsom Strike Collection, Hoover Institution Library and Archives, 4.

The strikers at Folsom understand the prison as a site through which the state exercises violence to reproduce social and political hierarchies. In the preamble to their demands, they wrote that, “the prison system of which your courts have rendered unto, is without question the authoritative fangs of a coward in power.”<sup>109</sup> They saw the prison as the “authoritative fangs” of a broader political body, imagining carceral violence as biting physical harm followed by a slower but equally noxious saturation of the blood. Their manifesto situates the prison within a broader system of state institutions, labeling the California Department of Corrections, Adult Authority, California State Courts, the United States Courts as “vile and vicious slavemasters” who produce and enforce the political hierarchy by using such violence to produce a structurally degraded convicted class.<sup>110</sup>

Specifically, the Folsom strikers argued that carceral institutions produce and uphold social hierarchies by creating an existentially dehumanized lower class. They wrote that,

Because of our posture as prisoners and branded characters as alleged criminals, the administrators and prison employees no longer consider or respect us as human beings, but rather as domesticated animals selected to do their bidding in slave labor and furnished as a personal whipping dog for their sadistic, psychopathic hate.”<sup>111</sup>

The strikers identified both the “posture” and “branding” of incarcerated individuals as mechanisms through which incarcerated individuals are transformed into “domesticated animals” rather than “human beings.” The phrase “our posture as prisoners” invokes the power imbalance produced by the physical reality of prison life, where guards have near total control over the physical autonomy of captive bodies. In their “posture as prisoners,” incarcerated individuals also lack autonomy over their understanding of reality; later on, they write that in “a world where authority acts within secrecy and within vast discretion and gives heavy weight to accusations by

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<sup>109</sup> “The Folsom Prisoners Manifesto,” 2.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid.

prison employees against inmates, inmates feel trapped unless they are willing to abandon their desires to be independent men.”<sup>112</sup> Their words reflect the epistemological power dynamic created in prisons, where guards are given the sole authority to discern fact from fiction. Because they are unable to contradict the reality endorsed by their captors, guards force individuals to “abandon their desires to be independent men” and conform to the world described by prison officials. At the same time, the strikers add that their “branded characters as alleged criminals” further justifies their dehumanization, characterizing the category of criminal as a violent “branding” of a sub-human identity; the phrase “branding” specifically conjures the tangible pain associated with the label of criminality and the specter of enslaved individuals branded by slave owners. The Folsom manifesto’s powerful and generative language thus describes how both the structural dynamics of captivity and the rhetorical power of the label of criminality allow prison officials to deny incarcerated individuals the consideration and respect afforded to “human beings” by placing them in a category of sub-personhood.

The manifesto goes on to argue that the dehumanization produced by carceral technologies facilitates the exploitation of their bodies both as a labor force and as repositories for social violence. They write that the dehumanization of prison transforms them into “domesticated animals selected to do their bidding in slave labor.” The phrase “domesticated animals” evokes the image of a mindlessly obedient labor force. At the same time, the strikers pointedly describe their work as “slave labor” to signify that the exploitation of their bodies is predicated upon their transformation into a sub-human species through an experience of captivity continuous with that of their enslaved forefathers; they suggest that all labor is involuntary and thus “slave labor” in a system of captivity where humans are denied autonomy or subjectivity. Finally, they note that the dehumanizing power of carceral technologies remolds them into the

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<sup>112</sup> “The Folsom Prisoners Manifesto,” 8.

“personal whipping dog[s]” for the “sadistic, psychopathic hate,” of prison administrators. Insofar as prison administrators are simply the fangs transmitting the venom ejected by the ruling class to produce the whole “system of injustice,” their words imply that captivity inherently subjects incarcerated bodies to the purest form of the violence upon which the whole system is reliant; incarcerated individuals are both literally exploited as laboring bodies and symbolically exploited as vesicles for the violence that reproduces a broader social structure. The manifesto’s foreward thus articulates a biting critique of the carceral technologies which dehumanize captive subjects to facilitate the total exploitation of their physical and symbolic labor power.

However, the manifesto’s writers were far from monolithic in their critique of prison labor: their discussion of labor in one of the thirty-two demands betrays two distinct conceptions of prison labor exploitation. The strikers write that,

Many prisoners believe their labor power is being exploited in order for the State to increase its economic power and continue to expand its correctional industries which are million dollar complexes, yet do not develop working skills acceptable for employment in the outside society, and which do not pay the prisoner more than the maximum sixteen cent pay rate. Most prisoners never make more than six or eight cents per hour. Prisoners who refuse to work for the two to sixteen cent pay rate, or who strike, are punished and segregated without the access to the privileges shared by those who work, this is class legislation; class division, and creates class hostilities within the prison.<sup>113</sup>

The phrase “many prisoners believe” flags the issue of prison labor as contentious within prison circles. The rest of the demand gestures towards two distinct interpretations of labor exploitation within prisons advanced by incarcerated individuals. One faction argues that the state exploits incarcerated bodies by forcing them to labor at low wages to increase its “economic power.” The other faction notes the discrepancy between the state’s exploitation of captive labor and its refusal to allow incarcerated workers to develop “working skills acceptable for employment in the outside world.” They thus observe that the state paradoxically forces them to perform useless,

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<sup>113</sup> “The Folsom Prisoners Manifesto,” 6.

low-wage labor in prison to expand its “economic power” not through the capital produced by prison labor but the continuous *expansion* of correctional industries that results from the creation of a class of presently and formerly incarcerated individuals with no capacity to sell their own labor. Such an analysis posits that incarcerated bodies are exploited to produce a new form of capital: the convicted class itself. They understand that the present social system relies upon the existence and reproduction of a class of dehumanized individuals existentially incapable of pursuing the full range of modalities which characterize actualized human existence. Ultimately, both factions sign the manifesto as the “California Prison Union,” seeking to forge a broader basis for incarcerated unity through an expansive conception of the specific “class division” produced within and through carceral technology.<sup>114</sup> They hoped that forming a union would facilitate a “united effort for designated change in administrative prison practice and legislative policy.”

After their release from Folsom in December of 1970, a group who had participated in the original strike organized into the first official California Prisoners Union; they built upon the critiques advanced by strikes to articulate the first thorough description of a “convicted class.” At their first official conference in February of 1971, original CPU elected a seven-member board of directors who were “all ex-convicts,” including Folsom strike leader Martin Sousa as chairman, Jay Douglas Halford as minister of communications, John Irwin as treasurer, and Wilbert “Popeye” Jackson—who had been released from San Quentin in January of 1970—as minister of prison affairs.<sup>115</sup> Every member of the board of directors served on the committee to

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<sup>114</sup> “The Folsom Prisoners Manifesto,” 2.

