

Open Letter Project

In this activity, you will study open letters in Black Studies, focusing on those by imprisoned intellectuals and activists and their allies. Open lettering is a storytelling method, creative practice, and cultural organizing tool. Like Martin Luther King, Jr.'s *Letter from Birmingham Jail* and James Baldwin's *The Fire Next Time*, open letters have been used to call people to action, express concern, share love, build solidarity, demand justice, and create collective care. You can read examples of open letters by people like Sojourner Truth, Ida B. Wells, Marcus Garvey, Martin Luther King, Assata Shakur, James Baldwin, and Angela Davis, as well as recent ones like Imani Perry's *Breathe*, letter to her sons, and *The Fire Inside* contributors.

Your project will consist of:

- (1) a short essay about an open letter you have chosen to write in the style of...
- (2) your own open letter in the style of one of the people listed above

Examples of Open Letters can be found

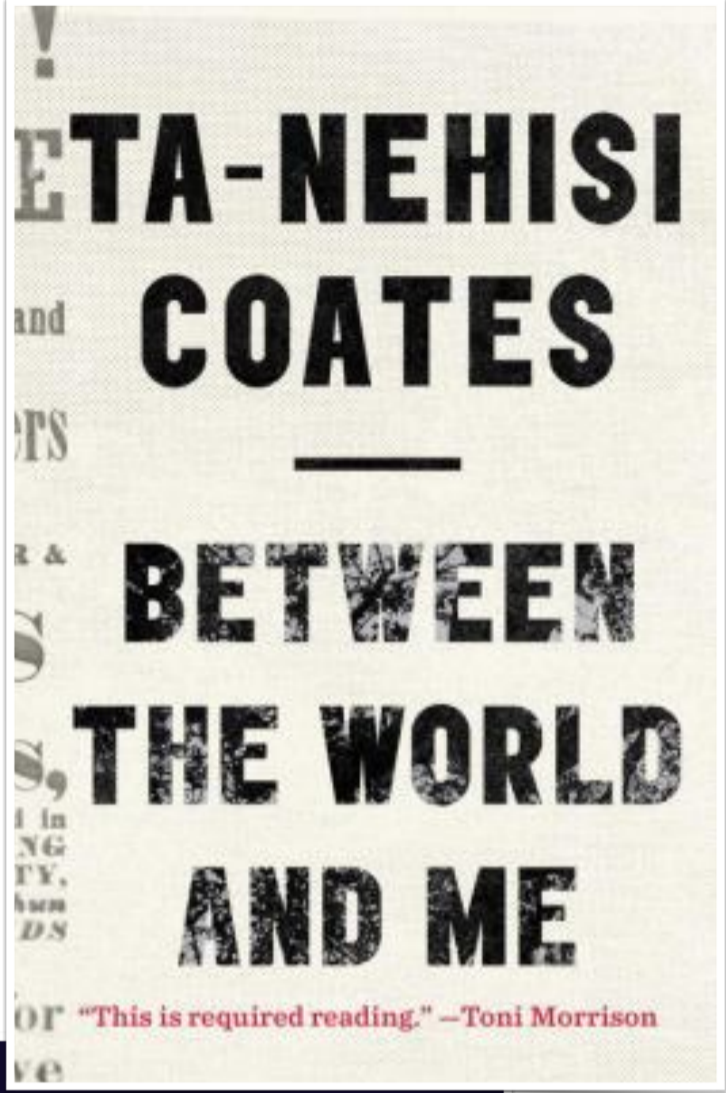
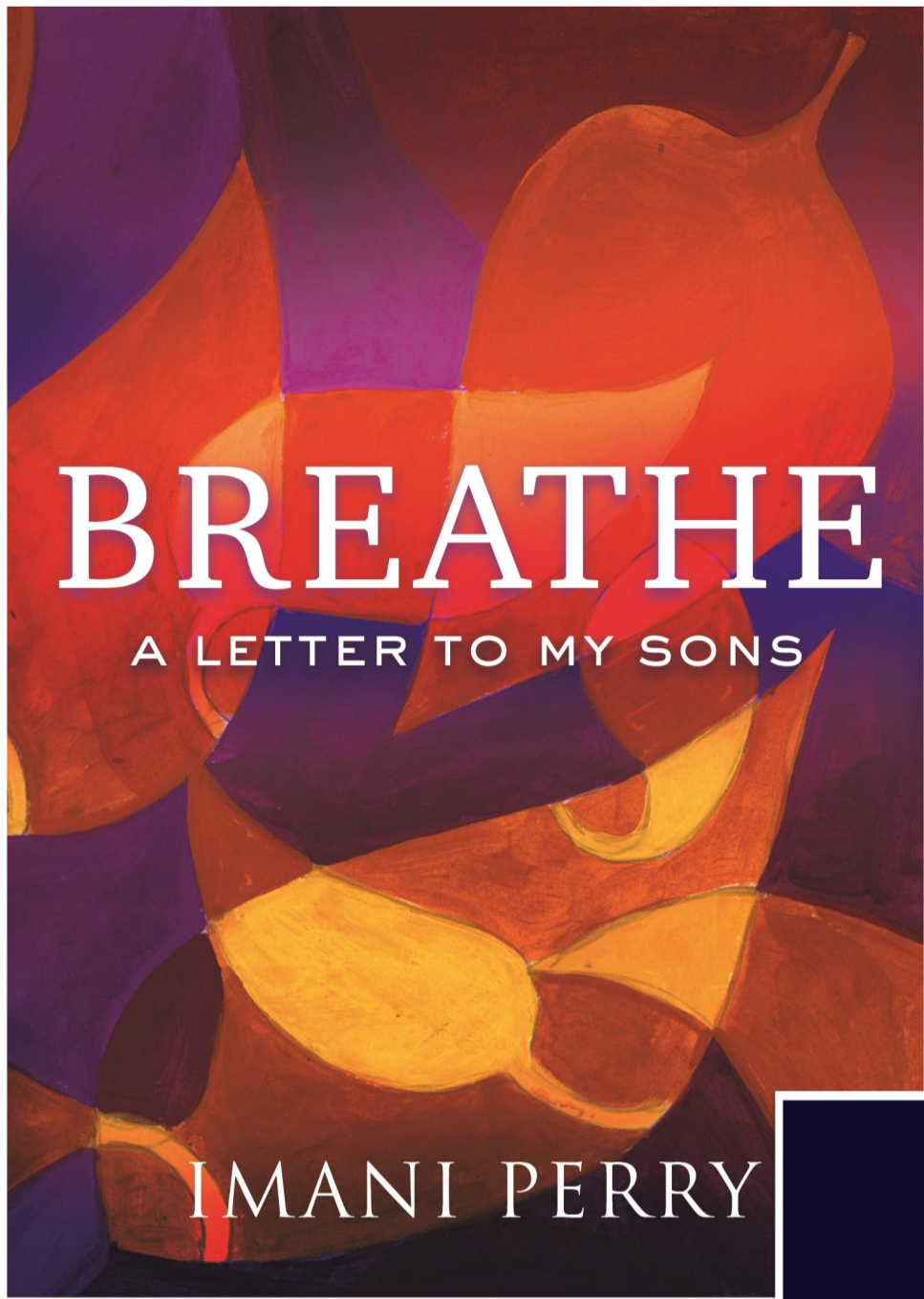
- In the Open Letters Study Group Packet

You may also choose your own example of an open letter

- The Fire Inside: <https://womenprisoners.org/the-fire-inside-archive/>
- The Freedom Archives: <https://freedomarchives.org/>
- American Prison Writing Archive: <http://apw.dhinitiative.org/>
- Joy James, ed., *Imprisoned Intellectuals Write on Life, Liberation and Rebellion* (2004)

Your Open Letter project should address the following:

- Background information and context about the letter you have chosen to study and write in the style of.
- Discussion of who wrote the letter, what their purposes were, and who their likely intended audiences were.
- What makes it powerful and effective? Did it accomplish what it set out to do? Why or why not?
- What are the most important quotes from the piece that best support the authors main arguments?
- What insights does it provide about race, gender/sexuality, and mass incarceration? And, what connections can you make to other themes and aspects of the course?
- How does it help you define and/or refine your own theory of change?



Letters from Black America
Intimate Portraits of the African American Experience



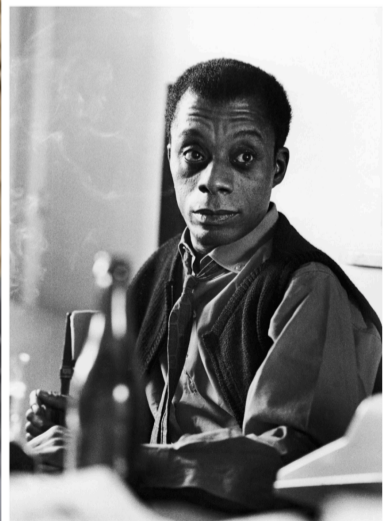
Edited by **PAMELA NEWKIRK**
Copyrighted Material

RADICAL HOPE
LETTERS OF LOVE AND DISSENT IN DANGEROUS TIMES

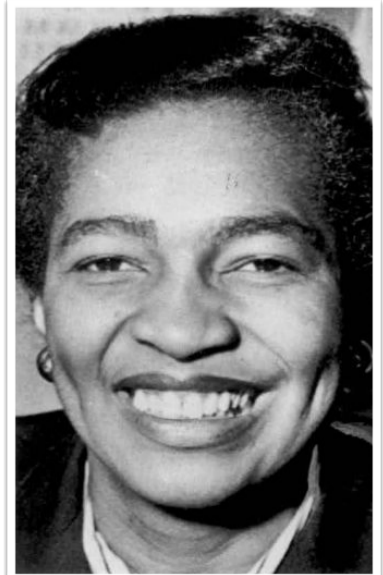
- CELESTE NG
- ROXANA ROBINSON
- LUIS ALBERTO URREA
- LUIS ALBERTO URREA
- JEFF CHANG
- FRANCISCO GOLDMAN
- CHIP LIVINGSTON
- PETER ORNER
- CHERRIE
- KAREN JOY FOWLER
- ALICIA GARZA
- KATE SCHATZ
- VIET T NGUYEN
- REYNA GRANDE
- AYLA DE LEÓN
- FRANCISCO GOLDMAN
- CHIP LIVINGSTON
- PETER ORNER
- CHERRIE
- FRANCISCO GOLDMAN
- CHIP LIVINGSTON
- PETER ORNER
- CHERRIE



Toni Morrison
Credit: Timothy Greenfield-Sanders



James Baldwin (1924-1987), American writer, 1964. Roger Violett —Getty Images



Open Letters Study Group

Readings:

