



## Endurance Against Erasure: Solitary Confinement, Racial Injustice, and Resistance in Albert Woodfox's *Solitary*

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**Abstract:** This article explores Albert Woodfox's memoir *Solitary* (2019) as a work of testament, legal history, and honest dispute. Woodfox spent nearly forty-four years in separation at the Louisiana State Penitentiary at Angola, much of it in a six-by-nine-foot cell, after an imprisonment for the 1972 killing of a prison guard that he denied until his death. Portrayal on the memoir, court records, journalistic accounts, and experiential scholarship on seclusion, the study demands three questions: how does Woodfox define surviving prolonged solitary confinement, how does his story describe the racial dynamics of Louisiana's criminal legal system, and what does the book contribute to current arguments over restricted housing? A qualitative, interpretive reading of the text, set beside the legal and clinical literature, suggests that Woodfox presents survival as a deliberate practice built on political education, disciplined routine, and solidarity with fellow prisoners rather than as a passive endurance of harm. The case file shows how repeated procedural failures, including racially discriminatory selection of grand jury forepersons, kept him confined long after his first conviction was challenged. The article argues that the memoir is best understood not as a story of individual exceptionalism but as evidence that prolonged isolation, as a structural practice, is incompatible with international standards and with basic claims to dignity. It closes by outlining policy implications and the limits of memoir as a source.

**Keywords:** solitary confinement; Albert Woodfox; Angola 3; racial injustice; prison testimony; resilience

### 1. Introduction

Few American prisoners have lived the argument against solitary confinement as completely as Albert Woodfox. He was held in isolation at Angola, Louisiana's maximum-security prison, for close to forty-four years, a span that is generally regarded as the longest in the United States (Associated Press, 2022). When he was finally released on his sixty-ninth birthday in February 2016, he had spent most of his adult life in a cell roughly the size of a large closet, leaving it for about an hour a day. Three years later he published *Solitary* (Woodfox, 2019), a memoir that Grove Press released in March 2019. The book was a finalist for both the National Book Award for Nonfiction and the Pulitzer Prize in General Nonfiction, and it also received the American Book Award, the Stowe Prize, and the Louisiana Endowment for the Humanities Book of the Year.

This article reads that memoir as more than a personal history. It is also a legal chronicle, a record of political formation inside prison, and a sustained critique of a punishment that the United States continues to use at scale. An earlier national survey of correctional administrators estimated that between 80,000 and 100,000 people were held in some form of isolation in American prisons (Association of State Correctional Administrators & Arthur Liman Public Interest Program, 2015). Against numbers of that size, an individual life story can seem small. The argument here is the opposite: Woodfox's account matters because it makes the abstraction concrete, and because it ties the harm of isolation to the racial and procedural failures that produced it. Neelakandan (2023)

Three questions guide the discussion. First, how does Woodfox describe the work of surviving prolonged isolation? Second, what does his case reveal about race and the administration of criminal justice in Louisiana? Third, what can a memoir contribute to policy debates that are usually conducted in the language of statistics and



legal standards? The method is a qualitative, interpretive reading of the memoir placed alongside court opinions, news reporting, and the clinical and sociological literature on isolation. Because the memoir is a first-person account, claims drawn from it are attributed to Woodfox rather than treated as independently verified fact.

## 2. Method and Sources

The analysis proceeds in three steps. The first is a close reading of *Solitary*, attending to how Woodfox organizes his narrative, which episodes he foregrounds, and how he characterizes his own choices. The second is a reconstruction of the legal chronology from published court opinions and news reporting, which allows the memoir's account to be checked against the public record where such a check is possible. The third is a comparison with the empirical and conceptual literature on isolation, drawn from clinical psychology, sociology, and international human rights instruments. This design cannot establish causation, and it does not attempt to measure the psychological condition of any individual. Its purpose is interpretive: to ask what kind of evidence a prison memoir provides, and what it adds to the evidence already available.