<sup>115</sup> Cummins, “Iron Gag,” 444; Jackson, “History of the UPU,” 1-2.

write the C.P.U's constitution, which was presented at the first C.P.U. Convention in June of 1971.<sup>116</sup> The preamble of the C.P.U. constitution proclaimed:

We the convicts and our people imprisoned or at large throughout the State of California are being subjected to a continuous cycle of poverty, prison, parole and more poverty; the same cycle that prisoners the world over have endured since the first man was enslaved. It is more than a game of Crime and Punishment; it is a social condition of inequality and degradation that denies us the opportunity to rise up and pursue a dignified way of life as guaranteed by the U.S. Constitution. Once convicted, forever doomed has been the practice of society. We are the first to be accused and the last to be recognized. We are deemed the lowest of all people: We the CONVICTED CLASS."<sup>117</sup>

The preamble picked up on the idea that carceral institutions transform incarcerated individuals into dehumanized objects in order to exploit them for "slave labor" as first expressed by the strikers at Folsom; however, this iteration of the C.P.U. re-imagined the dehumanization effected by all forms of captivity as the shared "social condition of inequality and degradation" among what they then term the "CONVICTED CLASS." They apply the Folsom strikers' critique of carceral power to the interlocking systems of "poverty, prison, parole and more poverty" through which the convicted class are "enslaved." Their invocation of slavery points to the two alternate interpretations of this theory of an existentially degraded "convicted class" which would ultimately be espoused by the two rival prison union factions: whereas the moderate faction used the term "slave" to describe the low-paid labor required of prisoners, Jackson's faction looked to the history of American confinement to advance a different critique of the endless cycle of captivity experienced by Black and poor Americans which negated their labor power altogether.

The more moderate segment of the prison union movement headed by Irwin and Halford worked to ameliorate the pain of prison by pursuing legal rights for the "convicted class."

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<sup>116</sup> "CPU Convention," *Anvil*, July 1971, Freedom Archives, [https://freedomarchives.org/Documents/Finder/DOC510\\_scans/Anvil/510.Anvil.July.1971.pdf](https://freedomarchives.org/Documents/Finder/DOC510_scans/Anvil/510.Anvil.July.1971.pdf).

<sup>117</sup> "CPU Preamble," *Anvil*, June 1971, California Prisoner's Union Collection, Freedom Archives, [https://freedomarchives.org/Documents/Finder/DOC510\\_scans/Anvil/510.Anvil.July.1971.pdf](https://freedomarchives.org/Documents/Finder/DOC510_scans/Anvil/510.Anvil.July.1971.pdf).

Regardless of the theories implied by their preamble, Irwin contended that they were “very consciously avoiding Marxist rhetoricisms.”<sup>118</sup> Once ratified, the final “Bill of Rights of the Convicted Class” removed the language that described prison labor as slave labor, instead writing that,

We the people of the convicted class, locked in a cycle of poverty, failure, discrimination and servitude, do hereby declare, before the world, our situation to be unjust and inhuman. We have been historically stereotyped as less than human, while in reality, we possess the same needs, ambitions and dignity indigenous to all humans. Our class has been unconstitutionally denied equal treatment under the law.”<sup>119</sup>

Their reformulation of the cycle of “poverty, prison, parole, and more poverty” into “poverty, failure, discrimination and servitude” pointedly describes incarceration as “failure,” leaving it up to the reader to decide whether the incarcerated person or system is the source of such failure. Indeed, the CPU did not contest the inherent legitimacy of prisons; as Jay Douglas Halford described to the press assembled at the 1971 conference, the CPU sought to “make the Department of Corrections more humane.”<sup>120</sup> Their constitution demanded legal, constitutional rights be extended to prisoners, undergirded by a belief that the extension of such rights to incarcerated individuals would solve the issues within the justice system. The CPU’s theory of prison unionism has been misapplied to both factions of the movement. However, their fundamental endorsement of the carceral system sharply contrasted with the sweeping critique that would come to characterize the revolutionary abolitionist theory articulated by Jackson’s UPU faction.

In 1971, the prison movement split into two factions due to both personal and political divisions. The leaders of both unions leveraged personal accusations at the other; Irwin claimed to have “caught [Jackson] stealing money” while Jackson alleged that the split was a “cheap

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<sup>118</sup> Cummins, “Iron Gag,” 449.

<sup>119</sup> “CPU Preamble.”

<sup>120</sup> “Prisoners Union Being Formed,” *Hartford Courant*, June 13, 1971.

power play” to gain control of the growing union.<sup>121</sup> Personal dispute aside, the vastly different paths taken by the groups after the split reveals the core ideological differences between the two groups. As the next section of this chapter will show, over the next four years, Jackson’s UPU chapter developed a broader historical critique of the carceral state as a fundamental mechanism to create social hierarchies by producing a “convicted class” and organized this class towards revolutionary action.

In his account of the “History of [the] U.P.U.” in the March/April 1975 issue of *Anvil*, Popeye Jackson articulates the UPU’s fully realized revolutionary abolitionist critique of prisons, describing the prison system as a set of technologies which produce an existentially degraded convicted class ripe for revolutionary struggle. He reflects that,

Like everything else; the U.P.U’s development has not been without setbacks and mistakes. We have learned that it is impossible to struggle for an end to slave labor in prisons without also fighting for an end to the dehumanizing, the brutalizing, the drug therapy, and all the total reducing of men and women to mere shells of their former selves.<sup>122</sup>

In his assessment of the UPU’s trajectory, Jackson characterizes their efforts to solely “struggle for an end to slave labor” and other particular prison practices as a setback in their development. Picking up on the theories articulated at Folsom and in the original CPU preamble, Jackson argues that all such practices are mechanisms through which the broader prison system realizes its ultimate purpose: the “total reducing of men and women to mere shells.” The UPU argued broadly that, “we, as members of the convicted class, are twisted and mangled in the vice of a cruel system that cares little for human life,” articulating a prescient conception of the carceral state as a life-negating force that produces a “twisted and mangled” convicted class of degraded

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<sup>121</sup> Cummins, “Iron Gag,” 456.; Earl Hunter et al., 1971, United Prisoners Union Collection, Freedom Archives, 1.