- Imani Perry, *Breathe: A Letter to My Sons* (2019)
- Original BPP Members, *Open Letter to Hip-Hop Artists* (2019)
- Alicia Garza, *Dear Mama Harriet* (2016)
- Ta-Nehisi Coates, *Between the World and Me [Open Letter to his Son]* (2015)
- Alvaro Hernandez, *Open Letter to Diverse Movements* (2015)
- Marlon Peterson, *Open Letter to the Media* (2014)
- Alice Walker, *Open Letter to Barack Obama* (2008)
- Toni Morrison, *Open Letter to Barack Obama* (2008)
- Anna Bell Chapa, *To My Sister*, (2003)
- Paula Foster Stallworth, *For My Children* (2000)
- Assata Shakur, *Open Letter* (1998)
- Combahee River Collective, *Statement* (1974)
- Angela Davis, *Open Letter to High School Students* (1971)
- James Baldwin, *Open Letter to My Sister Angela* (1970)
- Martin Luther King, Jr., *Letter from Birmingham Jail* (1963)
- Claudia Jones, *To Elizabeth Gurley Flynn* and *For Consuela* (1955)
- Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, *Farewell to Claudia* (1955)
- Ida B. Wells-Barnett, *To Anti-Lynching Bureau* (1902)
- David Walker, *Appeal to the Colored Citizens of the World* (1829)

The New York Times | <https://nyti.ms/2IUyWHA>

NONFICTION

A Black Mother's Love and Fear for Her Children in a White World

By Julie Lythcott-Haims

Sept. 28, 2019

BREATHE

A Letter to My Sons

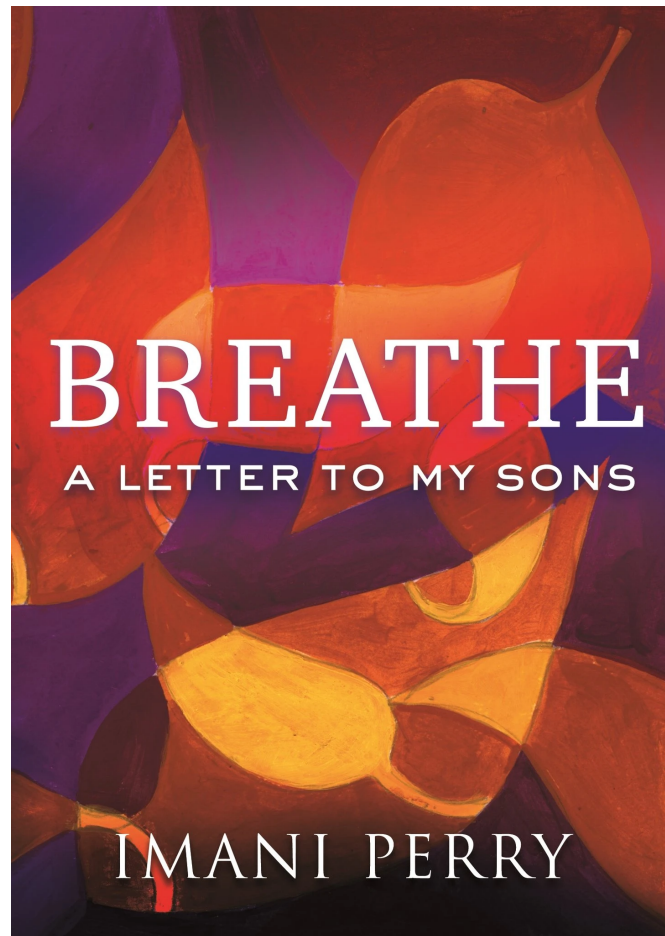
By Imani Perry

How do you instill enough self-love in your children that it will buoy them when racial hatred threatens to pull them under? This is the challenge for parents of black children, and the aim of “Breathe: A Letter to My Sons,” by Imani Perry.

A professor of African-American studies at Princeton, Perry is a prolific writer whose work, including her recent award-winning biography of the playwright Lorraine Hansberry, contributes to a fuller understanding of black history and culture. But in “Breathe,” the scholar forsakes the safe harbor of academic objectivity for the wilds of personal vulnerability. Her exhale feels overdue, and deep.

This is a mother who has made it by most standards, yet she cannot guarantee the safety of her offspring because of the color of their skin. She stands guard at a crossroads where past is present, the political is personal and the abstract or purely hypothetical is all too real. Like any parent, she wants her children, two boys, to be able to create a decent and happy life for themselves. Yet the “terrifying specter” of the white imagination means they are often not seen as individuals but instead are judged for being black — “subject to the larger white world’s constant evaluation as to whether or not you are worthy.” (She compiles a running list of criticisms and put-downs to which her kids are subjected: “Too mobile, too slow, too fast, inattentive. Why are you still in the bathroom? It takes you too long to pee. It takes you too long to remember this algorithm, this table. You hold the pencil too tight, you do not hold it tightly enough.”) We hear echoes of Hansberry’s fictional family in “A Raisin in the Sun” debating the merits of moving to a white community versus allowing those would-be white neighbors to buy them off in exchange for staying put. Perry chose the former for her sons, along with its consequences. “You live in some worlds that are more white than black,” she tells them. “And so, you learn, early on, that the aversion to blackness can turn perfectly lovely people grotesque.”

One presumes she is referring not only to strangers but to those in the village it is said to take to raise a child — those who are supposed to care about *her* children in the manner due *all* children, and yet do not act. From them she regularly hears, “It must be terrifying to raise a black boy in America,” and her frustration with these newly, barely, woke folk is palpable: “Without hesitation, they speculate as if it is a statement of fact. I look into their wide eyes. I see them hungry for my suffering, or crude with sympathy or grateful they are not in such a circumstance.” It is not that she doesn’t want them to care about black suffering. Her point is, Would you stop pleading innocence and *do* something?



But educating those folks is not Perry's primary aim; instead, "Breathe" centers on black endurance. Her book offers her children an elixir of history, ancestry and compassion, which, together, become instruction. She shares a childhood memory of the grotesque as prologue: a brilliant teacher who repeatedly singled her out for mockery and degradation while white classmates looked on. "They were disciplined into passive acceptance, into reaping the rewards, while I was humiliated over and over again. ... Bewildered at the idea that they might have something asked of them to disrupt the hideous truth. This is what you are surrounded by. Silent witnesses."

She reckons with how to stay in control when the news routinely offers a one-two punch: Black children are harmed and the wrongdoers go free. "Feeling deep love and complete helplessness to protect the beloveds is a fact of black life." In one sobering passage, she imagines what could have happened to her teenage sons when a tripped alarm summoned the police to their home one night. What if an officer had mistaken one of her boys for an intruder? She admits readers may find this "melodramatic." But whether a son would have been gunned down in his own home is beside the point; the stress of worrying accumulates and becomes its own specter: "Hypervigilant panic is our misfortune."

Yet life is the gift Perry offers her sons, not fear or helplessness. "I cannot clip your wings. ... No, I want your wingspan wide." "Breathe" is a testament to her long game, a refusal to let unwarranted and unpunished death frighten her sons from truly living. She steers them away from the belief that an admirable life depends on achieving professional and economic status: "The greatest legacy you come from, to my mind, is of the people who found meaning beyond the doors of universities or the luster of careers. Who were themselves, even in the tiniest of ways, when there was hardly any place to be." Perry heeds the words of a Zen priest who speaks of "freeing oneself of the white mind, of its overwhelming method of seeing and interpreting, as a means of getting closer to truth." "Breathe" models the practice.

Perry never reveals specific harms that her sons have endured, which is the book's transcending quality; it is not about them. Instead, she insists that *all* black children be treated with dignity and kindness. Here her voice takes on an oracular quality: "Like the phoenix, in you the ancestors come again, rise from the curling red and gray ashes underneath lynching trees. ... That is what black reincarnation is. The debt is still owed. We keep making generations to collect our inheritance."

It is when we know these ancestors, their history and their progress, Perry suggests, and when we believe in the right to a life of dignity despite what others may think, that our breath itself is power. "Breathe" is a parent's unflinching demand, born of inherited trauma and love, for her children's right simply to be possible.

Julie Lythcott-Haims is the author of "Real American: A Memoir." Her next book, "How to Be an Adult," is forthcoming.

BREATHE

A Letter to My Sons

By Imani Perry

163 pp. Beacon Press. \$18.

A version of this article appears in print on , Page 24 of the Sunday Book Review with the headline: Native Sons

The background is an abstract composition of overlapping, organic shapes in warm tones. The color palette includes deep purples, vibrant oranges, bright yellows, and rich reds. The shapes resemble stylized leaves or petals, creating a sense of movement and depth. The overall effect is a textured, painterly quality.

BREATHE

A LETTER TO MY SONS

IMANI PERRY

*Through good, nothing, or ill, your mother stands
behind you, in front of the looking glass.
The boy standing before his mother blinks.
And there is another, stalk high.
Seeing a child, and another
I know and do not know.
My own and belonging only to himself
and to himself.
Smuggling truth off the well-worn and decent corridors.
Mother to son, we race in the woods,
through an underground railroad of all ways.
Dear sons of cotton, muscle, and bone
I am for you.*



#MOBP is FREE!

BOOKING & CONTACT

Black Power Hip-Hop Political Economy Political Prisoners

An Open Letter from Original Black Panther Party Members to Black (Hip-Hop) Artists Who Have an Interest in Our Community (T.I., KILLER MIKE, CARDI B, KANYE WEST, BEYONCE', JAY-Z, P-DIDDY, LUDACRIS, 50-CENT, and others)



iMWiL Contributor 2 days ago



Greetings and Solidarity to each of you. In recognition of your individual voice, influence, and cultural following among current generations of Black people/Africans in the Diaspora and on the continent, we salute you.

While we only know you from the public domain, we know that many of you come from backgrounds where you faced poverty, police brutality, lack of healthcare and other forms of oppression like most Black people. We all recognize that we are in a watershed period of economic and government failure, a pandemic and now a resistance movement from which things will never emerge the same.

What we all do in this period will directly impact the fortunes, survival and freedom dreams of Black People, and others around the world who suffer from the same oppression. Whether its South American Favelas, South African Shanty Towns, Palestinian territories or the Black urban ghettos of racist America, capitalism and white supremacy has turned the entire world into a ghetto for the profits of a few. So, we should pay attention to each other, because here, in the heart of racist America we are all we have, and along with our true allies, are truly all we need.

Individually we who write this letter are former members of the original **Black Panther Party**, co-founded in 1966 by the late **Huey P. Newton**, and **Bobby Seale** in Oakland, California. We were

targets of the FBI's infamous Counter Intelligence Program (codename **COINTELPRO**) which killed many of our comrades, including **Fred Hampton, Mark Clark**, and numerous other Panthers and revolutionary freedom fighters. We are veterans of government search and destroy missions that forced our beloved Comrade Assata Shakur into exile. We are former Black Political Prisoners who spent decades in U.S. prisons, like our comrades **Russell Maroon Shoatz**, Romaine "Chip" Fitzgerald, **Sundiata Acoli, Jalil Muntaqim**, and **Mumia Abdul-Jamal** who are still locked down today. In short, we were on the front line of government efforts to kill and destroy the Black radical movements for civil/human rights including the right to self-determination.



