

# *Introduction*

## THE LIFE OF PAPER

*ascesis*

involved in writing  
my history

i've been waking in  
night sweats &

it's not the sheets,  
those things in-

side are  
burning out

of love

17 JUNE 2009

WRITING AND REWRITING THIS BOOK has been a slow burn—as the case may be now for you, too, kindly reading it. On the one hand, to myself and to those who have shared their stories with me (and probably also to others still holding their stories close to themselves), the central argument of this study is obvious, almost *too* obvious to necessitate book-length explanation: this is, simply, that letters can mean the world to the people attached to them, and distinctively so for communities ripped apart by incarceration. In the first and final instance, this is a formulation of “the life of paper” that you must accept at face value in its plenitude, a plenitude that is all but better represented by understatement than long-winded analysis. If one does not

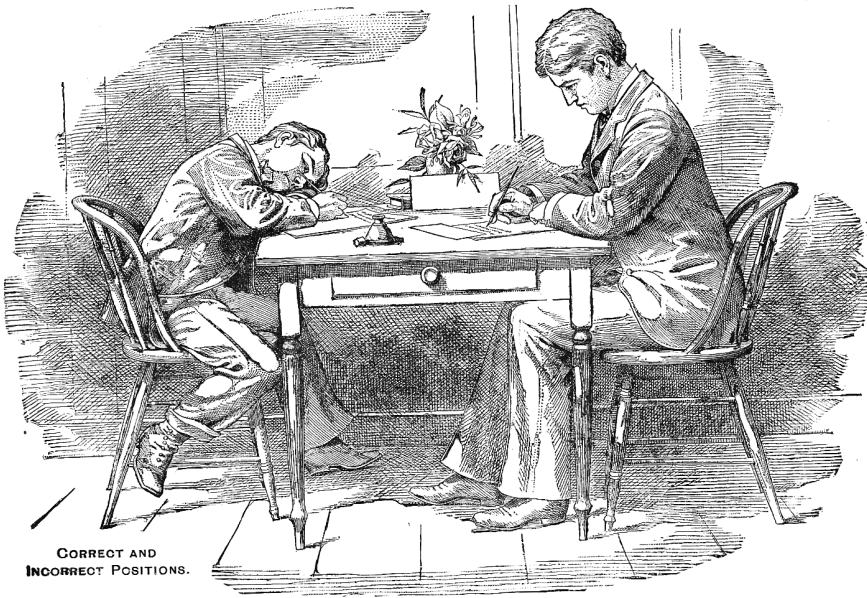


FIGURE 1. H. T. Loomis, *Practical Letter Writing* (Cleveland, OH: Practical Textbook Co., 1897), 6. Original caption reads, "Correct and Incorrect positions."

accept this, chances are that no amount of research could effect otherwise because the problem would not have been a matter of fact, even if it becomes so profoundly one of logic.

Yet, on the other hand, I have nevertheless felt compelled to corroborate the existence of such a phenomenon, plain as it may be. And once I committed to doing so by giving it name, the self-evidence of all meaning seemed to vanish. And so, each and every time I come to the page, my own creativity always begins at a loss.

Part of the problem I experience with narrating this life of paper is, indeed, an effect of my object of study, the letter itself; in turn, my issues become productive of the very means through which I problematize the letter for the sake of study, too. Assumptions of both the transparency and the significance of the letter have long captured civic imagination, as conveyed by H. T. Loomis in the introduction to his textbook, *Practical Letter Writing* (1897): "One's habits and abilities are judged by his letters,—and usually correctly. . . . The qualifications necessary to enable a person to write a good business or social letter are a fair English education, ready command of language, and

good general knowledge of the affairs of life. These may all be acquired if the student does not possess them. To be a good correspondent, one must be able to think intelligently, and to display business tact.”<sup>1</sup>

By the time of his book’s publication at the close of the nineteenth century, Loomis was already lamenting the assumed obsolescence of the handwritten letter, casualty in the sweeping momentum of technological advance wherein “these busy days, the old-fashioned letter is replaced by brief notes, telegrams, or telephonic messages.” Rendered defunct by the progress of human genius and invention, apparently the epistolary would have no place in ages to come. Yet, if he begins by announcing the letter’s extinction, then why write the book—and moreover, why characterize its activity as practical? For Loomis, the ultimate function of this education in the “neatness, correct forms, and established customs in writing letters” seems to reside less in the use-value or objectivity of the letter as commodity than in the object the letter itself produces: Western civilization as such—its embodiment in and through “correct and incorrect positions” (figure 1), acquisition of proper habits, abilities, intelligence, and business tact, achievement of general mastery over the affairs of life.

If the epistolary thus mediates man’s becoming at this most essential scale of economy, then my own questions become: what is a letter, what does it do and how does it work, on the other side of human mastery—thought and learned, written and read, sent and received from an other side of history? What vitalizes human relationships to the letter when the human embodies the crisis rather than cultivation of man and the mortal stakes of the problem of representation? In three parts, *The Life of Paper* hence deals with these questions at the interstices of aesthetic, racial, geographic, and ontological form: exploring the lifeworlds maintained through letter correspondence in particular contexts of racism and mass incarceration in California history. Tracing the contradictions of modernity that inhere in as well as mobilize around the letter itself, its mediation of social struggles to define “Western civilization” as well as its reinvention of ways of life that the latter cannot subsume, this investigation unfolds in three cycles to uncover how letters facilitate a form of communal life for groups targeted for racialized confinement in different phases of development in California, this distinctive or iconic part of the U.S. West.