<sup>122</sup> Popeye Jackson, “History of U.P.U.”

individuals who are structurally denied the sweeping totality of a fully actualized human existence.<sup>123</sup>

Jackson and other members of the UPU use the phrase “a cruel system” rather than “prison system” to describe a broader set of life-negating carceral technologies which inflict violence on certain bodies to produce and reproduce the stratifications of American society along race, gender and class lines. Arguing that “the very foundation of this country is violence,” Jackson wrote,

It’s terrorism when Rockefeller ordered the murder of 33 convicts at Attica. It’s terrorism when San Quentin pigs murdered George Jackson and countless other revolutionary people. These are the real terrorists in the country. Fear and terror have been the tactics of the ruling class through out the history of this country. Beginning when Indians were slaughtered and robbed of their land, when black people were brought here as slaves, when they brought Asian people here to build the railroads, when Chicanos were brought here to do slave labor and when the poor white people were being exploited in the factories, the ruling class continues to terrorize.<sup>124</sup>

His brief account of violence in American history describes the violence inflicted by the prison system upon incarcerated revolutionaries as one of many instances in which the “ruling class” deploy “fear and terror”—the same words used by the People’s Court to describe prison violence—to uphold the present system. He situates carceral violence within a longer history of state-sponsored American violence that includes the “slaughte[r]” and “robber[y] of indigenous people, the enslavement of Black people, and the coerced “slave” labor of “Asian people... Chicanos... [and] poor white people.” Jackson viewed this violence as “foundational” to American society, connecting the violence of settler-colonialism that created the nation to the brutality that facilitated the construction of critical American infrastructure and the “terrorism” taking place within the prison. He concludes by noting that, “behind this dream of a union the

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<sup>123</sup> “The Politics of Lobotomies,” *Anvil*, April 1973, Anvil and Arm the Spirit Collection, Freedom Archives, 7.

<sup>124</sup> Popeye Jackson and Pat Singer, “Dare to Struggle, Dare to Win,” *Anvil*, August 1973, Freedom Archives, [https://freedomarchives.org/Documents/Finder/DOC510\\_scans/Anvil/510.Anvil.August.pdf](https://freedomarchives.org/Documents/Finder/DOC510_scans/Anvil/510.Anvil.August.pdf), 3.

twisted and broken bodies of literally thousands of our Sisters and Brothers who have been killed trying to deal with the system lie,” both reinforcing the concept of carceral technologies as fatal and urging the creation of a revolutionary union to avenge fallen “Sisters and Brothers” killed both fighting against and simply “dealing with” a system predicated upon a disregard for certain human life.<sup>125</sup>

This sophisticated analysis of the prison as a crucial death-dispensing technology that produces and preserves American social hierarchies informs the UPU’s complex critique of prison labor as a force that reproduces the prison itself. Jackson writes that,

The bulk of slave labor is done to maintain the prison... Not only is the prison system used by the ruling class to protect its economic interests, but that same ruling class profits by the production of the convict labor force which both maintains the prison and produces for the state.<sup>126</sup>

Noting that the majority of labor in prison is geared toward “maintan[ing] the prison” itself, Jackson describes that the prison “produc[es] the convict labor force” which both produces cheap goods for the state *and* reproduces the prison system itself through their everyday maintenance of actual prison facilities and their existence as an existentially immobilized class which continuously fills the prison by circulating endlessly through the cycle of “poverty, prison and parole.” In this endless cycle, the carceral violence that produces a “convict labor force” and the labor of incarcerated individuals are mutually constitutive elements that enable the existence of a “prison system” that serves to uphold the ruling class’s “economic interests;” in other words, the perpetuation of the historical social inequalities which define American life.

Thus, the UPU envisioned the prison system as a concentrated site of complex and varied counter-revolutionary technologies that intrinsically inhibits social progress and constrains the

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<sup>125</sup> Jackson, “History of U.P.U.,” 3.

<sup>126</sup> Popeye Jackson et al., “Expose the Prison Cover-Up: The California Prison Industry,” *Anvil*, April 1975, Freedom Archives, [https://freedomarchives.org/Documents/Finder/DOC510\\_scans/Anvil/510.Anvil.April.1975.pdf](https://freedomarchives.org/Documents/Finder/DOC510_scans/Anvil/510.Anvil.April.1975.pdf), 4.

possibilities of human life for all except the few who comprise the “ruling class.” For instance, in an article entitled “the politics of lobotomies,” another unnamed UPU member contends that “the Convicted Class faces brain surgery by the madmen who administer the prison systems.” They argue that such “brain surgery” takes of literal “surgical operations” and broader “brain-washing schemes” which seek to “make into vegetables” all “prisoners who show ‘anti-social tendencies,” namely, “Third World people, prisoners with high political awareness, or those involved in rebellions.”<sup>127</sup> The author imagines prisons as a possible site of thought control that would prevent the racialized “convicted class” from even imagining the possibility of a different state of existence. At the end of his “History of the UPU,” Jackson concludes that,

We are fighting to end the indeterminate sentence, the medical experimentation on prisoners, and ultimately the system which thrives on all these practices. It is a gross political mistake to struggle for minimal reforms, because even when these reforms are granted, the Koncentration Kamps are still there for those who threaten the position of the ruling class.<sup>128</sup>

Jackson retrospectively incorporates previous UPU demands for the elimination of practices like the “indeterminate sentence” or “medical experimentation” within a broader effort to end the “system which thrives on these practices as a whole,” because he contends that struggling for short-term “minimal reforms” fails to address the destructive power of inherent to prisons themselves. According to Jackson, the existence of any “Koncentration Kamps”—discrete spaces of violent social conditioning—eliminates the possibility for social change, as they are inevitably used to limit the revolutionary potential of the oppressed.

In a logical extension of their sweeping critique of prisons as institutions that produce the vast inequality of American life, the UPU sought to unite and lead this degraded “convicted

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<sup>127</sup> “The Politics of Lobotomies,” 7.

<sup>128</sup> Jackson, “History of the UPU,” 3.

class” in a revolutionary struggle against the carceral system and the social structure it generates.