Some of us were also racist law enforcement's worst nightmare, armed combatants in the revolutionary Black underground, the **Black Liberation Army (BLA)**. Much of our history in our people's struggle has been kept away from you and seemingly unavailable to your generation as you reinvent what was done in the past. Our people's enemies haven't changed, circumstances and conditions have. History never repeats itself – but it damn sure can rhyme.

The question is where do we, Black people, oppressed peoples, go from here? What is to be done? Make no mistake, we are still at war. A war that began when, as **Malcolm** said, "Plymouth Rock landed on us" and it has continued to this day unabated.

It is our duty as revolutionary freedom fighters to pass on lessons, wisdom, knowledge and experiences to the next generation of freedom fighters, cultural workers and activists. In that manner, an oppressed people can resist domination from one generation to the next without reinventing failures, pitfalls, or the mistakes of the previous generation. It is our enemy's job to

prevent this, and isolate one generation from the other. It is their duty to denigrate the history of militant and radical traditions and burnish the history of integrationist who think we can simply vote our way out of this problem. It is for this reason that we have stepped forward at this neo-fascist moment in history driven by the current crisis of capitalist culture, an ongoing pandemic and the now renewed attention and massive demonstrations brought on by ongoing police murders in our community.

We have chosen to focus this letter on you because our enemies constantly target you to help “calm” the people down. They hope your new class status will outweigh your racial and class analysis. You have a chance to prove them wrong and with your resources and influence you can be crucial to the collective survival of our people. Tattoos, expensive cars and private jets don’t inoculate anyone from a disease and don’t render you bullet proof. We have to collectively provide for our own human agency and not delude ourselves into thinking it’s safer to integrate into a maligned system of greed and dehumanization.

Some may say we as Panther veterans are not the Black people you should be seen talking to. Niggas should know their place we’ve been told and this is one reason that powerless Black folks have sports figures, actors, musicians and bought-off politicians as their public opinion makers. The voices of the disenfranchised is only heard when they rage against the machine that has ground down their lives.

We have all been encouraged by the energy of the Black masses and our allies in protesting the murder of George Floyd, but as each of you are well aware the murder and brutality visited upon our people is nothing aberrational or new. The butchering, torture, and dehumanization of Black people extends back to the days of bullwhips, castrations and mass rape on the plantations of America’s European “founding fathers” and continues to this day. This is the legacy from which modern law enforcement in America derived its overarching purpose, the protection of property and wealth, not people – especially not Black people. No amount of training, social sensitivity, counseling, or smaller police forces will change the current impact of this history on law enforcement. Only our control of public safety in our communities will break this historical context for modern law enforcement. This begins with decentralization of the police, and community control of public safety.

This season of political struggle is indeed about the “Ballot and the Bullet.” To organize the former, (ballot) all progressive and radical forces in America need to come together in a United Front Against Fascism and the militarized police state. This is what the BPP did at the height of the tumultuous sixties, resulting in delaying the outright consolidation of right-wing racist takeover of American foreign and domestic policy.

George Jackson: Releasing the Dragon (a video mixtape)



We must also look beyond solutions that are strictly based on legislative reform, voting, or individual capitalist enterprises. Black folks must survive institutional racist paradigms of power and exercise political and social self-determinant power. The public platforms each of you have can go a long way in creating this tactical and strategic organizing vision. With this in mind we ask you who have a certain sway over the attitudes and minds of today's Black youth to do the following.

- Let's meet and talk through a strategy based on liberating Black People and our respective roles.
- Let us create a Pan-African Refugee and Relief Agency where we become our own first responders in times of natural or man-made disasters/pandemics.
- Help create consortium so we can develop new a cooperative economic system where ownership is shared and is directed towards the needs of our people/workers, not consumerist enterprises.
- Support radical and revolutionary Black organizations that have a history of accomplishment and institution building in our community that is independent of major corporate donations, government grants or foundation founding.
- Through your media reach support the current rebellion in the streets and mass organizing for radical change.
- If you are opposed to property destruction then call for massive demonstrations at key government and private instillations and give free concerts to ensure large numbers of people come out.
- Work with us and others to create and fund an independent Black political platform and candidates with radical demands for Black control and redistribution of this country's wealth and reparations.
- Fight for the demilitarization and the decentralization of the police where the local community through local boards control the hiring, firing and disciplining of police in their community.
- Let us create a system of not only a new policing paradigm but one where we create a community restorative justice and end the prison industrial complex.

These are just some of the things you/we can do to create a united Black Liberation Front to challenge our oppressive conditions in the united states and erase the class divide between the overwhelming majority of our people and those few like you who have some wealth and influence. This is all our opportunity to do what's best for our people and be on the right side of history.

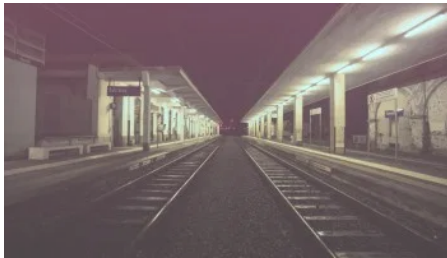
Original Black Panthers Members,

KATHLEEN CLEAVER, SEKOU ODINGA, CLEO SILVERS, JAMAL JOSEPH, YASMEEN MAJID, VICTOR HOUSTON, PAULA PEEBLES, BILAL SUNNI ALI, JIHAD MUMIT, DHORUBA BIN-WAHAD, KIM HOLDER, HAROLD WELTON, HAROLD TAYLOR, ARTHUR LEAGUE, RASHAD BYRDSONG, KHALID RAHEEM.

Supported by [Community Movement Builders](#).

Any media inquires please contact **Kamau Franklin** at kamaufranklin@gmail.com

Related



The Price of the Ticket: How Much Does it Cost to See Ourselves?
In "Articles"



Assata Shakur, Excluding the Nightmare After the Dream by Dhoruba bin-Wahad
In "Africana Studies"



Murdering Fred Hampton and Black Power with Bruce Dixon and Todd Steven Burroughs
In "Africana Studies"

Tagged: [50 cent](#) [assata shakur](#) [beyonce](#) [black history](#) [black panther](#) [black panther party](#) [cardi b](#) [community movement builders](#) [fred hampton](#) [hip-hop](#) [jalil muntaqim](#) [jay-z](#) [kamau franklin](#) [kanye west](#) [ludacris](#) [malcolm x](#) [mumia abu-jamal](#) [p-diddy](#) [political prisoners](#) [sundiata acoli](#) [t.i.](#)

International Solidarity Webinar at the University of Tehran

Emancipatory Journalism w Dr. Hemant Shah




6 thoughts on “An Open Letter from Original Black Panther Party Members to Black (Hip-Hop) Artists Who Have an

Interest in Our Community (T.I., KILLER MIKE, CARDI B, KANYE WEST, BEYONCE’, JAY-Z, P-DIDDY, LUDACRIS, 50-CENT, and others)”

TSL says:

 **June 11, 2020 at 12:24 pm**

 **Thank you for coming to the forefront and for rallying the troops once again....Once enough of us stand up, the game is over! Checkmate!**

Reply

Ernie DAMANI says:

 **June 11, 2020 at 12:23 pm**

 **As an elder who participated in the original BLM (LIBERATION) I am so pleased and proud to read your principled critical analysis.**

I recommend adding a dialectical, historical dimension to your crit that recognizes that ALL segments of our PB are not antagonistic to revolutionary struggle. This is particularly historically. true of our cultural artist. Beyonce is no Nina Simone, T.I. & Killa Mike might not be “The Last Poets” but to the extent they heed this call to action and take DIRECTION from the Black grassroots movement, let them. Most importantly, raise up and politically develop a current crop of cultural warriors. WHO do you suggest? If there’s another EMORY or Sonia Sanchez out there find/recruit them! As a good brother used to say, “If you don’t like that news go out and make some of your own!” (Mackie McCloud WILD-AM Boston)

A LUTA CONTINUA Bro. Damani

Reply

Mario SKENGRAM says:

 **June 11, 2020 at 8:50 am**

🗨️ This is high time we all join hands

And build a system that will be for the advantages of black lives matters.

So its high time we come together as strong and powerful black people. As we are we all have been victim of this police brutality

Reply

Clayton Cox says:

📅 June 11, 2020 at 8:14 am

🗨️ This will be the Greatest Story ever told!! I we are getting the message that We are Our greatest asset and when we Unite the House Will Finally Stand! I longed for this Reunion. There is ABSOLUTELY NOTHING TO FEAR BUT FEAR ITSELF, but not even then

Reply

Steven Biko Bandele Nkosi says:

📅 June 10, 2020 at 11:27 pm

🗨️ The New Afrikan Asafo People’s Vanguard stand solidarity with you and will work to carry our the above request.

Reply

1. HetHeru says:

📅 June 11, 2020 at 8:01 am

🗨️ Htpu dear elders..FIRST, let me say I am grateful for yall, your great works and its revolutionary impact on black people worldwide. Our people cannot thank , support and honor y’all enough. In fact, we have not and this saddens me..It is one of the contradictions of the black liberation struggle that MUST BE ERADICATED. You we must honor, take direction from and support including financially. The late Elombe Brathwaite was my first mentor. He saved me from a whitewashed existence at 19 years old. It was through Elombe that my political consciousness was born. He ignited a fire

within me for self determination and spawned my political activity. It was through Ellombe that I was introduced to your great and fearless works. I honor and respect yall HIGHLY. Therefore it greatly saddens me to see this open letter to those who chose to be the enemy of our people. Some of these “artists” you are appealing to are blood drinking WORSHIPPERS of demonic forces (Baphomet and Moloch). They have NO interest in life giving, black liberatory activities. They are members of what you our elders have taught us were the petty bourgeoisie class which was created by our enemies as a buffer to work against black liberation. They are controlled by our enemies. Why then are they being summoned to assist with our liberation? I am TOTALLY shocked and confused by this open appeal to those who have proven to be ENEMIES of black liberation i.e. Jay Zzz’\$, Beyond seeing and Con yay Westernized..SHOCKED by this open letter at a time when the masses are FINALLY RISING UP. Why not lead them and draw financial resources from this powerful movement of resistance? I say this in sincerity and with the highest respect. You have taught us to utilize our mental faculties for critical political analysis. You taught us, like El Hajj Malik El Shabazz, to be politically uncompromising. You are the leadership of the black liberation movement..the BLA..I honor you..please explain this political position and public statement. – Hmt HetHeru RaatMwt

Reply

Leave a Reply

Enter your comment here...

Copyright iMiXWHATiLiKE! 2020

DEAR MAMA HARRIET

Alicia Garza

Dear Mama Harriet,

You were the first person I thought about on November 8, 2016, when they announced that Donald Trump had been elected as the forty-fifth president of the United States. The first time you used the Underground Railroad was in September 1849. Legend has it that once you escaped, you never looked back.