Part 1, “Detained,” focuses on migrants from southern China during the peak years of U.S. Chinese Exclusion (1890s–1920s). These chapters elaborate the distinct pathways that detained communities forged—in and through

letters—to rearticulate emergent infrastructures defining an epoch of global imperialist expansion, capitalist industrialization, and nation-state formation predicated on exclusions understood in terms of “racial” distinction. Part 2, “Interned,” focuses on families of Japanese ancestry during the World War II period (1930s–1940s) and examines processes of aesthetic production in interned communities through letters, in dialectic with global developments in systems of censorship and surveillance. Part 3, “Imprisoned,” focuses on socialities of Blackness in the post–Civil Rights era (1960s–present), interrogating how the Black radical tradition has vitalized practices of reembodying the human as imprisoned communities of different ethnoracial heritage engage letter correspondence to survive collectively through dramatic restructurings of global capitalism, U.S. apartheid, and racial order that all bond societies in California and beyond to prisons as anchoring institutions of civic life.

On the one hand, this book examines the contradictions of mass incarceration as a process of systematic social dismantling, situating research on letters within global capitalist movements, multiple racial logics, and overlapping modes of social control that have taken distinctive shape in the U.S. West and conditioned the dependence on imprisonment as a way of life. On the other hand, framing letters within this political violence that qualifies them, this work explores how the mundane activities of communities to sustain themselves, as manifest in letter correspondence, emerge discernibly as constitutive of social life rather than seemingly adjunct to it. Invested with the urgency of struggles to survive, I argue, the production and circulation of letters open real and imaginative possibilities, both engrained in the letter and in excess of it. Thus, in “the life of paper,” I interrogate the processes that connect paper objects to historical human identity and being. I also analyze how these forms of connection—structural, physical, ideological, and affective labor internalized in the letter—create alternative conditions that both ground and animate endeavors to reinvent people’s own means of living. As such, these acts of self-making provide a glimpse into how communities under such constraint can reproduce themselves at every scale of existence, from bodily integrity to subjectivity to collective and spiritual being. I hence call the life of paper a “poetics”: an art of becoming, mediated in and through the letter and the interaction of literature with history, that prioritizes the dynamics of creative essence to generate an other kind of social power bound to the unfathomable.

Certainly, no shortage of research exists to help establish how something as ordinary as the letter could be an axis around which the most consequential social, political-economic, and literary problems in the modern age have revolved. Scholars across disciplines have researched the role of letters in revolutionizing Europe during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, beginning with the ways that correspondence among radicals and intellectuals during the French Revolution fundamentally shaped their earliest understandings and demands for human rights to communication and press. In this historical legacy and political vision, the letter also helped to catalyze the founding of the United States of America, as opposition to imperial stamp acts and paper taxes fomented the eventual overthrow of British rule by Anglo colonial settlers in the “new world” who viewed such economic policies as politically repressive attacks—encumbering people who, in this period of colonial expansion, relied on transatlantic correspondence to coordinate the social reproduction of Western European and Euro-American communities.<sup>2</sup> As an abundance of scholarship has already suggested, the ascent of print capitalism in the early nineteenth century further transformed Eurocentric democratic culture through the contradictory creation of diverse literate and literary publics, on the one hand, and the mobilization and control of communication technologies by political-economic elites in the service of privatized accumulation, on the other. During this decisive period of struggle to redefine “imagined communities,” English letter-writing instruction, popularly instituted in England beginning in the eighteenth century and subsequently globalized throughout its colonies, instilled the values of social order, Christian morality, and character; moreover, learning the formal aesthetics of a proper letter also structured a population’s concepts of rationalism, social refinement, and upward mobility, as letters mediated—and generic convention represented—bourgeois and governmental order during this time. Training in civic practices of reading and writing, epitomized in Loomis’s *Practical Letter Writing* as tedious in practice yet monumental in effect, thus helped to facilitate a secular reorganization of space-time, a shared sense of human identity tethered to official nationalisms, and new modes of governmentality in both European nation-states and their colonies.<sup>3</sup>

In geopolitical terms, the letter also provides a distinct lens to view the construction of modern infrastructure from both imperialist and

anti-imperialist perspectives. Specific to the United States, scholars have studied the postal system as it constituted the national geography, largest federal civilian workforce, and central administrative apparatus of both government and corporate commercial enterprise in the first half of the nineteenth century.<sup>4</sup> This form of geopolitical organization—coordinating the development of key infrastructure such as roads, railroads, steamships, and the telegraph—achieved global hegemony in 1874 with the creation of the Universal Postal Union, establishing uniform practices and arrangements in the Western nation-states for the international exchange of mail.<sup>5</sup> If the letter thus served as building block of capitalist empires, it also affected their antithesis. In V. I. Lenin's 1871 call to revolution, for example, his vision of a democratic socialist state and economy was also exemplified by nothing other than the postal service: "To organize the whole economy on the lines of the postal service . . . that is our immediate aim. This is what will bring about the abolition of parliamentarianism and the preservation of representative institutions. This is what will rid the laboring classes of the bourgeoisie's prostitution of these institutions."<sup>6</sup> In this sense, wherein the articulation of racial capitalism and imperialism vis-à-vis the post simultaneously actuates grounds for the dictatorship of the proletariat, the letter functions as metonym for how systems of domination reproduce their own negation.

Indeed, Antonio Gramsci, revitalizing the fight against fascism with his insights into the interlockings of political economy and culture, knew intimately the significance of letters at the nexus of physical and ideological force. While his *Prison Notebooks* have most influenced contemporary thought, Gramsci's personal correspondence underlying his expository writings on techniques of war highlights the multidimensional means, terrains, and activities through which social struggles over life and death unfold, exemplified in this present book as "the life of paper." In a letter from prison addressed to his mother, dated 24 August 1931, for instance, Gramsci reproaches:

This is what I think: people don't write to a prisoner either out of indifference or because of a lack of imagination. In your case and with everyone else at home I never even thought it could be a matter of indifference. I think rather that it is a lack of imagination: you can't picture exactly what life in prison is like and what essential importance correspondence has, how it fills the days and also gives a certain flavor to one's life. I never speak of the negative aspects of my life. . . . But this does not mean that the negative aspect of my life as a prisoner does not exist and is not very burdensome and should at least not

be rendered more onerous by those who are dear to me. In any event, this little speech is not addressed to you, but to Teresina, Grazietta, and Mea, who indeed could at least send me a postcard now and then.<sup>7</sup>

Gramsci's allusions here to his reliance on feminized reproductive labor, the performance of that labor in this context through the letter, the imaginative space that correspondence opens at the interstices of mind, body, and feeling, and the dialogical or intersubjective condition of existence that the letter lays bare: each of these aspects, even if left untheorized by Gramsci himself, clearly becomes a facet of war and survival that, in this case, he could no longer take for granted.

