CHAPTER 6

LIFE SENTENCES: NARRATED LIVES AND PRISONER RIGHTS IN THE UNITED STATES

No one shall be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment.

—International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights

They keep you wrapped up in civil rights. And you spend so much time barking up the civil-rights tree, you don’t even know there’s a human-rights tree on the same floor.

—Malcolm X, “The Ballot or the Bullet”

Ultimately, when a society fails to care what happens to some of its members, believes that certain human beings have forfeited their human rights because of their actions, or fails to hold officials to account for their misdeeds, then it creates the conditions in which human rights violations can thrive.

—Amnesty International, United States of America: Rights for All

On September 8, 2000, Nelson Mandela stood before a cheering crowd of young Australians in Melbourne’s Colonial Stadium to address the World Reconciliation Day tribute concert. World Reconciliation Day had begun as a social studies project of ninth
graders at Melbourne’s Trinity Grammar School. Here was grassroots activism in practice, a human rights initiative spearheaded by local teenagers who had studied Mandela’s life and decided to enlist him in their effort to promote reconciliation between Australia’s Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples.

Prime Minister John Howard, fearing the political repercussions of Mandela’s Australian tour, chose not to stand with Mandela that day. Two days before Mandela had told an audience at the Australian National University in Canberra that “the scars of the past remain and fester unless they are addressed,” directly alluding to the plight of Australia’s Indigenous people. For his part, Howard had been fending off UN charges condemning the living conditions of Indigenous Australians. In response to the charges, Howard denounced the United Nations for its criticism of Australia, called for the reorganization of its committee system, and snubbed Mandela as a way to avoid political embarrassment over Liberal Party policies.

American rights activist and celebrity Rubin “Hurricane” Carter did stand with Mandela, joining him before the estimated crowd of 40,000 present at the benefit concert. Millions more around the world watched the concert on television, and an estimated 300 million people logged on to the simultaneous webcast of the event. Carter’s appearance beside Mandela projected to audiences in Australia and around the world intersecting filiations of rights activism: campaigns for black civil rights; for indigenous rights; and for prisoner rights.

Carter stood before the crowd as a former welterweight boxer, convicted murderer, cause célèbre of Bob Dylan’s haunting “Hurricane,” now human rights activist, who, in the words of Dylan’s song “coulda been the champion of the world” but for a miscarriage of the American justice system. Three-and-a-half decades earlier, with the civil rights movement, the growing antiwar movement, the long summers of urban unrest, and the newly empowered Black Panther Party challenging the complacencies of American society, Carter, a rising middleweight boxer in training for the World Championship fight, was arrested for a triple murder in a New Jersey bar. Convicted in 1967, Carter entered prison to serve three life terms.

While incarcerated, Carter began writing his life story, chronicling his impoverished childhood and his adolescence lived in and out of reformatories and jails, chronicling as well the racism of the police and justice systems. In 1974, Viking Press published *The Sixteenth Round: From Number 1 Contender To #45472*. At the same moment, two of the state’s key witnesses in his trial reversed their testimony. Carter’s cause was joined by celebrity advocates, among them Joan Baez,