The president at that time, Zachary Taylor, died before he could weigh in on the debate surrounding our humanity. The year he died, Congress passed the Fugitive Slave Act, determined to keep people like you from the promise of America—life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. When President Polk had taken office a few years earlier, he apparently considered slavery to be a “side issue,” less important than stealing land from Mexico and other economic issues. I imagine you didn’t care much about who was elected president then, since they were all slaveholders. But you did care about politics.

The truth is I think about you often. Your courage in the face of adversity makes it so that I can put one foot in front of the other, even when I'm tired, even when I'm scared, even when I'm not completely sure what I'm doing or if it will work. I think about you in this political moment, where there are times when us Black folk can be our own worst enemies. When someone tells me that it can't be done, that it doesn't fit with what we've always done, I hear you saying to me, "I freed a thousand slaves, and I could have saved a thousand more if only they had known they were slaves."

I work hard to embody you, Mama Harriet. When I learned that after you escaped, your brothers had second thoughts and turned back, but you kept going, it gave me the strength to keep going. When I learned that you went back to bring your husband to freedom, and he refused to come with you, instead electing to stay with his new wife, it gave me the strength to always be my own compass. When I learned that you returned to bring your sister to freedom and found out that she had since died, it gave me the determination to keep going, though we may never know the outcome of what we do or whether our goals will actually be accomplished.

Mama Harriet, I wonder what sustained you after all of the heartbreak and disappointment that you endured. I wonder how you kept going. I imagine it was ancestors to you, as you are to me, that kept you steady and focused, soothed your heart when it felt like it was shattered into a million pieces, gave you visions of what freedom could be, gave you courage, and infused you with a deep love for your people, whether or not they always loved themselves.

Mama Harriet, when they passed the Fugitive Slave Act, you were undeterred. You simply moved the Underground Railroad to a place more favorable for success, because that's how committed you were. You didn't quit. You didn't give up. Every opportunity for freedom guided your decisions. You weren't afraid to work with anyone who shared the same goal, even if they didn't share your experience. You worked with abolitionists like John Brown, you worked with Quakers, you worked with suffragettes—even when they couldn't see your humanity. You were the first woman to lead an assault at Combahee River, where you helped to free seven hundred slaves. You broke barriers; you pushed boundaries. I'm sure you had peers who didn't like how powerful you were, but because you stood in your power, I can stand in mine.

Mama Harriet, these are perilous times we are living in. Eight years ago, we elected the first Black president of the United States, Barack Obama. This was a historic moment for Black people in this country, no matter how symbolic. Many felt that the election of Barack Obama signaled that we, as a country, had finally moved beyond race. Many attempted to say that his election was the fulfillment of your dreams, Mama Harriet, and the dreams of so many others who came before us. And yet, with President Obama's election, we continued to see the ravages of institutional and systemic racism.

You see, Mama Harriet, the conundrum that you encountered is the same set of contradictions that we encounter. We had a Black president who often shied away from addressing the nation about the pervasive nature of racism,

and yet, he faced racism at every turn. Black folks, by and large, were hesitant to criticize the president, of course, for many reasons—many of us could feel, viscerally, the challenges that he faced as a leader. Mama Harriet, we have moved from one form of slavery to other forms. There are astronomical numbers of us in prisons and jails. Too many of us still do not have the basic things we need to survive. Some of us who do find the means are forced to navigate being one of a few in a sea of white bodies, white norms, white culture—and still too many of us seek white acceptance.

But, Mama Harriet, our people have been rising up. Across gender, generation, immigration status (yes, Black people are all over the world), and sexuality, Black people have been rising up. The last decade has seen Black resistance, and the strongest expression of that resistance has occurred over the last four years. Led by a deep and abiding love for all of humanity, we have worked hard to make sure that the lives of Black people are just as valuable as the lives of others.

There was a backlash. A backlash against the supposed progress that was made. A backlash against having a Black leader of the “free” world. Even though all forty-three presidents before him were white and male, when the forty-fourth president of the United States was Black, there were people in this country who believed that this was an example of how Black people are once again getting undeserved handouts. You see, Mama Harriet, the same sickness that caused people to put other people in chains, rape them, strip them of their humanity, work them to their literal deaths while never allowing them to benefit from the fruits

of their labor still exists today. Today, the whips are invisible, but the scars remain.

That backlash that I was just telling you about? The result was a president who is unfit to be a leader. A president who was raised in white supremacy, who still embraces it. A president who has no vision for freedom, for justice for all of us. His vision, Mama Harriet, is that he and his friends will continue to get rich off of our backs. Carrots for some, sticks for us, Mama Harriet. The whole system of democracy is in question today, Mama Harriet. There are too many of us who do not believe in democracy anymore. You know what the white folks say, Mama Harriet. They say we don’t deserve to make decisions over our own lives. They expect us to just go along to get along. In the same way that the president when you were here with us saw slavery as a “side issue,” there are still too many in our society who continue to see race and racism as a “side issue,” who instead privilege economic stability over a society where all of us can be all of who we are, all of the time.

Mama Harriet, I’m terrified. I worry every day that none of it is enough. I worry that my heart will harden. I worry that I will lose faith in us. Those feelings are fleeting. I know they will go away. But my real fear? My real fear is that we won’t get it together until it’s too late. Already, Mama Harriet, the planet is in trouble. The trees and streams and animals that you knew have long since been used up in irresponsible ways. They’ve poisoned families in Flint, Michigan, Mama Harriet, because when it comes to poor people, when it comes to poor Black people, they say it’s okay to drink water laden with lead. This is why I pray to

you every day, Mama Harriet. Because I need your strength, your resolve, your courage, and your vision.

Each day I pray to you, Mama Harriet, to give me and all of us the strength to keep moving toward freedom. I know it won't be easy, so I pray that you fortify me and the rest of us. I pray that you help us see slavery clearly so that we can fight it and end it once and for all. I pray that you remove the barriers between us that keep us from being effective together. I pray that you mend our hearts when we break them and when our fight shatters our hearts into a thousand pieces.

And most of all, Mama Harriet, I pray that you are proud of us.

With love,
Alicia

THE LANTERN

Roxana Robinson

To my great-great-great-aunt Hattie, Harriet Beecher Stowe,

I've been thinking about you a lot recently, Aunt Hattie, because it seems that we are living in dark times again. I've been wondering about how you thought about those times, and how it was that you decided to speak out.

When you wrote *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, it was 1851, and America had been bringing enslaved people to its shores for more than two hundred years. So slavery was already deeply rooted and entrenched; it was a part of our culture.

But it wasn't something you grew up with. You were born in 1811 in Litchfield, Connecticut, a place where slavery was rare. When you were in your early twenties, your father took a teaching job in Ohio, and he moved the family to Cincinnati, which was just across the river from Kentucky. There you became vividly aware of what was happening: you had a front-row seat to the horrifying American

More From The Brutality of a Country

See Project

The Atlantic

Letter to My Son

“Here is what I would like for you to know: In America, it is traditional to destroy the black body—*it is heritage.*”



A

The Atlantic

Sign In

Subscribe

Story by Ta-Nehisi Coates

JULY 4, 2015

POLITICS

Subscribe to *The Atlantic's* [Politics & Policy Daily](#), a roundup of ideas and events in American politics.

And have brought humanity to the edge of oblivion: because they think they are white.

—James Baldwin

So on, Last Sunday the host of a popular news show asked me what it meant to lose my body. The host was broadcasting from Washington, D.C., and I was seated in a remote studio on the Far West Side of Manhattan. A satellite closed the miles between us, but no machinery could close the gap between her world and the world for which I had been summoned to speak. When the host asked me about my body, her face faded from the screen, and was replaced by a scroll of words, written by me earlier that week.

The host read these words for the audience, and when she finished she turned to the subject of my body, although she did not mention it specifically. But by now I am accustomed to intelligent people asking about the condition of my body without realizing the nature of their request. Specifically, the host wished to know why I felt that white America's progress, or rather the progress of those Americans who believe that they are white, was built on looting and violence. Hearing this, I felt an old and indistinct sadness well up in me. The answer to this question is the record of the believers themselves. The answer is American history.

There is nothing extreme in this statement. Americans deify democracy in a way that allows for a dim awareness that they have, from time to time, stood in defiance of their God. This defiance is not to be much dwelled upon.

Democracy is a forgiving God and America's heresies—torture, theft, enslavement—are specimens of sin, so common among individuals and nations that none can declare themselves immune. In fact, Americans, in a real sense, have never betrayed their God. When Abraham Lincoln declared, in 1863, that the battle of Gettysburg must ensure “that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth,” he was not merely being aspirational. At the onset of the Civil War, the United States of America had one of the highest rates of suffrage in the world. The question is not whether Lincoln truly meant “government of the people” but what our country has, throughout its history, taken the political term *people* to actually mean. In 1863 it did not mean your mother or your grandmother, and it did not mean you and me. As for now, it must be said that the elevation of the belief in being white was not achieved through wine tastings and ice-cream socials, but rather through the pillaging of life, liberty, labor, and land.

That Sunday, on that news show, I tried to explain this as best I could within the time allotted. But at the end of the segment, the host flashed a widely shared picture of a 12-year-old black boy tearfully hugging a white police officer. Then she asked me about “hope.” And I knew then that I had failed. And I remembered that I had expected to fail. And I wondered again at the indistinct sadness welling up in me. Why exactly was I sad? I came out of the studio and walked for a while. It was a calm late-November day. Families, believing themselves white, were out on the streets. Infants, raised to be white, were bundled in strollers. And I was sad for these people, much as I was sad for the host and sad for all the people out there watching and reveling in a specious hope. I realized then why I was sad. When the journalist asked me about my body, it was like she was asking me to awaken her from the most gorgeous dream. I have seen that dream all my life. It is perfect houses with nice lawns. It is Memorial Day cookouts, block associations, and driveways. The Dream is tree houses and the Cub Scouts. And for so long I have wanted to escape into the Dream, to fold my country over my head like

a blanket. But this has never been an option, because the Dream rests on our backs, the bedding made from our bodies. And knowing this, knowing that the Dream persists by warring with the known world, I was sad for the host, I was sad for all those families, I was sad for my country, but above all, in that moment, I was sad for you.

*This is your country, this is your world,
this is your body, and you must find some
way to live within the all of it.*

That was the week you learned that the killers of Michael Brown would go free. The men who had left his body in the street would never be punished. It was not my expectation that anyone would ever be punished. But you were young and still believed. You stayed up till 11 p.m. that night, waiting for the announcement of an indictment, and when instead it was announced that there was none you said, "I've got to go," and you went into your room, and I heard you crying. I came in five minutes after, and I didn't hug you, and I didn't comfort you, because I thought it would be wrong to comfort you. I did not tell you that it would be okay, because I have never believed it would be okay. What I told you is what your grandparents tried to tell me: that this is your country, that this is your world, that this is your body, and you must find some way to live within the all of it.