In these regards, as central as the epistolary has been to the very production of modern rationality and its myriad contradictory manifestations, questions about the "arcane of reproduction"<sup>8</sup> as embedded in Gramsci's mis-sive have also compelled a turn to the letter as a means to problematize the concept of objectivity as such. Jacques Lacan, for example, transforming intellectual history with his interrogations of language and its determination of the subject, attends to the epistolary in order to elucidate the ultimate stakes of his project: "The problem, that of *man's relationship to the letter*, calls history itself into question."<sup>9</sup> In shifting analytical priority from "literary criticism to literary condition,"<sup>10</sup> Lacan investigates how the letter instantiates critical revelations or crises that destabilize at least two core suppositions of Western thought: first, that of a linear correspondence in the symbolic universe between signifier and signified; and second, that of human communication as static transfer of data between autonomous rational entities. Hence disassembling "reality" itself, these interventions rupture fundamental assumptions of modern man and the substance of being as delimited through Cartesian systems and have thus contributed to groundbreaking movements in both psychoanalysis and poststructuralism: revolutionizing the study of relational dynamics within and between dominant social institutions, language, and desire; language, desire, and the "unconscious"; and the unconscious and conscious parts of the mind, or the existence of the Other *within* the self. From this perspective, perhaps most associated with the oeuvre of Jacques Derrida,<sup>11</sup> the ontological indeterminacies that the letter represents, its deconstruction of transparency and thereby of the entire epistemological fabric that presumes it, animate the letter as microcosm for the problem of a most primal human alienation from the essence of knowing or of being known.



Applying these frameworks to epistolary studies in literature, then, scholars have built vibrant discourse around the letter, its dialogical and historical condition, as it unravels pretenses of authenticity or coherence of subjectivity, gender, voice, authorship, textuality, genre, consciousness, place, and space-time.<sup>12</sup> As Rebecca Earle points out, this basic dilemma of undecidability, in fact, manifests in and as epistolary scholars' own lack of agreement on the very definition of a letter, since it formally structures or hybridizes with so many other forms of communication such as news media, commerce, intimacy, politics, travelogues, and poetry.<sup>13</sup> This question of aesthetic origins—as further reflected in discussions about relationships between the letter, the novel, the dominant Anglo literary canon, and literature at large—poses an important problem. Exploring and historicizing the relationships between genres helps to explain the techniques through which literature represents historical reality and thereby helps to create those realities as such.<sup>14</sup> Hence scholars of literature are fascinated with the indeterminate nature of the letter, its decisive yet ambivalent relationship to all forms and extensions of literary culture: as the inability either to define what constitutes a letter or to understand with certainty its syncretic relationships with other forms, again, destabilizes the onto-epistemological assumptions attendant on European generic conventions and hierarchies of aesthetic value. In addition to forming dominant European literary genres and canons, such epistemological and aesthetic conventions operate at other registers of knowledge production such as the organization of scientific schema, academic disciplines, and race thinking; in the final analysis, generic questions and anxieties raised by the letter therefore return us to a breakdown of the boundaries of modern thought as such.

#### THE DIFFERENCE THAT RACISM MAKES

This book proceeds under the premise that the contradictions and ultimate emergencies, the difference, thus mediated through the letter open out to other realms of meaning when understood within studies of modernity as the movement of racism and of modern civilization as constituted in, by, and through the historicity of “race.” In these latter contexts, the problem for history, that of man’s relationship to the letter, redoubles in its encounter with the question of what it means to be the problem for man, as W. E. B. DuBois famously forecasted the crisis posed by the color line for the twentieth cen-



tury.<sup>15</sup> At this crucible of multiplying negations—the problems posed to the coherence of historical reality and of the human, of their interlocking in productions of racial distinction<sup>16</sup>—attention to the letter hence provides unique means to study both movements of racial capitalist development, its requisites and ideals of civic life, on the one hand; and on the other, the lifeworlds created beyond, or deep within, the official limits of historical representation and through emergent representations of horizons beyond, or deep within, man.

Such perspective afforded by the problematization of the letter further contours this study's central contribution to contemporary discourse on mass incarceration: namely, the analytic it offers to understand the "prison industrial complex"<sup>17</sup> as foremost a problem of civilization rather than punishment and, as such, a priority of social reproduction that cannot be fully rationalized through logics of capitalist production alone. In part, this framework builds on Lisa Lowe's decisive positioning of Asian American Studies as means to interrogate the production of racial distinction within contradictions of and between racial capitalism and nation-statecraft.<sup>18</sup> My work extends this view to investigate social formation at the interstices of racial capitalism, racial apartheid, and their overdeterminations as they manifest historically through mass incarceration. Politically and analytically, this question of how to distinguish as well as interconnect the two—capitalism and apartheid, each system's reliance on the production of "racial" distinctions to maintain their operational capacities—has remained at the heart of twentieth-century U.S. social movements. In pursuits of social justice, for example, consider early Civil Rights struggles committed to dismantling segregation yet, at times, less clear about what positions to take on capitalism (and correlatively, intensified state violence on deepening senses of the need to abolish both), or evolving overlaps and fissures between cultural nationalism and revolutionary internationalism as ideologies of antiracism. In perhaps unexpected ways, then, *The Life of Paper* addresses such unresolved questions as they loom today in conflicting characterizations of mass incarceration as either a slave labor regime or a new caste system, both frames imbued with tremendous rhetorical and affective force and yet ultimately inconsistent or limited in their explanatory potential. In this regard, readers most compelled by contemporary problematics might start reading this book at part 3 and make their way backwards; whether read chronologically or not, the main arguments arrive at more or less the same points.