Jackson argued that,

We CAN free political prisoners. We CAN free victims of racist and political repression. We CAN stop the increase of police aggression and the unbridled terrorism which pervades the prisons, but we can only succeed in turning the tide of repression through a UNITED MULTI-NATIONAL co-ordinated front. The repression of this period is calculated and systematic in its centers is the seed of Fascism, which if allowed to sprout would strangle us all. To successfully confront and bring a halt to this systematic nationally organized repression, we need a national apparatus to organize our resistance against racism, Fascism, capitalism, and imperialism.<sup>129</sup>

Jackson’s central concern was unity among the variegated group of oppressed Americans; he believed that a “UNITED MULTI-NATIONAL co-ordinated front” could successfully counter the interlocking technologies of violent oppression that were slowly expanding to ensnare greater swaths of the populace. He called for “POWER TO THE CONVICTED CLASS IN REVOLUTIONARY UNITY AND SOLIDARITY STRAIGHT AHEAD AND TO THE LEFT;” viewing “revolutionary unity” among the “Convicted Class” as the greatest opportunity to produce such a “united multi-national co-ordinated front.”<sup>130</sup> In the first issue of *Anvil* published after the UPU’s split from the moderate union faction, Jackson identified his UPU officials as “revolutionary people who dare to defy the ruling class of people throughout the United States.”<sup>131</sup> The UPU understood and urged revolutionary practice as both a broad set of practices that included both individual rejection of the dehumanization and division wrought by carceral technologies and the collective pursuit of armed revolution by incarcerated and underground radicals against the system itself.

In a poem written inside San Bruno County Jail in April of 1975 titled “What is Revolution,” Popeye Jackson wrote:

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<sup>129</sup> Popeye Jackson, “We Must Unite,” *Anvil*, April 1973, Anvil and Arm the Spirit Collection, Freedom Archives, 2.

<sup>130</sup> Jackson, “We Must Unite,” 2.

<sup>131</sup> Ibid.

Revolution is to indict the system,  
Revolution is to end capitalism,  
Revolution is to end imperialism,  
Revolution is to end racism,  
Revolution is to end fascism,  
Revolution is to end sit-ins,  
Revolution is to end cry-ins,  
Revolution is to end pray-ins,  
Revolution is to end colonialism,  
Revolution is to change the system,  
Revolution is political awareness,  
Revolution is political consciousness,  
Revolution is refusing tokenism,  
Revolution is refusing to be pacified,  
Revolution is teaching the masses self-defense,  
Revolution is that there is no negotiation,  
Revolution is that there is no such thing as non-violence,  
Revolution is to destroy everything that gets in the way,  
Revolution is that there be no compromise with the ruling class,  
Revolution is multi-national unity,  
Revolution is unity on all fronts,  
Revolution is to continue the struggle,  
Revolution is to build a communication base,  
Revolution is to build an economic base,  
Revolution is to have no fear of dying,  
Revolution is preparing to die so that our children may live,  
Revolution is a bloody war,  
Revolution is organizing the masses,  
Revolution is love for the people,  
Revolution is total freedom,  
Revolution is by any means necessary,  
Revolution is understanding all of the above.<sup>132</sup>

The poem showcases the breadth of organizing strategies contained within Jackson’s expansive concept of “Revolution.” The final section of this chapter will use Jackson’s poem as a guide to the UPU’s revolutionary abolitionist praxis. At its core, Jackson pronounces that revolution is to act in order to “indict” and “change” the violent carceral system that produces “capitalism... imperialism... racism... fascism...[and] colonialism;” the remainder of the poem gestures towards the particular actions he believed would begin to facilitate that transformation.

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<sup>132</sup> Popeye Jackson, “What Is Revolution,” September 1975, Freedom Archives, 6.

Jackson rejected the strategies associated with “non-violent” Civil Rights organizing of the past decade. The poem defines the organizing strategy of revolution in contrast to that of previous struggle; he writes that revolution is to end “sit-ins... cry-ins... [and] pray-ins,” referencing and rejecting the non-violent strategies of the early Civil Rights Movement; his invocation of three increasingly despairing types of “ins” seems to gesture towards his belief in the inefficacy of actions that request rather than seize their demands. He develops this further by insisting that the strategy of revolution understands that “there is no such thing as non-violence;” indeed, as his endorsement of “bloody war” implies, Jackson was one of the most outspoken proponents of armed revolutionary struggle in Bay Area prison movement circles.

The UPU aligned itself with other revolutionary leftist groups to organize armed resistance by the “convicted class” both in and out of prisons. In a 1990s interview with Eric Cummins, Nick Harrington, an individual incarcerated during the UPU’s height, admitted that, “there was a more radical, more extreme lean by the United Prisoners Union... [the] Union was connected with *other things* that potentially could have become much more than just an informational and educational affair” (emphasis added).<sup>133</sup> Harrington is deliberately vague in his description of the “things” to which the UPU was connected; his reticence and the ideological drive of the UPU suggest that the UPU may have been involved in organizing more covert resistance inside. Indeed, the UPU formed a lasting alliance with the lesser-known but influential Marxist group called Venceremos Organization (VO). The UPU began to work closely with VO in 1973, when Jackson was appointed the group’s “Minister of Defense.”<sup>134</sup> The UPU and VO organized closely together: the UPU became the site of most VO meetings, Jackson led classes on the techniques of armed self-defense for VO members, and VO members led Marxist

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<sup>133</sup> Cummins, “Iron Gag. A Chronicle of San Quentin Prison, 1950-1980,” 535.

<sup>134</sup> Jackson, “History of UPU,” 2.; People’s Court, “Free Popeye,” 12.

study-groups for the UPU.<sup>135</sup> At one point, VO and UPU were so aligned that the FBI falsely identified the UPU as a VO front.<sup>136</sup> Although the necessary secrecy of organizing armed resistance leaves much of their organizing hidden to the historian's eye, one informant who infiltrated the VO-UPU conglomerate told the People's Court that the two groups "had a lot of weapons" and "planned to attack a prison bus... and give each of the prisoners a gun and clothing."<sup>137</sup> The UPU also aligned themselves with various groups inside prisons like the San Quentin Chapter of the Polar Bear Party in their effort to forge bonds of unity among the "convicted class."<sup>138</sup> In sum, a significant portion of the UPU's revolutionary abolitionist organizing work involved efforts to inspire armed resistance by the convicted class.

At the same time, Jackson's poem reveals an additional understanding of everyday revolutionary practice through collective care; a theory of revolutionary abolitionist praxis akin to that described by the People's Court. Jackson wrote that revolution is also "unity on all fronts" and "love for the people." Another set of UPU organizing activities included working to meet the practical needs of individuals recently released from prison; UPU members arranged for their transportation, housing, and often served as a social network for individuals who might otherwise have minimal support systems.<sup>139</sup> They worked to convey "love for the people" by attending the trials of any and all self-identified "political prisoners," often elevating little-known cases through *Anvil*. Towards the end of their analysis of his life, the People's Court quotes Jackson himself, who professed that "I was on a hell of an ego trip... I was putting forth the image of *Popeye Jackson*, not thinking about the comrades... It took me a long time to get my shit together. Gradually, my political level, my conscience (sic) level, began to be raised to a

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<sup>135</sup> People's Court, "Free Popeye," 12.