I write you in your 15th year. I am writing you because this was the year you saw Eric Garner choked to death for selling cigarettes; because you know now that Renisha McBride was shot for seeking help, that John Crawford was shot down for browsing in a department store. And you have seen men in uniform

drive by and murder Tamir Rice, a 12-year-old child whom they were oath-bound to protect. And you know now, if you did not before, that the police departments of your country have been endowed with the authority to destroy your body. It does not matter if the destruction is the result of an unfortunate overreaction. It does not matter if it originates in a misunderstanding. It does not matter if the destruction springs from a foolish policy. Sell cigarettes without the proper authority and your body can be destroyed. Turn into a dark stairwell and your body can be destroyed. The destroyers will rarely be held accountable. Mostly they will receive pensions.

There is nothing uniquely evil in these destroyers or even in this moment. The destroyers are merely men enforcing the whims of our country, correctly interpreting its heritage and legacy. This legacy aspires to the shackling of black bodies. It is hard to face this. But all our phrasing—*race relations*, *racial chasm*, *racial justice*, *racial profiling*, *white privilege*, even *white supremacy*—serves to obscure that racism is a visceral experience, that it dislodges brains, blocks airways, rips muscle, extracts organs, cracks bones, breaks teeth. You must never look away from this. You must always remember that the sociology, the history, the economics, the graphs, the charts, the regressions all land, with great violence, upon the body. And should one live in such a body? What should be our aim beyond meager survival of constant, generational, ongoing battery and assault? I have asked this question all my life. I have sought the answer through my reading and writings, through the music of my youth, through arguments with your grandfather, with your mother. I have searched for answers in nationalist myth, in classrooms, out on the streets, and on other continents. The question is unanswerable, which is not to say futile. The greatest reward of this constant interrogation, of confrontation with the brutality of my country, is that it has freed me from ghosts and myths.

Eduardo Munoz / Reuters

And yet I am still afraid. I feel the fear most acutely whenever you leave me. But I was afraid long before you, and in this I was unoriginal. When I was your age the only people I knew were black, and all of them were powerfully, adamantly, dangerously afraid. It was always right in front of me. The fear was there in the extravagant boys of my West Baltimore neighborhood, in their large rings and medallions, their big puffy coats and full-length fur-collared leathers, which was their armor against their world. They would stand on the corner of Gwynn Oak and Liberty, or Cold Spring and Park Heights, or outside Mondawmin Mall, with their hands dipped in Russell sweats. I think back on those boys now and all I see is fear, and all I see is them girding themselves against the ghosts of the bad old days when the Mississippi mob gathered 'round their grandfathers so that the branches of the

black body might be torched, then cut away. The fear lived on in their practiced bop, their slouching denim, their big T-shirts, the calculated angle of their baseball caps, a catalog of behaviors and garments enlisted to inspire the belief that these boys were in firm possession of everything they desired.

I felt the fear in the visits to my Nana's home in Philadelphia. You never knew her. I barely knew her, but what I remember is her hard manner, her rough voice. And I knew that my father's father was dead and that my Uncle Oscar was dead and that my Uncle David was dead and that each of these instances was unnatural. And I saw it in my own father, who loves you, who counsels you, who slipped me money to care for you. My father was so very afraid. I felt it in the sting of his black leather belt, which he applied with more anxiety than anger, my father who beat me as if someone might steal me away, because that is exactly what was happening all around us. Everyone had lost a child, somehow, to the streets, to jail, to drugs, to guns. It was said that these lost girls were sweet as honey and would not hurt a fly. It was said that these lost boys had just received a GED and had begun to turn their lives around. And now they were gone, and their legacy was a great fear.

When I was 6, Ma and Dad took me to a local park. I slipped from their gaze and found a playground. Your grandparents spent anxious minutes looking for me. When they found me, Dad did what every parent I knew would have done—he reached for his belt. I remember watching him in a kind of daze, awed at the distance between punishment and offense. Later, I would hear it in Dad's voice—"Either I can beat him, or the police." Maybe that saved me. Maybe it didn't. All I know is, the violence rose from the fear like smoke from a fire, and I cannot say whether that violence, even administered in fear and love, sounded the alarm or choked us at the exit. What I know is that fathers who slammed their teenage boys for sass would then release them to streets where their boys employed, and were subject to, the same justice. And I knew mothers who belted their girls, but the belt could not save these girls from

drug dealers twice their age.

To be black in the Baltimore of my youth was to be naked before the elements of the world, before all the guns, fists, knives, crack, rape, and disease. The law did not protect us. And now, in your time, the law has become an excuse for stopping and frisking you, which is to say, for furthering the assault on your body. But a society that protects some people through a safety net of schools, government-backed home loans, and ancestral wealth but can protect you only with the club of criminal justice has either failed at enforcing its good intentions or succeeded at something much darker.

I remember being 11 years old, standing out in the parking lot in front of the 7-Eleven, watching a crew of older boys standing near the street. I stood there, marveling at the older boys' beautiful sense of fashion. They all wore ski jackets, the kind that mothers put on layaway in September, then piled up overtime hours so as to have the thing wrapped and ready for Christmas. A light-skinned boy with a long head and small eyes was scowling at another boy, who was standing close to me. It was just before three in the afternoon. I was in sixth grade. School had just let out, and it was not yet the fighting weather of early spring. What was the exact problem here? Who could know?

The boy with the small eyes reached into his ski jacket and pulled out a gun. I recall it in the slowest motion, as though in a dream. There the boy stood, with the gun brandished, which he slowly untucked, tucked, then untucked once more, and in his small eyes I saw a surging rage that could, in an instant, erase my body. That was 1986. That year I felt myself to be drowning in the news reports of murder. I was aware that these murders very often did not land upon the intended targets but fell upon great-aunts, PTA mothers, overtime uncles, and joyful children—fell upon them random and relentless, like great sheets of rain. I knew this in theory but could not understand it as fact until the boy with the small eyes stood across from me holding my entire

body in his small hands.

*Before I could escape, I had to survive,
and this could only mean a clash with the
streets.*

I remember being amazed that death could so easily rise up from the nothing of a boyish afternoon, billow up like fog. I knew that West Baltimore, where I lived; that the north side of Philadelphia, where my cousins lived; that the South Side of Chicago, where friends of my father lived, comprised a world apart. Somewhere out there beyond the firmament, past the asteroid belt, there were other worlds where children did not regularly fear for their bodies. I knew this because there was a large television in my living room. In the evenings I would sit before this television bearing witness to the dispatches from this other world. There were little white boys with complete collections of football cards, their only want was a popular girlfriend and their only worry was poison oak. That other world was suburban and endless, organized around pot roasts, blueberry pies, fireworks, ice-cream sundaes, immaculate bathrooms, and small toy trucks that were loosed in wooded backyards with streams and endless lawns. Comparing these dispatches with the facts of my native world, I came to understand that my country was a galaxy, and this galaxy stretched from the pandemonium of West Baltimore to the happy hunting grounds of *Mr. Belvedere*. I obsessed over the distance between that other sector of space and my own. I knew that my portion of the American galaxy, where bodies were enslaved by a tenacious gravity, was black and that the other, liberated portion was not. I knew that some inscrutable energy

preserved the breach. I felt, but did not yet understand, the relation between that other world and me. And I felt in this a cosmic injustice, a profound cruelty, which infused an abiding, irrepressible desire to unshackle my body and achieve the velocity of escape.

Adrees Latif / Reuters

Before I could escape, I had to survive, and this could only mean a clash with the streets, by which I mean not just physical blocks, nor simply the people packed into them, but the array of lethal puzzles and strange perils that seem to rise up from the asphalt itself. The streets transform every ordinary day into a series of trick questions, and every incorrect answer risks a beat-down, a shooting, or a pregnancy. No one survives unscathed. When I was your age, fully one-third of my brain was concerned with whom I was walking to school with, our precise number, the manner of our walk, the number of times I

smiled, whom or what I smiled at, who offered a pound and who did not—all of which is to say that I practiced the culture of the streets, a culture concerned chiefly with securing the body.

The culture of the streets was essential—there was no alternative. I could not retreat into the church and its mysteries. My parents rejected all dogmas. We spurned the holidays marketed by the people who wanted to be white. We would not stand for their anthems. We would not kneel before their God. “The meek shall inherit the earth” meant nothing to me. The meek were battered in West Baltimore, stomped out at Walbrook Junction, bashed up on Park Heights, and raped in the showers of the city jail. My understanding of the universe was physical, and its moral arc bent toward chaos then concluded in a box. That was the message of the small-eyed boy, untucking the piece—a child bearing the power to body and banish other children to memory. Fear ruled everything around me, and I knew, as all black people do, that this fear was connected to the world out there, to the unworried boys, to pie and pot roast, to the white fences and green lawns nightly beamed into our television sets.

Every February my classmates and I were herded into assemblies for a ritual review of the civil-rights movement. Our teachers urged us toward the example of freedom marchers, Freedom Riders, and Freedom Summers, and it seemed that the month could not pass without a series of films dedicated to the glories of being beaten on camera. *Why are they showing this to us?* Why were only our heroes nonviolent? Back then all I could do was measure these freedom-lovers by what I knew. Which is to say, I measured them against children pulling out in the 7-Eleven parking lot, against parents wielding extension cords, and the threatening intonations of armed black gangs saying, “Yeah, nigger, what’s up now?” I judged them against the country I knew, which had acquired the land through murder and tamed it under slavery, against the country whose armies fanned out across the world to extend their

dominion. The world, the real one, was civilization secured and ruled by savage means. How could the schools valorize men and women whose values society actively scorned? How could they send us out into the streets of Baltimore, knowing all that they were, and then speak of nonviolence?

Some things were clear to me: The violence that undergirded the country, so flagrantly on display during Black History Month, and the intimate violence of the streets were not unrelated. And this violence was not magical, but was of a piece and by design. But what exactly was the design? And why? I must know. I must get out ... but into what? I saw the design in those in the boys on the corner, in “the babies having babies.” The design explained everything, from our cracked-out fathers to HIV to the bleached skin of Michael Jackson. I felt this but I could not explain it. This was two years before the Million Man March. Almost every day I played Ice Cube’s album *Death Certificate*: “Let me live my life, if we can no longer live our life, then let us give our life for the liberation and salvation of the black nation.” I was haunted by the bodily sacrifice of Malcolm. I was haunted because I believed that we had left ourselves back there, and now in the crack era all we had was a great fear. Perhaps I must go back. That was what I heard in the rapper’s call to “keep it real.” Perhaps we should return to ourselves, to our own primordial streets, to our own ruggedness, to our own rude hair. Perhaps we should return to Mecca.