A note on terminology is useful. Louisiana's official label for Woodfox's confinement was closed cell restriction, while scholars and advocates use terms such as solitary confinement, administrative segregation, and restricted housing, sometimes interchangeably and sometimes with distinctions that matter legally. C. (2024) In this article solitary confinement refers to confinement in a cell for roughly twenty-two to twenty-four hours a day with minimal meaningful human contact, which matches the conditions Woodfox describes. The memoir's own publisher summary puts the figure at twenty-three hours a day in a cell measuring six feet by nine feet (Woodfox, 2019).

## 3. The Man and the Case

Woodfox was born in New Orleans in 1947 and grew up poor, an experience he links in the memoir to the petty crime that eventually brought him into the prison system (Woodfox, 2019). He was serving time for armed robbery when, in April 1972, a prison guard named Brent Miller was killed at Angola. Woodfox and another prisoner, Herman Wallace, were charged and convicted of the murder. Mohammed (2024) Both men had been associated with the Black Panther Party inside the prison, and both were placed in what Louisiana called closed cell restriction. A third prisoner, Robert King, was convicted separately in the death of another inmate and spent nearly three decades in isolation before his conviction was reversed in 2001. The three came to be known collectively as the Angola 3 (Associated Press, 2022).

The legal history that followed is unusually long and unusually tangled. Woodfox's first conviction was set aside by a state court on grounds that included discrimination in the selection of the grand jury foreperson. He was tried again, convicted again, and challenged that second conviction in federal court. In 2014 the Fifth Circuit upheld the finding that racial discrimination had tainted the grand jury process in his case (*Woodfox v. Cain*, 2014). In June 2015 a federal district judge barred a third prosecution and ordered his release, observing among other things that decades had passed, and key witnesses had died. A divided panel of the Fifth Circuit reversed that order in November 2015 and allowed the state to proceed (*Woodfox v. Cain*, 2015). Rather than face a third trial, Woodfox pleaded no contest to manslaughter in 2016 and walked out of Angola, still insisting he had not killed anyone (Associated Press, 2022). He died of complications from COVID-19 on August 4, 2022.

## 4. What Isolation Does: The Empirical Context

To understand why Woodfox's survival is remarkable, it helps to recall what researchers have found about isolation. Grassian's (1983) early clinical study of prisoners held in segregation described a cluster of symptoms that included perceptual disturbances, panic, difficulty concentrating, and paranoid thinking. Later reviews reached broadly consistent conclusions. Haney (2003) surveyed the literature on long-term isolation and supermax conditions and concluded that psychological damage can be severe, particularly for people with prior



vulnerabilities, and that many of the harms persist after release. Smith (2006), reviewing more than a century of research, noted real variation in how people respond and acknowledged methodological limits in the evidence, while still finding that isolation is associated with serious distress. Journalistic and philosophical treatments have pushed further. Gawande (2009) argued that prolonged isolation amounts to torture, and Guenther (2013) described it as a form of social death, a condition in which a person is cut off from the relationships that make a self.

International law has moved in the same direction. The United Nations Special Rapporteur on torture called in 2011 for an absolute prohibition on solitary confinement beyond fifteen consecutive days (Méndez, 2011), and the revised Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners, known as the Nelson Mandela Rules, prohibit indefinite and prolonged solitary confinement (United Nations General Assembly, 2015). Measured against those benchmarks, Woodfox's forty-four years are not an outlier within a defensible system. They are a different category of events altogether.

### **5. Surviving Solitary: Discipline, Solidarity, and Transformed Anger**

The most striking feature of *Solitary* is that Woodfox refuses the role of victim without ever minimizing what was done to him. The book is full of the details of deprivation, from the confined cell to the lack of human contact to the constant exposure to violence. Yet the narrative organizing principle is agency. Woodfox defines building routines to hold his mind together, keeping up physical exercise in a tiny space, and treating political study as a form of discipline rather than diversion. In his telling, the Black Panther principles he encountered earlier gave him a framework in which his confinement was not a private misfortune but part of a pattern that could be named and resisted (Woodfox, 2019).