<sup>136</sup> "Appendix: United Prisoners Union" (Federal Bureau of Investigation, January 17, 1975).

<sup>137</sup> People's Court, "Free Popeye," 12.

<sup>138</sup> Popeye Jackson, Michael Shane Guile, and Sleepy Bailey, "Critique and Analysis on the Prison Labor Force," *Anvil*, June 1973, Popeye Jackson Collection, Freedom Archives, 2.

<sup>139</sup> Jackson, "History of UPU"

level of awareness and I saw that it wasn't just me that needed help. I saw that a lot of people needed help. All these things began to help me get my shit together."<sup>140</sup> Jackson's words suggest that his increasing awareness of others' needs helped him understand his own purpose as a revolutionary dedicated simultaneously to inciting violent struggle against the system and organizing to meet the all too human needs of others so often ignored by the carceral system grounded in a negation of human life.

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<sup>140</sup> People's Court, "Free Popeye," 25.

### Chapter 3:

#### “The Cruellest Squeeze of All:” Parole, the SSU, the FBI and the Repression of the Prison Movement

In the summary of their findings published in 1975, the People’s Court wrote, “Popeye had been caught in the cruelest squeeze of all: San Quentin on one side and the SS on the other.”<sup>141</sup> The “SS” to which they refer is the Special Services Unit (SSU) of the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (CDCR), a unit founded in 1964 to collect “information about suspected gang leaders and radicals within the prison system and assisting police in apprehending parolees or escapees suspected of violent crimes.”<sup>142</sup> As a force whose jurisdiction spanned “prison revolutionaries” and “parolees,” the SSU was perfectly tailored to surveil and apprehend the growing California anti-prison movement both inside and outside of prisons by extending the reach of punitive technology. Although scholars have discussed the shift in California’s punitive logic and the role that police surveillance played in destroying the anti-prison movement in broad terms, none have outlined the precise mechanisms through which state intervention thwarted the movement’s lofty goals. In particular, virtually nothing has been written about the Special Service Unit which continues to surveil and disrupt any perceived “radical” activities of parolees in the present. Similarly, no historian has uncovered the extent to which the FBI was involved in Jackson’s murder. By engaging the perspective of “ex-cons” involved in the prison movement like Jackson and official statements by the CDCR, this chapter will attempt to detail the precise mechanisms through which carceral institutions stretched beyond specific facilities of confinement to curtail the outside movement. I will argue that as the radical movement to unravel penal technologies articulated an increasingly prescient

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<sup>141</sup> The People’s Court, “Free Popeye,” 31.

<sup>142</sup> Brian Parry, “Special Service Unit: Dedicated to Investigating and Apprehending Violent Offenders,” *Corrections Today* 63, no. 6 (October 2001): 120–23, 121.

understanding of carceral power, the California state and federal government worked to extend such technologies to the everyday reality of organizers' lives.

In the mid-1950s, the California prison system began to emphasize parole as an essential component of the rehabilitative system, extending its reach into everyday life. Proponents of a larger parole system cited both “public safety” and “rehabilitation” as reasons for its existence. At first, Adult Authority emphasized the social work aspect of the parole process, instructing parole agents to not “broaden their range of activities to include routine police work.”<sup>143</sup> Parole agents were imagined as “local therapists” or medical professionals, with one author writing that “the surveillance work of a parole agent will be carried out in the same spirit that a physician watches a polio patient make his first attempt to walk alone.”<sup>144</sup> By the mid 1950s, budget cuts from a waning war economy made parole arguably the central pillar of the rehabilitative system, facilitating the creation of mechanisms for greater surveillance of each parolee.<sup>145</sup> For instance, between 1955 - 1958, the CDCR studied and created “Special Intensive Parole Units” with fewer parolees per parole agent and found that a greater amount of surveillance of individuals on parole decreased their likelihood of reoffense.<sup>146</sup> Parole policies grew increasingly harsh as the Civil Rights Movement began to increasingly center the jail as a site of Black liberation—a trend which would continue into the late 1970s.

As California prisons filled with people of color and incarcerated individuals became highly politicized subjects, the CDCR increasingly emphasized the already expanded system of parole as a mechanism of “public safety.” By 1961, an Adult Authority manual reminded practitioners that, “a man who is transferred from prison to parole does not ‘go free.’ His parole

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<sup>143</sup> Brian Parry, “Special Service Unit: Dedicated to Investigating and Apprehending Violent Offenders,” *Corrections Today* 63, no. 6 (October 2001): 120–23, 121.

<sup>144</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.

<sup>145</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

<sup>146</sup> Joan Havel and Elaine Sulka, “Special Intensive Parole Unit, Phase III” (Sacramento: Research Division, California Dept. of Corrections, 1962), <https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/102470407>, 1-4.

imposes strict conditions upon him—because he is a person who has demonstrated he needs such control.”<sup>147</sup> In particular, the manual instructs that, “when a parolee’s conduct deteriorates to a point where it may threaten the welfare of the community, the policy is to cancel his parole.”<sup>148</sup> Contrary to the 1947 manual which discouraged parole agents from performing police functions, a 1967 Parole Task Force argued that parole agents were in a unique position to further the goal of public safety by “preventing, or reducing the likelihood of further illegal behavior.”<sup>149</sup> As early as the mid-1960s, then, the parole system began to redefine itself as a police force whose purpose was maintaining “public safety.”

The parole system became a major mechanism through which the state controlled and dismantled the growing anti-prison movement. The original 1971 CPU preamble described parole as an essential element of the broader prison system when it described the cycle of “poverty, prison, parole” that produced the “convicted class.” Strict parole policies facilitated a swift return to captivity, especially for any person recently released from prison who sought to organize within the prison movement. For example, parole violations included a broad set of activities such as being in “bad company,” which included all “ex-convicts”—thereby effectively making participation in the anti-prison movement a violation of parole.<sup>150</sup> Speaking at public events could also justify a parole revocation; a fact which Jackson continuously disregarded in his many speaking engagements.<sup>151</sup> In some instances, the combined forces of parole agents and police made parolees involved in the movement feel more surveilled than they had been in prison. As one UPU member wrote in *Anvil*,

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<sup>147</sup> Adult Authority, *Adult Authority*, 12.

<sup>148</sup> Ibid.

<sup>149</sup> Shah, *The Meaning of Rehabilitation*, 38.