My only Mecca was, is, and shall always be Howard University. This Mecca, My Mecca—The Mecca—is a machine, crafted to capture and concentrate the dark energy of all African peoples and inject it directly into the student body. The Mecca derives its power from the heritage of Howard University, which in Jim Crow days enjoyed a near-monopoly on black talent. And whereas most other historically black schools were scattered like forts in the great wilderness of the old Confederacy, Howard was in Washington, D.C.—Chocolate City—and thus in proximity to both federal

power and black power. I first witnessed this power out on the Yard, that communal green space in the center of the campus where the students gathered and I saw everything I knew of my black self multiplied out into seemingly endless variations. There were the scions of Nigerian aristocrats in their business suits giving dap to bald-headed Qs in purple windbreakers and tan Timbs. There were the high-yellow progeny of A.M.E. preachers debating the clerics of Ausar-Set. There were California girls turned Muslim, born anew, in hijab and long skirt. There were Ponzi schemers and Christian cultists, Tabernacle fanatics and mathematical geniuses. It was like listening to a hundred different renditions of “Redemption Song,” each in a different color and key. And overlaying all of this was the history of Howard itself. I knew that I was literally walking in the footsteps of all the Toni Morrisons and Zora Neale Hurstons, of all the Sterling Browns and Kenneth Clarks, who’d come before.

The Mecca—the vastness of black people across space-time—could be experienced in a 20-minute walk across campus. I saw this vastness in the students chopping it up in front of the Frederick Douglass Memorial Hall, where Muhammad Ali had addressed their fathers and mothers in defiance of the Vietnam War. I saw its epic sweep in the students next to Ira Aldridge Theater, where Donny Hathaway had once sung, where Donald Byrd had once assembled his flock. The students came out with their saxophones, trumpets, and drums, played “My Favorite Things” or “Someday My Prince Will Come.” Some of the other students were out on the grass in front of Alain Locke Hall, in pink and green, chanting, singing, stomping, clapping, stepping. Some of them came up from Tubman Quadrangle with their roommates and rope for double Dutch. Some of them came down from Drew Hall, with their caps cocked and their backpacks slung through one arm, then fell into gorgeous ciphers of beatbox and rhyme. Some of the girls sat by the flagpole with bell hooks and Sonia Sanchez in their straw totes. Some of the boys, with their new Yoruba names, beseeched these girls by citing Frantz

Fanon. Some of them studied Russian. Some of them worked in bone labs. They were Panamanian. They were Bajan. And some of them were from places I had never heard of. But all of them were hot and incredible, exotic even, though we hailed from the same tribe.

Eric Thayer / Reuters

Now, the heirs of slaveholders could never directly acknowledge our beauty or reckon with its power. And so the beauty of the black body was never celebrated in movies, on television shows, or in the textbooks I'd seen as a child. Everyone of any import, from Jesus to George Washington, was white. This was why your grandparents banned Tarzan and the Lone Ranger and toys with white faces from the house. They were rebelling against the history books that spoke of black people only as sentimental "firsts"—first black four-star general, first black congressman, first black mayor—always presented in the

bemused manner of a category of Trivial Pursuit. Serious history was the West, and the West was white. This was all distilled for me in a quote I once read, from the novelist Saul Bellow. I can't remember where I read it, or when—only that I was already at Howard. “Who is the Tolstoy of the Zulus?,” Bellow quipped. Tolstoy was “white,” I understood him to say, and so Tolstoy “mattered,” like everything else that was white “mattered.” And this view of things was connected to the fear that passed through the generations, to the sense of dispossession. We were black, beyond the visible spectrum, beyond civilization. Our history was inferior because we were inferior, which is to say our bodies were inferior. And our inferior bodies could not possibly be accorded the same respect as those that built the West. Would it not be better, then, if our bodies were civilized, improved, and put to some legitimate Christian use?

And so I came to Howard toting a new and different history, myth really, which inverted all the stories of the people who believed themselves to be white. I majored in history with all the motives of a man looking to fill a trophy case. They had heroes, so we must have heroes too. But my history professors thought nothing of telling me that my search for myth was doomed, that the stories I wanted to tell myself could not be matched to truths. Indeed, they felt it their duty to disabuse me of my weaponized history. Their method was rough and direct. Did black skin really convey nobility? Always? Yes. What about the blacks who'd practiced slavery for millennia and sold slaves across the Sahara and then across the sea? Victims of a trick. Would those be the same black kings who birthed all of civilization? Were they then both deposed masters of the galaxy and gullible puppets all at once? And what did I mean by “black”? You know, black. Did I think this a timeless category stretching into the deep past? Yes? Could it be supposed that simply because color was important to me, it had always been so?

This heap of realizations was a weight. I found them physically painful and

exhausting. True, I was coming to enjoy the dizziness, the vertigo that must come with any odyssey. But in those early moments, the unceasing contradictions sent me into a gloom. There was nothing holy or particular in my skin; I was black because of history and heritage. There was no nobility in falling, in being bound, in living oppressed, and there was no inherent meaning in black blood. Black blood wasn't black; black skin wasn't even black. And now I looked back on my need for a trophy case, on the desire to live by the standards of Saul Bellow, and I felt that this need was not an escape but fear again—fear that “they,” the alleged authors and heirs of the universe, were right. And this fear ran so deep that we accepted their standards of civilization and humanity.

They made us into a race. We made ourselves into a people.

But not all of us. It must have been around that time that I discovered an essay by Ralph Wiley in which he responded to Bellow's quip. “Tolstoy is the Tolstoy of the Zulus,” wrote Wiley. “Unless you find a profit in fencing off universal properties of mankind into exclusive tribal ownership.” And there it was. I had accepted Bellow's premise. In fact, Bellow was no closer to Tolstoy than I was to Nzinga. And if I were closer it would be because I chose to be, not because of destiny written in DNA. My great error was not that I had accepted someone else's dream but that I had accepted the fact of dreams, the need for escape, and the invention of racecraft.

And still and all I knew that we were something, that we were a tribe—on one hand, invented, and on the other, no less real. The reality was out there on the

Yard, on the first warm day of spring when it seemed that every sector, borough, affiliation, county, and corner of the broad diaspora had sent a delegate to the great world party. I remember those days like an OutKast song, painted in lust and joy. The black world was expanding before me, and I could see now that that world was more than a photonegative of that of the people who believe they are white. “White America” is a syndicate arrayed to protect its exclusive power to dominate and control our bodies. Sometimes this power is direct (lynching), and sometimes it is insidious (redlining). But however it appears, the power of domination and exclusion is central to the belief in being white, and without it, “white people” would cease to exist for want of reasons. There will surely always be people with straight hair and blue eyes, as there have been for all of history. But some of these straight-haired people with blue eyes have been “black,” and this points to the great difference between their world and ours. We did not choose our fences. They were imposed on us by Virginia planters obsessed with enslaving as many Americans as possible. Now I saw that we had made something down here, in slavery, in Jim Crow, in ghettos. At The Mecca I saw how we had taken their one-drop rule and flipped it. They made us into a race. We made ourselves into a people.

And what did that mean for the Dreamers I’d seen as a child? Could I ever want to get into the world they made? No. I was born among a people, Samori, and in that realization I knew that I was out of something. It was the psychosis of questioning myself, of constantly wondering if I could measure up. But the whole theory was wrong, their whole notion of race was wrong. And apprehending that, I felt my first measure of freedom.

This realization was important but intellectual. It could not save my body. Indeed, it made me understand what the loss of all our black bodies really meant. No one of us were “black people.” We were individuals, a one of one, and when we died there was nothing. Always remember that Trayvon Martin

was a boy, that Tamir Rice was a particular boy, that Jordan Davis was a boy, like you. When you hear these names think of all the wealth poured into them. Think of the gasoline expended, the treads worn carting him to football games, basketball tournaments, and Little League. Think of the time spent regulating sleepovers. Think of the surprise birthday parties, the day care, and the reference checks on babysitters. Think of checks written for family photos. Think of soccer balls, science kits, chemistry sets, racetracks, and model trains. Think of all the embraces, all the private jokes, customs, greetings, names, dreams, all the shared knowledge and capacity of a black family injected into that vessel of flesh and bone. And think of how that vessel was taken, shattered on the concrete, and all its holy contents, all that had gone into each of them, was sent flowing back to the earth. It is terrible to truly see our particular beauty, Samori, because then you see the scope of the loss. But you must push even further. You must see that this loss is mandated by the history of your country, by the Dream of living white.

Lucy Nicholson / Reuters

I remember that summer that you may well remember when I loaded you and your cousin Christopher into the back seat of a rented car and pushed out to see what remained of Petersburg, Shirley Plantation, and the Wilderness. I was obsessed with the Civil War because six hundred thousand people had died in it. And yet it had been glossed over in my education, and in popular culture, representations of the war and its reasons seemed obscured. And yet I knew that in 1859 we were enslaved and in 1865 we were not, and what happened to us in those years struck me as having some amount of import. But whenever I visited any of the battlefields, I felt like I was greeted as if I were a nosy accountant conducting an audit and someone was trying to hide the books.

I don't know if you remember how the film we saw at the Petersburg

Battlefield ended as though the fall of the Confederacy were the onset of a tragedy, not jubilee. I doubt you remember the man on our tour dressed in the gray wool of the Confederacy, or how every visitor seemed most interested in flanking maneuvers, hardtack, smoothbore rifles, grapeshot, and ironclads, but virtually no one was interested in what all of this engineering, invention, and design had been marshaled to achieve. You were only 10 years old. But even then I knew that I must trouble you, and this meant taking you into rooms where people would insult your intelligence, where thieves would try to enlist you in your own robbery and disguise their burning and looting as Christian charity. But robbery is what this is, what it always was.

At the onset of the Civil War, our stolen bodies were worth \$4 billion, more than all of American industry, all of American railroads, workshops, and factories combined, and the prime product rendered by our stolen bodies—cotton—was America's primary export. The richest men in America lived in the Mississippi River Valley, and they made their riches off our stolen bodies. Our bodies were held in bondage by the early presidents. Our bodies were traded from the White House by James K. Polk. Our bodies built the Capitol and the National Mall. The first shot of the Civil War was fired in South Carolina, where our bodies constituted the majority of human bodies in the state. Here is the motive for the great war. It's not a secret. But we can do better and find the bandit confessing his crime. "Our position is thoroughly identified with the institution of slavery," declared Mississippi as it left the Union, "the greatest material interest of the world."

But American reunion was built on a comfortable narrative that made enslavement into benevolence, white knights of body snatchers, and the mass slaughter of the war into a kind of sport in which one could conclude that both sides conducted their affairs with courage, honor, and élan. This lie of the Civil War is the lie of innocence, is the Dream. Historians conjured the Dream. Hollywood fortified the Dream. The Dream was gilded by novels and

adventure stories. John Carter flees the broken Confederacy for Mars. We are not supposed to ask what, precisely, he was running from. I, like every kid I knew, loved *The Dukes of Hazzard*. But I would have done well to think more about why two outlaws, driving a car named the General Lee, must necessarily be portrayed as “just some good ole boys, never meanin’ no harm”—a mantra for the Dreamers if there ever was one. But what one “means” is neither important nor relevant. It is not necessary that you believe that the officer who choked Eric Garner set out that day to destroy a body. All you need to understand is that the officer carries with him the power of the American state and the weight of an American legacy, and they necessitate that of the bodies destroyed every year, some wild and disproportionate number of them will be black.