Solidarity is the second pillar. The memoir returns to Wallace and King, and to the practice of keeping one another's spirits up across the distance of cell walls. This is consistent with sociological work on long-term isolation, which has documented how prisoners improvise forms of community even under conditions designed to prevent it (Reiter, 2016). Woodfox's account suggests that these improvised ties were not a comfort added to survival but a condition of it.

The third theme, and probably the most discussed, is the transformation of anger. Woodfox writes that he recognized early that bitterness would destroy him and chose instead to channel his rage into resistance and, eventually, into compassion; the Associated Press described this choice as central to the book (Associated Press, 2022). It would be easy to read this as a tidy redemption narrative, and critics should be careful of that reading. The memoir does not suggest that isolation ennobles anyone. If anything, its lesson runs the other way: what Woodfox accomplished he accomplished despite the institution, at a cost he does not pretend away.

### **6. Race, Procedure, and the Persistence of Confinement**

A reading of Woodfox's story that stops at psychology would miss its structural core. The prison where he was held sits on land that once worked as plantations, and scholars of mass incarceration have traced a continuous line from slavery through convict leasing to the modern penitentiary (Alexander, 2010). Woodfox's case fits that lineage in a very specific way. The defect that twice invalidated his convictions was not an exotic technicality. It was the racially discriminatory selection of grand jury forepersons, a practice that courts had condemned for decades (*Woodfox v. Cain*, 2014). The justice system recognized the wrong, yet the remedy arrived so slowly that he had spent roughly two decades in isolation before a state court first vacated his conviction.

This is where the memoir's legal narrative and its moral argument converge. A system committed to correcting error would have treated a tainted indictment as an emergency. Instead, Woodfox remained in a cell while procedure ran its course, and the state kept contesting his release even after a federal judge concluded that a fair third trial was unlikely. The point is not that every delay was bad faith. It is that a system in which confinement



continues by default, and relief must be wrung out of it case by case, will reliably impose its heaviest costs on the people with the fewest resources to resist. Alexander (2010) makes the broader version of this argument about race and mass incarceration, and Woodfox's life is an unusually well-documented instance.

### 7. After Release: Testimony as Activism

Woodfox did not treat his release as an ending. In the years after 2016 he spoke to a wide range of audiences, among them the Innocence Project, Harvard and Yale, the National Lawyers Guild, and Amnesty International events in several European countries (Woodfox, 2019). The memoir belongs to that campaign. Its publication gave a national readership access to conditions that are, by design, hidden from public view, and it did so in the voice of a person who had lived them rather than that of an advocate describing them from a distance.

The reception of the book suggests that this strategy worked, at least in terms of attention. Beyond the National Book Award and Pulitzer recognition noted above, it was named among former President Barack Obama's favorite books of 2019 and was chosen as a New York Times Book Review Editors' Choice (Woodfox, 2019). The Kirkus review described the bulk of the book as a chronicle of confinement and noted that the cumulative effect of the prisoners' treatment is hard to absorb (Kirkus Reviews, 2019). Reviewers also tended to place the work in a philosophical tradition. Praise gathered in the book's front matter compares its tone to stoic philosophy, a comparison that fits the memoir's emphasis on self-command but risks understating its political purpose (Woodfox, 2019).

That purpose is worth stating plainly. Woodfox is not offering his survival as a model that other prisoners should be expected to repeat. He is offering it as an indictment. If one man could keep his mind intact for four decades only by exceptional discipline, exceptional friendships, and a good deal of luck, then a system that depends on such exceptions to avoid mass psychological damage is not a system that can be defended. The memoir therefore reverses a common move in public discussion, in which a survivor's resilience is quietly used to excuse the conditions that required it.