<sup>150</sup> “Jury Acquittal = Prison Sentence?,” 1974, California Prisoner’s Union Collection, The Freedom Archives.

<sup>151</sup> “Cons Have Message: Jails Aren’t Any Fun,” *The Austin Statesman*, October 4, 1970, ProQuest Historical Newspapers, <https://www.proquest.com/docview/1514678069/9AA6C93467845B2PO/3?accountid=10226>.

Parole is... not a respite from prison but rather a cruel continuation of it. And the level of struggle and sacrifice is intensified. You are still being watched as you move down the “brick mainline.” They are still guaging (sic) your behavior with their “acceptability” yardstick and they are still penalizing you for your “misconduct.” They even have more guns, loaded and ready to be used against you if you move the wrong way. For parole is even a more ludicrous carnival than prison. There are more payers and players.<sup>152</sup>

His words speak to the intensity of surveillance that individuals on parole experienced on a daily basis—a level of surveillance that undoubtedly contoured the trajectory of their organizing work. The idea that there were “more guns, loaded and ready to be used against you” also reflects the multiplication of agencies empowered to surveil individuals on parole, including the SSU.

As an agency that uniquely bridged the eroding distinction between the inside and outside world, the SSU was a tangible manifestation of penal incursion into public life. Very little information is available about the unit, which evades the public eye by existing in the comfortable shadow of two larger agencies; consequently, the verbal testimonies of parolees organizing in Bay Area radical circles offers the best and only insight into the SSU’s work in the 1970s. Their descriptions paint an image of the SSU as an agency with almost limitless capacity to subjugate Ex-Cons through physical violence and the haunting specter of the violent captivity from which they were never fully removed.

Perhaps more than any other agency, the SSU brought (and brings) the violence of captivity to everyday life. One parole agent interviewed by the People’s Court called them the “CIA of corrections.”<sup>153</sup> Another People’s Court member explained that, “they don’t seem to answer to anybody but themselves. SS does the dirty work for the board, for corrections and paroles, and on their own initiative.”<sup>154</sup> The SSU had a wide mandate and limited supervision; in practice, another person involved in the movement (especially as a member of Tribal Thumb)

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<sup>152</sup> J. Douglas Halford, “Parole as a Continuation of Prison,” *Anvil*, September 1971, Anvil and Arm the Spirit Collection, Freedom Archives, 3.

<sup>153</sup> People’s Court, “Free Popeye,” 17.

<sup>154</sup> *Ibid.*

reflected that they functioned as the CDCR's "police squad."<sup>155</sup> A People's Court member claimed that the SSU were the only parole agents who carried guns, "and use[d] them." They recall hearing of an instance when an SSU agent and regular parole agent, "went to the parolee's house to confront him but he wouldn't open the door so the SS agent shot him in the stomach through the door."<sup>156</sup> The combination of rumor and fact surrounding the SSU and their propensity for violence only added to their power, especially because of their proven propensity for operating the same levers of power present in prison life to turn people.

The SSU specialized in exploiting and reproducing the social conditions of their subjects in various states of confinement to disrupt the movement and extend the mental positionality of captivity outside of prison walls. The People's Court reflects that, "informers are an SS specialty."<sup>157</sup> One person who testified recalled,

getting an unexpected parole with only a year to go until his top. He was quickly transferred from the adjustment center to a minimum security prison to "decompress" and allowed completely out of the prison on work furlough during the day. A mind blowing experience for someone who has just spent 9 years inside, most of it in the adjustment center. Then the SS arrived. If he wanted to keep his parole, he would have to corroborate the testimony of an informer who was the basis of a very heavy case that they very much wanted to win.<sup>158</sup>

Former Tribal Thumb member Rick Riley had a similar experience with the SSU, which frequently collaborated with the FBI. He recalls that,

I was there like thirty days now, and the FBI came to see me. They called me in; there's the captain of the Department of Corrections, Secret Service Unit, whatever the hell it was called back then... They said, 'We sent you here on a hundred-and-twenty-day thing. We can take you back to court at any time, get the judge to change the sentence on you. You can go to the work furlough and escape, or we can send you to camp and you escape, just work with us. They wanted to infiltrate Tribal Thumb... Anyway, so this is why they sent me to prison. Because they figured by now I'd be scared sufficiently enough to

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<sup>155</sup> Rick Riley, *The Thief on the Cross* (Page Publishing, Inc., 2015), 107.

<sup>156</sup> People's Court, "Free Popeye," 17.

<sup>157</sup> Ibid.

<sup>158</sup> Ibid.

where I'd just say, 'Okay, yes please, get me out of here.' You know, part of me wanted that, I'm not gonna lie. Part of me was like, 'Man, freedom.' You know? But then, I was like, 'Oh hell no, I can't do that.' So I told them, 'No!' Now I was pissed off though. I told them, 'You played with my life like that? You brought me here, you did this to me? And now you expect me to work with you!' This FBI and this captain of Department of Corrections, they told me to work with them and I'll be free. I got to escape though. They wanted me to escape, because they wanted me to hook it up where the Tribal Thumb comes to get me and I go with them and I get through their underground and all that. That's the information they had wanted.<sup>159</sup>

Riley's account speaks to the degree to which SSU and federal agents had control over the lives of any person ensnared in the carceral web. In both instances, the SSU leveraged the increasingly thin boundary between captivity and "freedom" to compel their subjects to go against their friends and community. Riley's testimony also speaks to the tactic employed by the SSU, which was to penetrate all levels of the underground by having their informants perform the actions associated with committed revolutionaries, making it almost impossible to distinguish between informant and member of the cause. Indeed, prospective informants like Riley himself could often barely understand where their loyalties lay, torn between the desire to sustain their existence and their resistance to such apparent oppression. Because of the particular surveillance capacity that the state wielded over all individuals inside or recently released from carceral institutions, revolutionary prison groups like the UPU were especially vulnerable to infiltration. As the People's Court document describes, when Jackson was re-arrested for shoplifting in 1975, he found himself caught in the "cruellest squeeze of all," forced to choose between his loyalty to the revolutionary prison union effort and his valid desire to avoid the captivity that had interrupted the vast majority of his life.<sup>160</sup> Although it is impossible to discern whether Jackson was indeed turned by the police, his circumstances demonstrate the gravity that the state wielded in the lives of Ex-Cons trying to organize against the very system in which they were entangled.

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<sup>159</sup> Rick Riley, *The Thief*, 107-108.

<sup>160</sup> The People's Court, "Free Popeye," 31.