Two qualifications regarding this study's spatial assumptions help further to introduce how the problem of "race" is also situated in this work. First, this

analysis develops Ruth Wilson Gilmore's formulation of carceral geographies that locates the prison's place within the broader fabric of *public* life and infrastructure; in this sense, the identified object of study, or the problem, is not restricted to prisons or the people housed there but instead stretches across scales to name and investigate the fuller articulation of social relations that drive, and are driven by, contradictions of capitalist development and racialized apartheid as they have defined modern civilization.<sup>19</sup> Through this lens, grappling with crises of mass incarceration entails less an exclusive emphasis on sites of incarceration than on the role these sites play in the reproduction of dominant landscapes as a whole—in other words, the ways that racialized orders of confinement anchor, even as their effects may appear isolated from, all of what we know as civilized life. It is in this respect that, parallel with the letter, the carceral emerges in this research as another site around or through which the most consequential social, political-economic, and ideological formations cohere.

Second, I hope this book will play a part in the regional historicization of mass incarceration in the U.S. West as it is inextricable yet distinguishable from histories drawn from U.S. southern and Atlantic regions.<sup>20</sup> At the outset of this endeavor, I privilege activity that routes across the United States and East Asian Pacific in order to pursue questions of dominant regional articulation. This research follows from Adam McKeown's argument that the international policing of Asian migration to white settler states and its attendant forms of racialization around the turn of the twentieth century served as a primary means of consolidating nation-states, globalizing borders, standardizing transnational diplomatic and commercial interactions defining "civilization," and regulating human identities.<sup>21</sup> From this standpoint, and further contextualized by concurrent struggles taking shape in other political geographies, this work therefore assumes that attention to these trans-Pacific relations can enrich our thinking on conditions of possibility for more contemporary regimes of racism and mass incarceration even as, of course, it does not and cannot fully explain them. In the latter regard, I invite others also invested in such research to advance or overhaul the analyses offered here with other studies. For instance, examinations of Plains Indian ledger art (drawings done in business ledgers and notebooks by tribes that include the Arapaho, Northern and Southern Cheyenne, Kiowa, and Lakota-Sioux during their confinement to reservations),<sup>22</sup> or other iterations of the life of paper that center the American hemisphere or the Pacific islands in their regional scope, would certainly compel revisions of historical interpre-

tations extended in this book and change the dimensionality of its insights. Nevertheless, I maintain some faith that the general methods, conceptual orientations, and affective gestalts shared here may prove useful to the carrying out of such important undertakings and augment the foundations on which our awareness can grow.

Within these boundaries, then, I approach the study of racism with a view that analytically suspends its hegemonic connotations as discrimination or perception—even when these understandings are framed as structural—in order first to prioritize engagement with racism as a matter of life and death within which all other social processes must be understood. Namely, in fleshing out Gilmore’s definition of racism as the “state-sanctioned or extralegal production and exploitation of group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death, in distinct yet densely articulated political geographies,”<sup>23</sup> common concerns such as racial bias, stereotype, or parity, which naturalize or take for granted “race” as a known quantity, yield to renewed questions about the productivity and processes of racialized ascription themselves: the construction or reinvention of human categories that organize and justify differentiated exposure to killing.<sup>24</sup> Such a perspective thus foregrounds two essential problems for analysis in every instance of studying racism and its trajectories: first, the imperatives of human sacrifice concomitant with each particularized movement of modern progress and development; and second, the epistemological architecture necessary to build analytics that, relative to each instance, make sense of difference to rationalize and striate the devastation as well as the spoils of war. In this research, I hence exert substantial analytical energy toward clarifying how human differences are rendered though the production of racial distinction in order to facilitate social movement whose ultimate stakes drive the fate of Western civilization as such.

It is perhaps at these levels of analysis—given both the theoretical orientations and the regional scope of this study—that one can make the most generative sense of how it came to focus on historical articulations of both Asiatic and Black racial distinction and, moreover, how and why it would do so in a shared trajectory despite the more outstanding differences between the two. Beginning with the planetary domination of “white only” imperialist and Free Soil movements at the moment of California statehood, part 1 privileges the regulation of citizenship, the production of Chinese racial distinction, and the construction of the Angel Island Immigration Detention Center as critical to the history of mass incarceration in the U.S. West. Unlike struggles over nation-state reconstruction taking place in the U.S. South, where convict

leasing emerged as central to reforming existing racial regimes and plantation power, ideological constructions and physical policing of immigration rather than crime in the western region most clearly articulated the correlation between dominant productions of racial distinction, on the one hand, and, on the other, the turn to systematic confinement as necessary foundation for the reproduction of capitalism, white supremacy, and dominant civic life. Specific to the Pacific Coast, then, examining movements of regional migration and localized containment, more than criminal justice policy or early construction of jails, may provide valuable insights on the relationship between mass incarceration and the institutionalization of a progressive racial grammar distinct from, even if interarticulated with, residual ideologies of race and emergent racial ideologies of crime prevalent in other nation-state struggles during this transformative period of modernity.