### 8. Implications for Policy and Scholarship

Several implications follow. The first is that restricted housing should be bound by time limits consistent with the international standards cited above, with independent review of any extension. The second is that isolation should not be used as an administrative convenience or a substitute for treatment, a concern especially acute for prisoners with mental illness. The third is that courts and legislatures should treat discriminatory jury practices as grounds for urgent, not leisurely, correction, and should consider how pretrial and post-conviction delay compounds the harm of wrongful confinement. For scholars, the memoir is a reminder that first-person testimony is a legitimate evidentiary source about conditions that researchers rarely observe directly, provided it is read alongside independent records.

### 9. Conclusion

This article argued that Albert Woodfox's *Solitary* is at once a personal testimony and a case study in how a state can fail a person while appearing to follow its own rules. Two explanations for that failure deserve to be stated plainly, because each account for something the other cannot, and because the evidence examined here supports both. The first is racial injustice. The second is the concentration of institutional power.

Consider race first. Woodfox was a young Black man in Louisiana in the early 1970s, held in a prison whose geography and history recall slavery, and convicted by a process that courts later found to be infected by racial discrimination in the selection of the grand jury foreperson (*Woodfox v. Cain*, 2014). That finding is not a matter of opinion; it is the reason two convictions fell. It also fits the wider pattern Alexander (2010) describes in which criminal justice operates as a mechanism of racial control that can function without any official ever announcing a racist purpose. A discriminatory procedure does not need a villain. It needs only an institution that has stopped



asking who is being excluded and who is being punished. Woodfox's case shows what that indifference costs when the person on the receiving end is Black, poor, and already labeled dangerous.

Power offers the second explanation. Woodfox was not simply a prisoner; he was a prisoner who organized. By his own account he had joined the Black Panther Party inside Angola and had challenged the conditions around him (Woodfox, 2019). Foucault (1977) argued that modern punishment is less about answering a crime than about disciplining those who threaten an established order, and that the prison works by making certain people visible, manageable, and silent. Read this way, the long isolation of Woodfox and Wallace looks less like the neutral consequence of a verdict and more like an exercise of authority against political dissent. Whether or not one accepts that this was the intent, the effect was to remove two organizers from the general population for most of their lives. When an institution polices itself, investigates its own staff's deaths, and then controls the conditions of those it convicts, the usual checks on that kind of power are precisely what is missing.

A caution belongs here, and it strengthens rather than weakens the argument. Woodfox's guilt was never settled in a fair trial, and he pleaded no contest to a lesser charge in 2016 while insisting on his innocence (Associated Press, 2022). His innocence is therefore a conviction held by him and by many who studied his case, not a judicial finding. But the argument does not depend on it. A federal district judge concluded that a fair third trial was in doubt after more than forty years, and the Fifth Circuit's own dissent warned of exceptional circumstances (*Woodfox v. Cain*, 2015). A state that cannot show it convicted the right person by lawful means has no claim to have earned the punishment it imposed, and a punishment that the clinical and legal literature describes as torture, or something near it, cannot be justified by a process that never worked (Gawande, 2009; Méndez, 2011).

These two explanations converge on one conclusion. If race decided who was suspected and power decided who was silenced, then Woodfox's forty-four years were not an aberration, but a predictable output of the system as designed, and the harm cannot be repaired by treating his story as an exception. Putting a person who may well be innocent into a six-by-nine-foot cell for decades, on the strength of a process that courts themselves found defective, is not only a failure of justice. It is a failure of humanity. The remedy is correspondingly large: independent investigation of in-prison deaths, genuine limits on isolation, urgent correction of discriminatory jury practices, and public accountability for those who hold the keys. Woodfox lived the evidence for forty-four years and then spent the rest of his life presenting it. The question *Solitary* leaves with its readers is not whether he endured, but what a society that claims to value justice is prepared to do now that it knows.

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