Here is what I would like for you to know: In America, it is traditional to destroy the black body—it is heritage. Enslavement was not merely the antiseptic borrowing of labor—it is not so easy to get a human being to commit their body against its own elemental interest. And so enslavement must be casual wrath and random mangleings, the gashing of heads and brains blown out over the river as the body seeks to escape. It must be rape so regular as to be industrial. There is no uplifting way to say this. I have no praise anthems, nor old Negro spirituals. The spirit and soul are the body and brain, which are destructible—that is precisely why they are so precious. And the soul did not escape. The spirit did not steal away on gospel wings. The soul was the body that fed the tobacco, and the spirit was the blood that watered the cotton, and these created the first fruits of the American garden. And the fruits were secured through the bashing of children with stovewood, through hot iron peeling skin away like husk from corn.

It had to be blood. It had to be the thrashing of kitchen hands for the crime of churning butter at a leisurely clip. It had to be some woman “cheard ... with thirty lashes a Saturday last and as many more a Tuesday again.” It could

only be the employment of carriage whips, tongs, iron pokers, handsaws, stones, paperweights, or whatever might be handy to break the black body, the black family, the black community, the black nation. The bodies were pulverized into stock and marked with insurance. And the bodies were an aspiration, lucrative as Indian land, a veranda, a beautiful wife, or a summer home in the mountains. For the men who needed to believe themselves white, the bodies were the key to a social club, and the right to break the bodies was the mark of civilization. “The two great divisions of society are not the rich and poor, but white and black,” said the great South Carolina senator John C. Calhoun. “And all the former, the poor as well as the rich, belong to the upper class, and are respected and treated as equals.” And there it is—the right to break the black body as the meaning of their sacred equality. And that right has always given them meaning, has always meant that there was someone down in the valley because a mountain is not a mountain if there is nothing below.

The terrible truth is that we cannot will ourselves to an escape on our own.

You and I, my son, are that “below.” That was true in 1776. It is true today. There is no them without you, and without the right to break you they must necessarily fall from the mountain, lose their divinity, and tumble out of the Dream. And then they would have to determine how to build their suburbs on something other than human bones, how to angle their jails toward something other than a human stockyard, how to erect a democracy independent of cannibalism. I would like to tell you that such a day approaches when the people who believe themselves to be white renounce this

demon religion and begin to think of themselves as human. But I can see no real promise of such a day. We are captured, brother, surrounded by the majoritarian bandits of America. And this has happened here, in our only home, and the terrible truth is that we cannot will ourselves to an escape on our own.

Lucy Nicholson / Reuters

But still you must struggle. The Struggle is in your name, Samori—you were named for Samori Touré, who struggled against French colonizers for the right to his own black body. He died in captivity, but the profits of that struggle and others like it are ours, even when the object of our struggle, as is so often true, escapes our grasp.

I think now of the old rule that held that should a boy be set upon in someone else's chancy hood, his friends must stand with him, and they must

all take their beating together. I now know that within this edict lay the key to all living. None of us were promised to end the fight on our feet, fists raised to the sky. We could not control our enemies' number, strength, or weaponry. Sometimes you just caught a bad one. But whether you fought or ran, you did it together, because that is the part that was in our control. What we must never do is willingly hand over our own bodies or the bodies of our friends. That was the wisdom: We knew we did not lay down the direction of the street, but despite that, we could—and must—fashion the way of our walk. And that is the deeper meaning of your name—that the struggle, in and of itself, has meaning.

*Our triumphs can never redeem this.
Perhaps our triumphs are not even the
point. Perhaps struggle is all we have.*

That wisdom is not unique to our people, but I think it has special meaning to those of us born out of mass rape, whose ancestors were carried off and divided up into policies and stocks. I have raised you to respect every human being as singular, and you must extend that same respect into the past. Slavery is not an indefinable mass of flesh. It is a particular, specific enslaved woman, whose mind is as active as your own, whose range of feeling is as vast as your own; who prefers the way the light falls in one particular spot in the woods, who enjoys fishing where the water eddies in a nearby stream, who loves her mother in her own complicated way, thinks her sister talks too loud, has a favorite cousin, a favorite season, who excels at dressmaking and knows, inside herself, that she is as intelligent and capable as anyone. “Slavery” is this

same woman born in a world that loudly proclaims its love of freedom and inscribes this love in its essential texts, a world in which these same professors hold this woman a slave, hold her mother a slave, her father a slave, her daughter a slave, and when this woman peers back into the generations all she sees is the enslaved. She can hope for more. She can imagine some future for her grandchildren. But when she dies, the world—which is really the only world she can ever know—ends. For this woman, enslavement is not a parable. It is damnation. It is the never-ending night. And the length of that night is most of our history. Never forget that we were enslaved in this country longer than we have been free. Never forget that for 250 years black people were born into chains—whole generations followed by more generations who knew nothing but chains.

You must struggle to truly remember this past. You must resist the common urge toward the comforting narrative of divine law, toward fairy tales that imply some irrepressible justice. The enslaved were not bricks in your road, and their lives were not chapters in your redemptive history. They were people turned to fuel for the American machine. Enslavement was not destined to end, and it is wrong to claim our present circumstance—no matter how improved—as the redemption for the lives of people who never asked for the posthumous, untouchable glory of dying for their children. Our triumphs can never redeem this. Perhaps our triumphs are not even the point. Perhaps struggle is all we have. So you must wake up every morning knowing that no natural promise is unbreakable, least of all the promise of waking up at all. This is not despair. These are the preferences of the universe itself: verbs over nouns, actions over states, struggle over hope.

The birth of a better world is not ultimately up to you, though I know, each day, there are grown men and women who tell you otherwise. I am not a cynic. I love you, and I love the world, and I love it more with every new inch I discover. But you are a black boy, and you must be responsible for your

body in a way that other boys cannot know. Indeed, you must be responsible for the worst actions of other black bodies, which, somehow, will always be assigned to you. And you must be responsible for the bodies of the powerful—the policeman who cracks you with a nightstick will quickly find his excuse in your furtive movements. You have to make your peace with the chaos, but you cannot lie. You cannot forget how much they took from us and how they transfigured our very bodies into sugar, tobacco, cotton, and gold.

Perhaps you remember that time we went to see *Howl's Moving Castle* on the Upper West Side. You were almost 5 years old. The theater was crowded, and when we came out we rode a set of escalators down to the ground floor. As we came off, you were moving at the dawdling speed of a small child. A white woman pushed you and said, "Come on!" Many things now happened at once. There was the reaction of any parent when a stranger puts a hand on the body of their child. And there was my own insecurity in my ability to protect your black body. And more: There was my sense that this woman was pulling rank. I knew, for instance, that she would not have pushed a black child out on my part of Flatbush, because she would be afraid there and would sense, if not know, that there would be a penalty for such an action. But I was not out on my part of Flatbush. And I was not in West Baltimore. I forgot all of that. I was only aware that someone had invoked their right over the body of my son. I turned and spoke to this woman, and my words were hot with all of the moment and all of my history. She shrank back, shocked. A white man standing nearby spoke up in her defense. I experienced this as his attempt to rescue the damsel from the beast. He had made no such attempt on behalf of my son. And he was now supported by other white people in the assembling crowd. The man came closer. He grew louder. I pushed him away. He said, "I could have you arrested!" I did not care. I told him this, and the desire to do much more was hot in my throat. This desire was only controllable because I remembered someone standing off to the side there, bearing witness to more fury than he had ever seen from me—you.

I came home shook. It was a mix of shame for having gone back to the law of the streets, and rage—"I could have you arrested!" Which is to say: "I could take your body."

Sait Serkan / Reuters

I have told this story many times, not out of bravado, but out of a need for absolution. But more than any shame I felt, my greatest regret was that in seeking to defend you I was, in fact, endangering you.

"I could have you arrested," he said. Which is to say: "One of your son's earliest memories will be watching the men who sodomized Abner Louima and choked Anthony Baez cuff, club, tase, and break you." I had forgotten the rules, an error as dangerous on the Upper West Side of Manhattan as on the West Side of Baltimore. One must be without error out here. Walk in single

file. Work quietly. Pack an extra No. 2 pencil. Make no mistakes.

But you are human and you will make mistakes. You will misjudge. You will yell. You will drink too much. You will hang out with people whom you shouldn't. Not all of us can always be Jackie Robinson—not even Jackie Robinson was always Jackie Robinson. But the price of error is higher for you than it is for your countrymen, and so that America might justify itself, the story of a black body's destruction must always begin with his or her error, real or imagined—with Eric Garner's anger, with Trayvon Martin's mythical words ("You are gonna die tonight"), with Sean Bell's mistake of running with the wrong crowd, with me standing too close to the small-eyed boy pulling out.

You are called to struggle, not because it assures you victory but because it assures you an honorable and sane life. I am ashamed of how I acted that day, ashamed of endangering your body. I am ashamed that I made an error, knowing that our errors always cost us more.

I never wanted you to be twice as good as them, so much as I have always wanted you to attack every day of your brief bright life determined to struggle.

I am sorry that I cannot make it okay. I am sorry that I cannot save you—but not that sorry. Part of me thinks that your very vulnerability brings you closer to the meaning of life, just as for others, the quest to believe oneself white

divides them from it. The fact is that despite their dreams, their lives are also not inviolable. When their own vulnerability becomes real—when the police decide that tactics intended for the ghetto should enjoy wider usage, when their armed society shoots down their children, when nature sends hurricanes against their cities—they are shocked by the rages of logic and the natural world in a way that those of us who were born and bred to understand cause and effect can never be. And I would not have you live like them. You have been cast into a race in which the wind is always at your face and the hounds are always at your heels. And to varying degrees this is true of all life. The difference is that you do not have the privilege of living in ignorance of this essential fact.

I am speaking to you as I always have—treating you as the sober and serious man I have always wanted you to be, who does not apologize for his human feelings, who does not make excuses for his height, his long arms, his beautiful smile. You are growing into consciousness, and my wish for you is that you feel no need to constrict yourself to make other people comfortable. None of that can change the math anyway. I never wanted you to be twice as good as them, so much as I have always wanted you to attack every day of your brief bright life determined to struggle. The people who must believe they are white can never be your measuring stick. I would not have you descend into your own dream. I would have you be a conscious citizen of this terrible and beautiful world.

This article is adapted from Coates's forthcoming book, [Between the World and Me](#).

Related Video

A new book from father to son on race in America

AN OPEN LETTER TO THE DIVERSE MOVEMENTS

DEAR COMRADES, ALLIES, FRIENDS, AND ALL OTHER JUSTICE & FREEDOM-LOVING PEOPLES OF THE UNITED STATES AND THE WORLD,

In the true spirit of human solidarity and internationalism against oppression, injustice and exploitation, I send all of you a warm embrace and greetings, with a clenched fist in the air, in this "Open Letter," from within the belly of a Supermax control unit prison, and under the bootheel of gestapo fascism behind razor wire and enemy lines, from this concrete tomb of one of Amerika's notorious gulag concentration camps for the poor, cages occupied by the poor, mainly by people of color who are disproportionately represented in the U.S. Prison Industrial Complex of Mass Incarceration for private, corporate profit, as sanctioned by the 13th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution that allows the immoral, criminal system of prison slavery that is destroying human lives, human dignity, by the same capitalist barbarians who rule the world and who are destroying the environment, ecological systems, and the wildlife of Planet Earth, for corporate, militarist profiteering.