Part 2, “Interned,” further elaborates this evolution of racialized incarceration as a measure of a national civic engagement rather than a matter of crime and punishment, also highlighting progressive rather than conservative ideological tendencies in the broader development of a modern security state with intensive and extensive reach. The contemporary import of this analysis becomes more apparent in light of escalated struggles between dominant multicultural and white extremist blocs for control of national military and government forces—the most recent 2016 U.S. presidential and congressional elections a stunning example of how consequential yet thin the line between the two, their shared worldview of white supremacy despite both cosmetic and substantive differences in how the latter is configured. Epitomizing politically moderate tendencies under the Obama administration, the U.S. Department of Justice in August 2016 acknowledged the need both to decarcerate and to end prison privatization. In his analysis of those political trends, American Civil Liberties Union staff attorney, Carl Takei, projected that private corporations, which have dominated in the administration of U.S. immigrant detention centers but not of prisons, would play a leading role in the prison decarceration process: absorbing into their capacities the construction and governance of “community” facilities, supervision, and corrections that will have replaced state and federal oversight of criminal warehousing and social control.<sup>25</sup>

In a still more dramatic turn of events, people around the world are bracing ourselves in the aftermath, just one week ago at the time of writing, of the victory of ultra-right factions elected to power in the United States on platforms of white racial purity, unbridled police surveillance and military aggression,

construction of an apartheid wall, and reconsideration of ethnoracial concentration camps as a linchpin of national security: promises to employ the deadliest uses of state capacity to privatize the means of human survival. At this juncture, examining the problematics of U.S. population management during World War II, correlated with contradictory productions of Japanese racial distinction at that time, provides a lens through which to engage current struggles over civic and carceral reform similarly rendered through competing ideologies of progressive transitions, optimized community development, and triumph of concerns for natural rights. That is, critical investigation of wartime precedents may help us to think through another catastrophic cycle of negotiation between, on the one hand, tendencies principally reliant on negative forms of surveillance and reactionary forms of race thinking; and, on the other, those based on formal appropriation of human rights struggles and their repositioning in new modes of apartheid as the claim and the victory of democratic movements. Shaping the evolution of both worldviews as well as their ultimate inextricability from one another, the history of Japanese internment and reconcentration reveals a process of nation-state recuperation that intensified rather than abolished racism precisely in the encounter of contending formulations of “community” as a dominant reproductive racial logic and, ultimately, the displacement of ungovernability into a renewed reliance on incarceration as part of the process of civic belonging.

It thus remains prevailing assertions of universal man and universal rights of man that keep the dynamics of killing in systematic operation today. As such, perhaps the most crucial way to understand part 3 is through its attempt to testify to the persistent challenge to dominant assumptions of human being posed by Black life: the culmination of struggles imbricated in African diasporic traditions that transform the concept of civilization and manifest the vital import of such transformation on practices of universal justice, democracy, and peace. In this sense, part 3’s analysis of contemporary mass incarceration raises somewhat of a resistance or an alternative to hegemonic paradigms of critical race thinking. Logics of the latter share a common point of departure with the presumption that although socially constructed, race is still real. In general, much of critical race and ethnic theory proceeds to turn its goals toward illuminating the real *effects* of the social construction of race, in forms such as disparate rates of poverty, unemployment, home ownership, wealth accumulation, health care, access to resources, exposure to environmental toxicity, victimization by state violence, emotional trauma, and on and on and on. This kind of emphasis on effects also relates to a contemporary

political economy of knowledge production in which both our methodological training and our desire for resources lend privilege to generic conventions that revolve around procedural diagnostics, deliverable interventions, and measurable impact as means of demonstrating the relevance of scholar activism. Of course, such studies fulfill themselves in their own historical effects that correlate with (even if they are not determined by) the vision and strength of their specific articulations of social life, many of which have contributed to community development with urgency and significance.

Yet, as a perhaps unintended consequence of this approach, race is often treated as a historically descriptive rather than creative category in order to render more immediately intelligible the “gaps” or inequalities that the research seeks to fill, whether in a specialized body of scholarship or in the lifeblood of an oppressed people. Yet, if the effects of racism are examined in ways disarticulated from actual productions of racial distinction, then in the final instance race can only be understood through the sieve of legalistic, representative, or instrumental frames that themselves circumscribe the human subjection we wish to overturn. People thus remain locked in the same positions in the ideological terrain of suffering because no intellectual means have been offered to give name to humanity beyond what is already constructed by and through the sources of our anguish. It is in this sense, then, that part 3 attempts to crystallize race as an *ontological* problematic and to examine further how Black social movements in the last half of the twentieth century revolutionized the race *concept* in order to preserve possibilities for being. This analysis spills into our current dilemma: living in a place and time in which certain preexisting modifiers to racial distinction or hierarchy have been tentatively abolished but not yet the basic function of human differentiation in the dominant grammar of a *de jure* postracial apartheid society. We might conceive of this function as a conjunctive one, ironically enough, in which the simulation of ontological divisions not only rationalizes the war, exploitation, and genocide wrought by modern man, but such abstraction also enables the reproduction of Western civilization by suturing or dressing the most apparent places it bleeds, hemorrhages where its own structural contradictions and overdeterminations cannot be resolved except through mass purges that require both cause and explanation.

On the one hand, then, those today seeking to preserve their claims to world domination face the persistent problem of how to construct new ideological modifiers to define their boundaries of human achievement and degeneracy, necessary means to maintain the operational capacities of

processes originally structured and understood in explicit terms of “racial” difference. (For the new dominant party, the challenge may be more precisely how to maintain the rhetorical appeal of reactionary ideologies of racial purity while responding to the progressive demands of racial capitalist reproduction.) On yet another hand, those of us seeking social justice face a different and ongoing problem, the preservation of *being* in the latter’s intimacies as well as its totalities. The essentialism of such a view, as alternately simplified and grandiose as it may seem, marks a basic distinction between movements for decarceration and those for abolition, the latter of which does not stop at reforming prisons but only at abolishing racism as such—what is most succinctly communicated through the pronouncement “Black Life Matters” and wherein contestations around the terms *life* and *matters* cohere and must be enunciated as the difference connoted by the existential qualification “Black.”<sup>26</sup> From this perspective, and through the overall paradigm of social reproduction offered in this study, I thus strive to anthropologize the contending terms through which dominant groups delimit the facts of “life”: historicizing rather than idealizing these social movements or visions not only to stop their reproduction and thereby the cycles from which their suffering arises and ceases, but, more urgently, to clear contemplative space to dwell in the social reproduction of other ways of life that abide by different dynamics than those governing dominant articulations of *world*.

