

The Intimacies of Solidarity: George Jackson and Eldridge Cleaver’s Prison Love Letters

Ruchi Mangtani CC ‘29 | Laidlaw Undergraduate Research and Leadership Program | Summer 2026
Mentor: Dr. Shana L. Redmond

01. Introduction

- George Jackson and Eldridge Cleaver were two leading figures of the prisoners’ rights movement who were radicalized in prison in the 1960s and ‘70s
- Their political tracts have received the greatest attention in public discourse and existing scholarship
- This project studies their intimate and ostensibly apolitical prison letters published in Jackson’s *Soledad Brother: The Prison Letters of George Jackson* (1970) and Cleaver’s *Soul on Ice* (1968)
 - *Soledad Brother* was a bestseller, and *Soul on Ice* was nominated as a New York Times Book of the Year
- Their prison letters are notable for their immediacy and urgency
 - The letters have undergone and are a creation of the carceral experience: they were monitored, restricted, censored, and destroyed
- Love letters in focus
 - Jackson’s writings to Fay Stender (his lawyer), Joan Hammer (a member of the Soledad Defense Committee), Angela Davis, and “Z.”
 - Cleaver’s writings to Beverly Axelrod (his lawyer)

What can the prison love letters of George Jackson and Eldridge Cleaver tell us that their explicitly political writings cannot?



05. Conclusion

- The personal and political emerged as not opposing spheres but mutually reinforcing
- Intimacy was a practice through which revolutionary politics could be strengthened
- Their letters reveal the romance of solidarity while pursuing the most material aim of escape

The prison letter cannot free the body, but it helped sustain the lives and sense of will of George Jackson and Eldridge Cleaver.



02. Methodological caution

- Resist the genre-fication of prison writing
 - “Rendering such insurrectionist texts into typically conceived realms of ‘genre’ is immediately an exercise of political domestication, an immobilization of text that subjects it to a structure of enjoyment that thrives from the horror of an imprisoned Other’s suffering” (Rodríguez, *Forced Passages*)
 - Jackson and Cleaver’s letters exist separate and distinct from these taxonomies and cannot be categorized
- Take the writings of Jackson and Cleaver as an authentic rendering of their experience
 - Avoid psychoanalyzing, intellectualizing, fictionalizing, or aggrandizing
 - Investigating romantic letters ≠ romanticizing
- Examine declarations of love from a material perspective: what did these letters accomplish under these oppressive conditions?
 - Any writing that takes incarceration seriously has to start and always come back to the material experience
 - If I want to hold hands with you, what are the conditions that prevent me from doing so?
 - Their letters should not be taken as an isolated event
 - The urgency of the exercise is to get out

“I don’t consider myself a writer, an intellectual, really none of the things that can be isolated, when I feel I’ll write (or talk) in an effort to effect and affect, and sometimes on the safety-valve principle, but actually I don’t prefer anything as mild as pen and paper...I reject further classification on the grounds that I will not be confused, manipulated, divided to be conquered” (Jackson, *Soledad Brother*)

04. Analysis

- Jackson and Cleaver were rendered incommunicado by the state and experienced social death
 - “Capture, imprisonment, is the closest to being dead that one is likely to experience in this life” (Jackson, *Soledad Brother*)
 - “I felt I was losing my identity. There was a deadness in my body...this numbness, this feeling of atrophy, and it haunted the back of my mind” (Cleaver, *Soul on Ice*)
- Letter-writing as life-sustaining
 - These romantic relationships cultivated through letter-writing were one of the only ways they could consistently insist on and remind themselves of their humanity
 - Maintained and strengthened their will
 - Fortified who they knew themselves to be despite all else
- The transformative and political potential of love
 - Solidarity that is not purely functional but is grown from intimacy
 - In these romantic relationships, Jackson and Cleaver’s politics are most challenged
- Notably, love does not transcend the material differences between the writers and their recipients
 - Differences in race, class, gender, and captivity status produce distance between the writers
 - A form of solidarity but not shared consciousness

“It’s 12:45 A.M., June 5, and I love you twice as much as I did yesterday. It redoubles and double redoubles. I am using the night-light in front of my cell to write this. You may never read it. I make this covenant with myself I’ll never again relax. I’ll never make peace with this world as long as the enemies of self-determination have the running of things. You may never read this, and I may never touch you, but I feel better than I have for many seasons” (Jackson, *Soledad Brother*)

“It is not ourselves alone who are involved in what is happening to us. It is really a complex movement taking place of which we are mere parts. We represent historical forces and it is really these forces that are coalescing and moving toward each other...We live in a disoriented, deranged social structure, and we have transcended its barriers in our own ways and have stepped psychologically outside its madness and repressions. It is lonely out here. We recognize each other. And, having recognized each other, is it any wonder that our souls hold hands and cling together even while our minds equivocate, hesitate, vacillate, and tremble?” (Cleaver, *Soul on Ice*)

06. Key Sources and Acknowledgments

Cleaver, Eldridge. *Soul on Ice*. Delta, 1999.
Jackson, George. *Soledad Brother: The Prison Letters of George Jackson*. Lawrence Hill Books, 1994.
Kelley, Robin. *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination*. Beacon Press, 2002.
Luk, Sharon. *The Life of Paper: Letters and a Poetics of Living Beyond Captivity*. Vol. 46. University of California Press, 2017.
Rodríguez, Dylan. *Forced Passages*. University of Minnesota Press, 2006.

Thank you to the Laidlaw Foundation for funding my research and providing tremendous support at every step of the process. Thank you to Dr. Redmond for being a phenomenal mentor this summer and beyond.

03. Prison Context

- The 1960s and ‘70s were the rehabilitation or treatment era of the American prison system
- The period saw an unprecedented production of prison writing
- Jackson spent 10 years in the Soledad State Prison and San Quentin Prison
 - Given an indeterminate sentence of one year to life
 - “No one, among the officials that is, ever calls me out of my cell anymore to speak with me of my progress or my future. I’m just locked down and forgotten” (Jackson, *Soledad Brother*)
 - 7.5 years in solitary confinement; confined to his cell 23 hours a day
 - Racially segregated
 - Paid “nothing to three cents an hour” for work
 - Family turned away from visiting
 - Mail “held back, returned, thrown away somewhere”
 - Allowed twenty-five dollars a month to spend
- Cleaver spent approximately eleven years in Soledad, San Quentin, and Folsom
 - Certain books forbidden
 - Mandatory lockup at 3:20
 - Cell door was a “solid slab of steel with fifty-eight holes in it about the size of a half dollar, and a slot in the center, at eye level, about an inch wide and five inches long” (Cleaver, *Soul on Ice*)
 - Each cell had a sink, bed, locker, shelf, and commode

“The cells seemed made for a dungeon. The heavy steel doors slammed shut with a clang of finality that chilled my soul. The first time that door closed on me I had the same wild, hysterical sensation I’d felt years ago at San Quentin when they first locked me in solitary” (Cleaver, *Soul on Ice*)



“I am still confined to this cell. It is nine by four. I have left it only twice in the month I’ve been here for ten minutes each time, in which I was allowed to shower” (Jackson, *Soledad Brother*)