The FBI also became increasingly involved in surveilling and disrupting the prison movement in the 1970s; indeed, federal agents both heavily surveilled Jackson himself and had informants infiltrate the UPU. A FOIA request for surveillance records of “Popeye Jackson” yielded a 164-page document of files which reveal the Bureau’s near-continuous monitoring of Jackson, including by tracking his housing and political activity.<sup>161</sup> The FBI recruited Sarah Jane Moore to infiltrate the UPU and gather information about Jackson’s activities.<sup>162</sup> Moore herself recalled that her FBI control officer Bert Worthington approached her by saying, “Look, we need your help here. These are dangerous people. They are out to destroy the country.”<sup>163</sup> She was trained in how to construct “psychological profiles of the radical left, lessons...[and] identify a violent personality;” her “primary assignment was to get to know Popeye much better and to find out everything she could about him and his friends.”<sup>164</sup> The FBI used Moore to produce a lengthy dossier of Jackson’s everyday activities, which they would eventually exploit to facilitate his murder.

Jackson was most likely killed by a member of a heavily infiltrated revolutionary group called Tribal Thumb, at the encouragement of FBI informants. Moore described Tribal Thumb as a “prisoners’ rights organization” founded by the Ex-Con Earl Satcher to “compete with the already popular Prisoners Union run by John Irwin, an ex-con who would eventually earn a doctorate in sociology with a focus on criminal justice, and its spin-off organization, the UPU, headed by Popeye Jackson.”<sup>165</sup> The group’s public organizing work was largely a front for his underground work attempting to arm incarcerated people in an insurrection against the prison

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<sup>161</sup> The People’s Court, “Free Popeye,” 31.

<sup>162</sup> Geri Spieler, *Taking Aim at the President: The Remarkable Story of the Woman Who Shot at Gerald Ford* (Palgrave MacMillan, 2009), 104.

<sup>163</sup> Ibid.

<sup>164</sup> Ibid., 105.

<sup>165</sup> Spieler, *Taking Aim*, 126.

system.<sup>166</sup> A later *Berkeley Barb* investigation describes Satcher as “an articulate and charismatic black man” who “became politicized while imprisoned” and “became active in the Long Beach chapter of the Black Panther Party (eventually attaining the Panther rank of Captain).<sup>167</sup> From 1969 onwards, the FBI heavily surveilled his activities.<sup>168</sup> In late 1974, the group was most likely infiltrated by an FBI informant named Gary Johnson and a gun salesman named Walter Hansackler<sup>169</sup> Although Moore eventually revealed that she was an FBI informant to the movement, she then declared herself loyal to the revolutionary cause and joined Tribal Thumb in September of 1975.<sup>170</sup> With three informants in their relatively small ranks, Tribal Thumb was significantly under the control of federal forces, and inadvertently operated according to their goals. The *Barb* reports that “Sarah Jane Moore began a whispering campaign against ‘Popeye’ Jackson, claiming he was a police agent, a pimp and a dope dealer...the rumors had the intended effect: They sowed the seeds of doubt in the radical community that supported Jackson and the UPU.”<sup>171</sup>

Most likely motivated by such rumors, on June 8th, 1975, Jackson and Voye were shot to death. A letter from the FBI’s San Francisco office to the FBI director reveals that a source informed both a federal agent and an agent from the Department of Corrections (most likely an agent of the SSU) that “the Tribal Thumb group... attempted to shoot Popeye Jackson” on April 8th, less than two months before he was killed.<sup>172</sup> At the very least, the FBI and CDCR passively enabled Jackson’s death by not acting on information about active threats against his life. The letter from the FBI’s San Francisco office goes on to say that,

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<sup>166</sup> Spieler, *Taking Aim*, 127.

<sup>167</sup> Bill Wallace and Imilla Cabral, “Inside Tribal Thumb: Did the Feds Help Murder Popeye Jackson?,” *Berkeley Barb*, December 23, 1978.

<sup>168</sup> Ibid.

<sup>169</sup> Ibid.

<sup>170</sup> Ibid.

<sup>171</sup> Wallace and Cabral, “Inside Tribal Thumb.”

<sup>172</sup> U.S. FBI San Francisco Office, *Re Bureau Teletype to San Francisco*, July 1 1975, 2.

[REDACTED] INTERVIEWED BY BUREAU AGENTS ON MAY 16 AND 21 LAST, AND RELATED THAT DURING LATTER PART OF APRIL 1975, HE HAD [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

THIS INFORMATION WAS FURNISHED TO THE SFPD INTELLIGENCE DIVISION, ON MAY 21 LAST.

AT APPROXIMATELY 3:00 AM ON JUNE 8 LAST, WILBERT POPEYE JACKSON AND SALLY VOYE WERE BOTH SHOT AND KILLED AT POINT BLANK RANGE WHILE THEY SAT IN A PARKED CAR AT 43 ALBION STREET, SAN FRANCISCO. JACKSON

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It is impossible to know what information was redacted by the FBI, but clear that they received some kind of pertinent and still classified information about Jackson approximately three weeks before his death. Finally, Jackson's FBI file shows that the gun that the FBI laboratories eventually connected to bullets found at the scene of their murders was furnished by FBI informant Hansackler, who asked that it be returned quickly so as not to alert attention within the group.<sup>174</sup> Ultimately, Tribal Thumb member Richard London was convicted of murdering Jackson partially on the basis of Hansackler's report that London had given him the gun.<sup>175</sup> Although the evidence does not definitely point to any definitive chain of events, it makes it clear that the FBI either facilitated Jackson's murders through rumors, passively allowed his murder to occur, or killed him themselves. As *Berkeley Barb* authors Imilla Cabral and Bill Wallace put it, "the actual murder appears to have been assisted at virtually every important juncture by agents of the Federal Bureau of Investigation engaged in a labyrinthian campaign of

<sup>173</sup> U.S. FBI San Francisco Office, *Re Bureau*, 2.

<sup>174</sup> U.S. FBI SAC, Sacramento (157-3567), *Re Telephone Call of SA [Redacted] to Sacramento*, July 11 1975, 1.

<sup>175</sup> *London v. People* (Court of Appeal, First District, Division 1, California May 19, 1978).

disruption targeted against Bay Area revolutionary groups.”<sup>176</sup> Analyzing Popeye Jackson’s murder as the outcome of the expansion of carceral logic beyond prison walls offers one powerful example of how the movement’s eventual destruction was facilitated by state forces rather than intra-movement conflict or poor organizing strategy.