Therefore, while interrogating movements taking shape in and giving shape to dominant landscapes, this book’s primary aspiration is to discern the more nebulous regions or social articulations formed through the life of paper and, concurrently, the epistemological shifts both necessary for and affected by such efforts toward discernment: an ultimate concern influenced by the elaboration of Black geographies as the unfinished production of space, driven by the struggles, practices, consciousness, and ontological worldviews of “people who occupy the ‘nonexistent’” and put demands on spatial arrangement through new forms of life.<sup>27</sup> In the first and final instance, then, while attentive to contradictory movements of development and confinement in planetary realms of war, this project is essentially motivated by Clyde Woods’s injunction to prioritize analytically the “presence of contending ontologies” in order to crystallize the endurance of worldviews and ways of life that have not been subsumed by racial capitalism, even as their forms of appearance may be obscured by or through structures of domination and of mediation.<sup>28</sup> My applications of these formulations compel at least two final clarifications. First, the methodological and epistemological



approaches of Black studies of modernity, their attempts to narrativize histories of the African diaspora in modes necessarily shorn of—at least, in contradiction with—the will to knowledge or recovery, themselves entail a delimiting of the lived specificities of racism and productions of difference in each instance of their particular articulations.<sup>29</sup> In this sense, turning to paradigms that issue from Black radical traditions as the means for this present study is not to equate or conflate experiences of differently racialized groups but rather to socialize the former’s techniques of analyzing lived conditions and to explore further the implications of preexisting analyses for extended processes of racial differentiation.

Second, just as this project does not assume equivalences, neither does it seek to draw comparisons even as my research points out certain repetitions. Instead, by concentrating on “the life of paper,” I am working to problematize the production of collectivities and communal ways of existence that—on the one hand, while only recognizable as and through creations of racial distinction, constrained by history and/or conditioned by ancestors—also uncover modes of racialized, gendered, and sexualized embodiment that can be understood within or alongside dominant structurings of human being without being simply derivative of them. From this perspective, within the ultimate mystery of social reproduction as the production of difference, each case therefore represents a certain kind of singularity for which, in the final analysis, there can exist no comparison: dynamics of a basic enigma, or dialectics between ontological continuity and differentiation, between vital energy and material substance, that are detectable in mediations of the letter and which I am thus calling a “poetics,” for lack of perhaps a better term.

## A POETICS

In his studies of ancient Greco-Roman culture, Michel Foucault theorizes that the epistolar—alongside *hupomnemata*, or notebooks acting as memory aids—constituted “arts of oneself[,] . . . a labor of thought, a labor through writing, a labor in reality” that served an ethopoietic function: writing as agent of the transformation of truth into character.<sup>30</sup> Influenced by this concept of letters as mediating an “aesthetics of existence,” I likewise approach the life of paper’s “poetics” as an art of social reproduction, embedded in a set of individual as well as collective practices that generate life potential and give definition to, as much as they are defined by, the labor to

sustain human being. However, specific to imbrications of racism and the unfolding of Western thought—the historicity of concepts of truth and character and the racialization of modern aesthetics of existence—elaborations of the care and technologies of self in each of the cases presented here hence necessitate other epistemological resources not only to explain the negative effects of dominant ethopoietic processes but also to distinguish other modes of becoming within deepening articulations of global crisis and cultures.

In this latter regard, Sylvia Wynter interrogates the historical transformations that *poesis*, “acts of making,” underwent in the age of modernity. Addressing the first international symposium on “ethnopoetics” in 1976, Wynter criticizes the contemporary invocation of the latter term itself, weary of its potential to reinscribe rather than challenge the “MUTATION” of human being that took place in the sixteenth century. That is, Wynter argues that uncritically employing *ethno* (Greek, “the people”) to distinguish “*ethnopoetics*” from a more universalized “poetics” subtly perpetuates the dichotomies produced during the globalization of Western civilization: the “detotalization of the world picture” and its “retotalization” through binaries such as Christian / heathen, civilized / savage, human / Other, West / rest, and eventually First / Third World vis-à-vis racism.<sup>31</sup> As a more precise formulation, Wynter instead suggests the pursuit of “socio poetics,” cultural production that can historicize and anthropologize the West / rest relation and, ultimately, further globalize a “concretely universal *ethnos*” as already instantiated by struggles of African diasporic peoples to sustain themselves beyond movements of genocide. From this perspective of Black life, binding the production of “a WE that needed no OTHER to constitute their Being,” particularity augments rather than opposes universality as meaning attached to every form of difference conserves Being rather than negates it.<sup>32</sup> In socializing this latter world order, then, the praxis of socio poetics entails “approaching the CULTURES OF THE OTHER in order to construct an alternative process of making ourselves human.”<sup>33</sup> It is precisely this model of poetics that guides my own approach to the cultures of those racially and spatially segregated as modernity’s Others, as much as it more essentially also characterizes the work of these epistolary cultures themselves, within their own otherness, to construct alternative processes of human being.

This framework of socio poetics syncretizes well with methods of Asian American cultural studies that further enrich the scope of historical materialist analysis and correlate with the specificities of my engagements in this project. Namely, in his consideration of Chinese poetry written from 1910 to

1940 on the walls of the Angel Island U.S. Immigration Detention Center, where part 1 of this book begins, Yunte Huang also works through the concept of poetics, its varying etymologies and epistemological interpretations, in order to illuminate differentiated historical effects and implications. Distinguishing modern mutations of the Greek *poesis* from the concept of poetry in classical Chinese literary criticism, *shi yan zhi*, Huang asserts:

The word *poem*, with its Greek roots in *poima* and *poein* (to make), suggests an object made, an outside separated from an inside; by contrast, *shi*, the Chinese word for poetry or poem, means not an object made by the writer but actually the writer him- or herself. As Stephen Owen points out, *shi yan zhi* [variously translated as “poetry says the mind” or “poetry expresses human nature”] may well be a tautological statement. The character *shi* consists of the components *yan* and *si*. . . . Hence, we may legitimately interpret *shi yan zhi* as meaning “poetry says,” with a stress on the intransitive verb. . . . This emphasis [is] not on something out there to be represented by the poem, but on the act of saying itself.<sup>34</sup>

From this perspective, Huang argues that we must understand poetry on the walls of Angel Island through *shi yan zhi*, “an expressive-affective conception of poetry as opposed to the mimetic-representative conception in the Western tradition,”<sup>35</sup> in order more seriously to appreciate the work of art as constituting lived experience more than reflecting it. Therefore, reading Angel Island poetry less as empirical documentation of immigrant detention than as instantiating acts to survive beyond it, this hermeneutic moves away from emphasis on accuracy of translation—as well as its corollary assumption that proper language could capture the transparency of meaning or experience—to focus on analytically restoring the interlocking of literary activity with the conditions of its material production and historical stakes. Huang’s “poetics of error” thereby crystallizes the functions of aesthetic labor to shape social life and struggle rather than merely to describe them: an approach to literary studies that I also appropriate as means to foreground the inextricability rather than autonomy of literary, material, and epistemological concerns throughout this study and that, in turn, refines our views of the materiality of the word as well as of the ontological significance of literary enunciation. This epistemological standpoint extends into readings of Japanese poetics whose practice and innovations by Issei, or first-generation Japanese migrants, are discussed at greater length in part 2 and, finally, routes back again in part 3 to the Black radical tradition, the injunction of Wynter’s socio poetics “to free the Western concept of humanism[,] . . . transforming

its abstract universal premise into the concretely human global, the concretely WE.”<sup>36</sup> As I will continue to make clear, the turns I take in these aesthetics of existence, in sum, do not abide by a mimetic-representative conception of language but rather by approaches to literary labor as acts of making or transformation—acts that preserve creative essence, as Fred Moten discloses, precisely “in the break” between the irreducibility of Being, historical movements to simulate its detotalization through racial capitalist logics and machinations of war, and its enduring self-evidence in manifold struggles to make an “art of making art” through which revelation reemerges even if, or because, it cannot be contained.<sup>37</sup>

In this latter sense, and thus conditioned by the premise that art and literature help to surrogate as much as they represent geopolitical and cultural formations—and do so through articulations of presence as much as of absence—scholarship instrumental in the development of Asian American Studies specifically thinks through the dilemma of *form* as the latter cuts across problems of history, geopolitics, aesthetics, and humanism. Groundbreaking work by Edward Said and Lisa Lowe, for example, articulates the role of the novel and its “highly regulated plot mechanism,” the bildungsroman, to rationalize the productive erasures embedded in contradictions of racial capitalism and modern statecraft as well as to mediate imperialist subjectivities, as readers invest in dominant systems of social reference—building their consciousness around the novel’s formal renderings of social-geographic space and hierarchies of family, property, and nation.<sup>38</sup> Amplifying these insights, and responding to an unintentional tendency of structural approaches to race studies to underestimate the complexities of ideology, Colleen Lye’s paradigm of “racial form” brings into sharper relief the mutually constitutive rather than epiphenomenal relationship of language to material processes in regimes of racialization: reviving our attention to the centrality of aesthetic movements in generating racial logics that reproduce or displace political, economic, and social crisis in dominant landscapes.<sup>39</sup> In this current project, the concept of racial form, or the problematic posed by it, thus facilitates closer examination both of the extraordinary ideological labor required to produce and reproduce carceral geographies and their attendant methods of control and, underneath the weight of this constant duress, of how the life of paper reasserts new ways of being human toward the transformation of catastrophe. In deliberating the latter, I take particular care to consider the consistency with which the life of paper’s formal subversions of the bildungsroman mediate historical ruptures in the telos

of progress and open out other terrains through which to connect and struggle with what it means to be alive, to be in life, to *be*.

Insofar as the bildungsroman also structures the conventions of historiography, as Lowe convincingly argues, this book is itself conditioned by these ideological mechanics at the same time that it is not proper to them. This contradiction, which I confront through acts of research and writing but cannot claim to resolve, further bears on the historical and literary approaches required to execute this work in any degree of consonance with its aims or horizons. In these regards, the letters grounding this project are the fruit of original archival research conducted at the National Archives and Records Administration—Pacific Region, the Chinese Historical Society of Southern California, UC Berkeley's Bancroft Library, the University of Washington Library Special Collections, the Southern California Library for Social Studies and Research, Freedom Archives, and several private archives. In addition—and for part 3 in particular, which, due to its timeliness, relies exclusively on previously published or publicly circulated materials—I incorporate epistolary traces from literary, historical, and testimonial sources including poetry, memoir, and film. Whenever possible, I also opened dialogues with those to whom the letters belong and have considered their analyses as I have constructed my own. Thus grounded in these epistolary archives and research, this work aims not only to denaturalize the geographic borders, political-economic laws, and civic norms that expose people to state-sanctioned violence, but, more critically, to privilege a sense of the activities and worldviews of disenfranchised populations who struggle to transform existing conditions.

In these endeavors, modes of orientation and engagement with the archives in the framework of “a poetics” must necessarily veer from dominant historical methods that are centrally preoccupied with the legitimacy of the epistolary's status as evidence: the letter's reliability, the problem of ephemerality for data analysis, and ongoing debates among academic historians about the validity of popular texts.<sup>40</sup> In contrast to such questions, tethered to assumptions of the transparency of meaning and experience as well as the lifeworld of the bildungsroman that I have already disclaimed, I am not concerned with using epistolary data to construct an empirical truth about the experience of mass incarceration. Instead, I argue precisely that these letters are neither representative of nor anomalous to a generalizable experience but that they are, in the essence of the word, *original*, even if, in deep ways, not unprecedented. Therefore, what I attempt through exposition is less to rein-

scribe investments in static renderings of lived events than to make meaning of the past in order to live through the present and, as Aurora Levins Morales urges, “to examine carefully what aspects of our history we offer our communities as sources of pride.”<sup>41</sup> In this sense, the circumstances under which the archives even exist—such as the contradiction of the racial state government’s preservation of the very letters they intended to erase, or the inextricability of social justice archival institutions from contemporary social justice movements<sup>42</sup>—illustrate concretely how the historicity of archives themselves, their “illegitimacy” in terms of our lacking ability to take their truth-value for granted, indeed establishes rather than nullifies the conditions of possibility for critical inquiry here.<sup>43</sup> It might be most precise to say, then, that my narrativizations mark an effort to *envision* rather than record the past as means of addressing the problems of historical being now.