The expansion of policing agencies like parole, the SSU and the FBI blurred the line between the prison and the outside world, providing the state with a mechanism to extend the carceral violence of captivity without erecting physical walls. The UPU observed this trend with marked concern, writing that even outside,

[We]... are still convicts although we bear the label of ex-convicts given to us by the ruling class. We are still convicts only we are living under “minimum-custody” while our Sisters and Brothers who are locked up behind the Walls of the Concentration Camps thruout Amerikka are in “maximum-custody.”<sup>177</sup>

Their use of the phrase “custody” to describe the continuity of their captivity in and out of prison signifies the indefinite objecthood of the “convicted class”—a perceived objecthood that justified the greater incursion of dehumanizing carceral violence in previously sacred realms of human life. The carceral state used the existentially degraded status of the revolutionary “convicted class” to justify the production of new carceral technologies to facilitate the violent destruction of the prison movement and its human leaders; once created, technologies like the SSU and parole were applied widely to facilitate the tremendous growth of the American prison system in the late 1970s and beyond.

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<sup>176</sup> Wallace and Cabral, “Under Their Thumb?”

<sup>177</sup> Jackson, “We Must Unite,” 1.

## Conclusion

Though largely forgotten today, Jackson's murder and the hysteria it provoked marked a turning-point in Bay Area anti-prison organizing: the case proved an efficient mechanism for media and state officials to delegitimize the prison movement's revolutionary abolitionist ethos by performatively unmasking what they characterized as the mundanely criminal motives behind the actions of radical groups. The revolutionary tenor of Jackson's character came under scrutiny, with the *San Francisco Examiner* widely reporting on "charges that Jackson using the guise of a prison reformer, was heavily engaged in drugs, pimping and other illicit activities."<sup>178</sup> When the San Francisco Police Department arrested Richard London, a member of Tribal Thumb for Jackson's murder, the *Examiner* called him a "gang executioner" for a "small group of ex-convicts."<sup>179</sup> In using such terms to characterize the conflict, the newspaper participated in a broader shift in rhetoric surrounding militant prison organizing, redefining organizations with self-professed "revolutionary" intent as conglomerates of "prisoners" and "criminals" more aptly termed "gangs." Ultimately, the fallout from Jackson's premeditated murder at the hands of the state contributed to a broader state-sponsored effort to upend prison organizing by extending the socially destructive paranoia of prison life into the outside world, and recast the political organizing of ex-convicts as apolitical interpersonal crime. As a result, the prescient critiques of the carceral state and organizing strategies elucidated by individuals like Jackson have remained

However, the People's Court and other revolutionary groups responded to the media's defamation of Jackson by radically reaffirming his indispensability as both a human and a vital

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<sup>178</sup> Larry D. Hatfield, "Popeye Arrest Linked to Moore, Hearst Cases," *San Francisco Examiner*, April 8, 1976, ProQuest Historical Newspapers,

[https://www.proquest.com/pagelevelimagepdf/2164525185/pagelevelImagePDF/\\$N/1?accountid=10226&t:lb=t](https://www.proquest.com/pagelevelimagepdf/2164525185/pagelevelImagePDF/$N/1?accountid=10226&t:lb=t).

<sup>179</sup> Lon Daniels, "Gang Executioner Faces Life in Killing of Popeye and Woman," *San Francisco Examiner*, September 23, 1978, ProQuest Historical Newspapers,

<https://www.proquest.com/docview/2169833471/D26C37B15721420CPO/4>.

force in the prison movement. An issue of *Anvil* published after Jackson's death compiled statements and poems commemorating Jackson authored by various groups of the radical left. The guerilla group Weather Underground wrote that "Popeye Jackson dedicated his life to fighting for prisoners, against a racist and inhumane system," while the Prairie Fire Organizing Committee uplifted Jackson as a "worker who gave his time and energy to the movement, not for personal gain."<sup>180</sup> Poetry from Jackson's friends and comrades revived his personhood against the flattening narratives of the media. A man named Brick Glick mourned that, "I came to know and love a warm and gentle man. I came to love him, never told him, then they killed him, shot and killed him. And I mourn him."<sup>181</sup> A woman named Mickey Tyler addressed Jackson directly in an effort to preserve his presence:

Your life is planted in the minds of the people/  
Your soul is rooted in the hearts of the  
convicts/ Who will fight until the living dead rot/  
in their own corruption/ We will carry  
the work you have done/ We will hold your spirit like a chain of gold between us/  
A silent but powerful union.<sup>182</sup>

Tyler imagined Jackson's life work continuing beyond his life in the bonds of unity he sought to forge among a revolutionary convicted class; in doing so, she recognized the significance and the fragility of his memory as his physical presence slipped away. Berger argues that "to organize in and against the prison... is an act of memory. It requires remembering, across the divide of space more than time, the existence, the humanity, of those in prison."<sup>183</sup> The efforts made by Tyler and members of the People's Court to faithfully preserve and transmit the truth of a man's life suggests that the act of remembering temporally distant individuals whose lives were cut short by the carceral state is also a form of resistance. Reviving the life, thought and work of incarcerated

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<sup>180</sup> "The People's Response to Popeye's Murder," *Anvil*, September 1975, Freedom Archives, [https://freedomarchives.org/Documents/Finder/DOC510\\_scans/Anvil/510.Anvil.September.1975.pdf](https://freedomarchives.org/Documents/Finder/DOC510_scans/Anvil/510.Anvil.September.1975.pdf).

<sup>181</sup> Ibid.

<sup>182</sup> Ibid.

<sup>183</sup> Ibid.

revolutionaries like Jackson contests simplistic narratives about Blackness and criminality which produced the present carceral system and reveals how the prison system grew into its present form; at the same time, this kind of historical work reveals a rich history of organizing against the prison by individuals like Popeye Jackson, whose theories and strategies have continued relevance in the present. Moreover, the act of “lovingly” reconstructing the lives of those resoundingly dismissed as forgettable in the narrative of arc of social movement history elucidates the actual history of abolitionist organizing, which necessarily includes complicated figures struggling to within and against a life-negating system of dehumanizing violence.

At the end of their analysis, the People’s Court proclaimed that “the only sentence a peoples’ court may give, is that the people shall know the truth.”<sup>184</sup> They theorize “justice” as the production of life-affirming and compassionate narratives; a form of justice exactly counter to the violent “justice” of carceral punishment. In doing so, the Court suggests that working to understand individuals as humans shaped by and against their embodied conditions is also an abolitionist practice; their work might be understood as a call for historians to take up difficult subjects in history as a radical rejection of human disposability.

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<sup>184</sup> The People’s Court, “Free Popeye,” 39

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