My methods of reading are hence not directed at restoring literal truths; instead, compelled by other studies of incarceration and inflected practices of reading, I avow the contexts of our own desires in order to interrogate literary activity as projects of self-creation and as part of meeting the need to transform governing structures and institutions.<sup>44</sup> This approach, pursuant to the discourse on *shi yan zhi*, indeed influences the treatment of translation: most explicitly pertaining to research in part 1, which relies on the original translations by U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Services of intercepted letters from Chinese into English; and in part 2, which relies when necessary on professional translations previously commissioned by families or anthology editors of letters from Japanese into English. In *all* cases, for letters written in or across any language, my analytical priorities center on the hyper-mediation of the letters themselves—the language as it *moves* in and through the historicity of epistolary production, reproduction, consumption, and circulation in their specific contexts—and on the effects of the letter as either narrativized or arguably manifested by those creating and created by it. This emphasis on the sociality of signification in historical motion follows from scholarship in Ethnic and Queer Studies that has provided tools to derive insights from the difference rather than verisimilitude between aesthetic representation and empirical fact. While theorized through a multitude of frames such as Blackness, queerness, mestizaje, creolization, interlanguage, or haunting, these perspectives each highlight how the impossibility rather than accuracy of translation incites meaning, particularly for people whose access to their historical, intellectual, and psychic heritage happens through incomplete or unthinkable processes of retrieval.<sup>45</sup>

In this light, the slippages, imprecisions, and losses in translation carry their own significance and, in this particular context, become a constitutive part of the life of paper, too.

Such precedents in Ethnic, Queer, and Performance Studies therefore variously conceptualize the ephemeral as means to disrupt hegemonic constructions both of space-time as linear and of communication as a function of knowability and capitalist productivity.<sup>46</sup> In this vein, this book works through the epistolary, as a category of ephemera, to build on these contributions to thought which, on the one hand, excavate understudied modes of social struggle and overlooked epistemologies of transformation, change, agency, or will; and, on the other, bring elements of social reproduction such as affect, performance, and corporeality to bear on public cultures and political life. Despite the irresolvable conflicts involved, there remain places throughout this study in which I offer substantive readings of materials based on translations whose accuracy cannot be verified; I have attempted in these instances to make assertions rooted in generalizable communications of affect and the performativity of the letter itself. These theorizations focus on discernible themes that emerge from my assumptions of connotation rather than denotation in order to link the contents of letters to their formal functions in processes of social reproduction—an orientation consistent with distinguishing the letter here as a gift rather than capitalist commodity, only coming more deeply into being the more it is consumed.<sup>47</sup> In doing so, my methods of close reading consider ephemerality as it draws our awareness to the continuum rather than opposition between the impermanent and the enduring, as well as the ways that our lives and their expressions, while ephemeral, sustain and give shape to the definition of “tradition” as the latter is constant but not fixed and is contingent on the past as well as what is to come.

Finally, then, much work remains to be done regarding the exploration of Marxian theories of labor power (and labor power as *wealth*) vis-à-vis ethnic epistemologies of vital energy or life force, of which this work on the life of paper as a poetics of social reproduction is but an introductory view. As a process of producing labor power, each of these cases presents conditions under which racism, war, and mass incarceration have significantly affected the ways that communities have reorganized normatively gendered reproductive labor in order to survive. Specific to the brutalities of confinement, the structuring of domination through racial and gendered segregation conditions a form of compulsory, highly regulated homosociality, which, in the



contemporary period, is ultimately only intensified rather than negated by the development of segregated prisons for transgender people.<sup>48</sup> Moreover, this coerced form of homosociality remains in contradiction with dominant cultures of pathological heterosexuality articulated through sexualized, gendered, and racial oppression as the modalities through which class is lived.<sup>49</sup> Under such constraints, then, insofar as the life of paper has played a role in revising these configurations, the new or renewed intimacies produced through the totality of labors bringing letters to life help to form relationships that exceed sanctioned identities or roles understood along axes such as race, gender, and sexuality. From this perspective, the life of paper mediates the production or survival of “contraband” love,<sup>50</sup> a kind of vital energy or life force, that transgresses systematic violence as the latter manifests in dynamic articulations of coercive force. While this study focuses on the heteronormative, often heterosexist, reproductive unit of incarcerated communities, the family, as it exists, it also emphasizes the necessity—if not the striving—mediated through the life of paper for different ways to create and re-create oneself, one’s family, community, and social world through love in myriad and dynamic forms.

In this sense, this poetics, in the circulation of creative resource that survives regimes of killing, opens out toward the vibrant relationships yet to be known or fulfilled—as well as ways to realize them—that we cannot anticipate, and yet each ensures that we move collectively toward a different horizon. In the final analysis, at last, in a world structured by domination, the existential problem and living process of becoming human thus shape the life of paper as activity that makes manifest the deepest mystery at the heart of social reproduction: a poetics that comes from, as it also enacts, dialectical movements of differentiation and multiplicity inherent in the revelation of ontological totality, the work of its preservation and representation, and the resulting production and reproduction of a concretely universal “we” that is both bound and open to life as yet unimaginable potential.



FIGURE 2. Hong Kong Post's "Four Great Inventions of Ancient China" Special Stamp, issued on 18 August 2005 (clockwise: compass, printing, paper, gunpowder). Photograph by the author.