The rise of fascism across U.S. cities, society and inside Amerika's prison houses has moved me to intensify my revolutionary advocacy work and reach outside these prison walls to persons and organizations like you, to stir the senses, to encourage those of you seriously concerned with our social and human condition as an oppressed class, and to step up and organize ourselves into the united, dynamic, creative social forces of resistance that we can, and must, build, in order to take control of our lives, our communities, and our destiny as Justice & Freedom-Loving^و must work conscientiously to organize ourselves and fight back and replace this racist, rotten, immoral, repressive and imperialist political socioeconomic system of wage-theft capitalism and imperialism that is destroying human lives, human dignity and innocent civilians, and other abuses by authorities, by armed thugs of the state calling themselves "police," is widespread in all U.S. communities of color, from New York to California and in between. The police murders of Michael Brown, 12-year old Tamir Rice, Eric Garner, Walter Scott, Freddie Gray, Larry Jackson, and many other state-sponsored terrorist crimes against the innocent by armed thugs wearing badges, protected by racist courts, are not isolated incidents. It is a systemic pattern and culture of the core evils of this capitalist class socioeconomic system that is inherently racist to the core that must brutalize, coerce, control and exploit the working class in order to survive. This "Monster of Frankenstein" of this "free enterprise capitalist system" has entered its advanced form of repression called "fascism." Fascism is a system of government marked by a centralized oligarchy, stringent socioeconomic controls, nationalist patriotic frenzy, and the use of flagrant state violence against the poor and other segments of society it must scapegoat and to blame for the ills of the economic glut between capital and labor. All (14) characteristics of fascism are beginning to re-appear under the current capitalism that is inevitable under wage-theft slavery and the current "glut between capital and labor," that even the newspapers of U.S. corporations have recognized in an article

entitled, "Glut of Capital and Labor Challenges Policy Makers" The Wall Street Journal, 24 April, 2015, by Josh Zumbrun, and Carolyn Cut. Those characteristics are: (1) Powerful continuing nationalism, patriotic frenzy of the ultra-conservative extremism of the right-wing; (2) Disdain for human rights; (3) Identification of enemies, scapegoats as a unifying cause; (4) Supremacy of the U.S. military; (5) Rampant sexism; (6) Controlled mass media; (7) Obsession with national security; (8) Religion and government are intertwined; (9) Corporate power is protected; (10) Labor power is suppressed; (11) Disdain for intellectuals and the arts; (12) Obsession with crime and punishment; (13) Rampant cronyism and corruption, and (14) Fraudulent elections. See, "The Study of Fascist Regimes," By Dr. Lawrence Britt; further, the racist-hate murders of the [9] innocent black people during a "bible study" at the historic black church in Charleston, South Carolina by the racist extremist inspired by white supremacy and confederate slavery's history of the south; the "rally" by flag-waving confederate white supremacists through a black neighborhood in Houston, are just the "tip of the iceberg" of what is to come.

The political system, such as the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, the National Security Agency, the FBI, ICE, DEA, have long been operating "secret intelligence programs" and have "secret black hole prisons" around the world, as part of this fascist strategy. These agencies are sowing seeds of distrust, misinformation, and to divide and conquer communities of color, turning neighbors against each other, and creating "suspicions" amongst citizens and nurturing a culture of "snitches" of civilians spying on each other and reporting to government. These "intelligence agencies" are illegally wire-tapping private telephone lines, and spying on cyberspace communications and collecting other private and personal data and records from citizens by government randomly, especially those "suspected" of terrorism or terrorist-related activities, all in the name of "national security" and their "war on terrorism," which in all reality is "war on the poor," their "war on ethnicity and social dissent and protest." Under Obama's 2012 National Defense Authorization Act, the government can now arrest and detain citizens, indefinitely, without any charges or trial. Government is using this law to "criminalize" political free speech, and any legitimate act of opposition or "disloyalty" to government policies, and spy on citizens and groups the government dislikes, under false pretexts and in the name of "national security" as done against New York Criminal Defense Attorney Lynne Stewart for her legitimate "legal defense" of the blind Muslim Cleric convicted in the first World Trade Center bombings in New York City, now imprisoned in the Supermax Control Unit Federal Prison at (ADX)-Florence, Colorado, a prison the subject of many denunciations by renowned international human rights tribunals and world human rights groups. For example, U.S. federal and state prisons have also become "militarized." The majority of "prison guards" of the James V. Allred Prison Unit located near Sheppard Air Force Base in Wichita Falls, Texas, are either "retired military" or on "leave" to be redeployed to war zones around the world. Their arrogant "patriotism" shows in their sheer racist brutalities and inhumanities they commit against the captive population, especially against prisoners of the Islamic Faith who possess a "prayer rug" or a Holy Koran, or are labelled

"security threat group" prisoners due to their militant political ideas and are involved in protesting human rights violations in Texas prisons, much like this writer who has been in solitary confinement going on [13] years in August of this year, and is an internationally recognized political prisoner. See: www.thejerichomovement.com (List of Political Prisoners). The conditions here are not only inhumane, cruel and unusual punishment, but also constitute "torture" as condemned by the same federal judge that held them unconstitutional years ago in Ruiz v. Johnson, 37 F. Supp. 2d 855, at 940 (1999), original case at Ruiz v. Estelle, 503 F. Supp. 1265 (1980), in violation of international human rights laws and standards. The same "military police" responsible for torture, and other war crimes against detainees in military prisons in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, in Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq, all learned their evil skills at "interrogation and torture" as "rookies" in state prisons. The hiring of former Texas prison director Lane McCotter, who ruled Texas prisons with an iron fist, by former U.S. Attorney General John Ashcroft, as "prisons director" at Abu Ghraib is a classic example. The world was exposed to the atrocities committed by military police at Abu Ghraib in photos and videos released recording these inhumanities and degrading treatment. See: "Mistreatment of Prisoners Called Routine in U.S.", "New York Times, May 8, 2004, (noting the hiring of McCotter by Ashcroft); See also, "Bush at War," Bob Woodward, (2002).

Furthermore, the inter-connection between the government's intelligence programs and "Prisons and Prisoners" is clearly shown in the history of the government's "Red Squads" to spy on, monitor, infiltrate and destroy inside "prison movements" and assassinate prisoner-leadership militants who speak out against these inhumanities, who understand the true nature of prisons under capitalism, and link inside and outside struggles, as one. The recent 800 million dollars of taxpayer's monies earmarked for the militarization of the borderlands signed by Texas Governor Greg Abbott as the Republican's "Border Security Bill" are the realities we face. Under the guise of "National Security" fueled by racist right wing political propaganda targeting Mexicans and the undocumented, it is not about immigration and all about corporate profiteering. Such monies will be used to saturate the borderlands with more iron fences, walls, surveillance cameras, high-tech drone aircraft, motion-sensors installed underground, militarized weaponry and patrol boats, hundreds of Rambo-like, trigger-happy cops, and another secret "gang intelligence" program headed by the Texas "DPS" to spy on Texas prisoners, activist groups and citizens, including environmental groups, under pretexts. U.S. imperialism has a known history of manufacturing "reasons" for invading other countries, and declaring war against them. In Texas, these militarist moves are coming on the heels of allegations of political corruption and criminal securities fraud charges to be presented to a Texas Grand Jury by Special Prosecutors against Texas' "Chief Law Enforcement Officer" Texas Attorney General Ken Paxton, Republican, and his questionable cronyism hirings; and the separate allegations of "No-Bid Contracts" awarded to insurance and other companies as political cronyism favors to political donors from Texas Governor Greg Abbott, in his former position as Texas Attorney General, and the list goes on and on. The "arming" of alleged "Mexican Drug Cartels" under the federal government's "Fast and Furious" clandestine pro-

gram exposed by watch groups, was part and parcel of this overall fascist strategy to justify further social control, repression, militarization, and corporate profiteering by the U.S. Oligarchy. Earth First! The Journal of Ecological Resistance, Jun/July 2015, page 25, "Lawless Borderlands; Extensive Loss of Border Wild Lands to Immigration Madness," by Karen Coulter, put it eloquently: "...[T]he militarization of the border isn't so much about immigration as it is about social control, depressing of wages, and testing public tolerance for a police state as a pilot project in the south to be expanded to the north." See also, The Mass Psychology of Fascism, by W. Reich.

The same capitalist corporate profiteers who have enriched themselves with building prison empires and the proliferation of "Supermax Control Unit Prisons" state and federal for our mass incarceration, are the same psychotic barbarians who are destroying the environment, ecological systems, wildlife and planet earth. We must stop this madness and wrestle political power and control away from them before it is too late. We must link our struggles against global capitalism, imperialist militarization, with our struggles to save the earth and all wildlife, its environment and ecological systems before the "world military super powers" initiate an apocalyptic nuclear war as a consequence of reviving global capitalist economies, and the re-division of world markets. We must not allow the establishment media to super-impose typical reformist "leaders" on our communities, for they are merely apologists of the capitalist system dispatched to mislead and to put out the "prairie fires" ignited across the nation, by oppressed people expressing their outrage and indignations against the brutalities, injustices, repression, and crimes against humanity of the capitalist police state against the poor. We must ^{not} do like the Ostrich and bury our heads in the sand, pretending these is not happening, nor seek other escapism from these realities that face us, and humanity. There is no way out of these nightmarish conditions but through revolutionary class struggle and resistance and to replace this illegitimate political system. History must be our teacher, our leader. Future generations will disown and condemn our generation if we fail to act now! Love, respect and give mutual aid support and solidarity to each other. Settle your quarrels and build a new and vibrant united front against fascism guided by, revolutionary theory, principles and practice, our social movements across the political, social spectrum must unite and take a leading, vanguard role in these inter-communal struggles, for building mass consciousness and mass mobilization of poor and oppressed communities, nationally and internationally. Seize the time! Build a united revolutionary front against fascism! Save the Earth! All power to the people! All power to the oppressed!

You are at liberty to share the contents of this communique with other persons and organizations in the United States and the world, in linking our community, worldwide and prison struggles against the same common enemy of the human species – global capitalism and imperialism!

ALVARO LUNA HERNANDEZ

Chicano/Mexicano Political Prisoner
Xinachtli,
Supermax High Security Control
Unit Prison, IOWA PARK, TEXAS

Page 4

Open Letter to the Media, If/When I am Gunned Down by the Police or a Random White Person.

August 28, 2014 | Marlon Peterson

Dear Media,

If you are receiving this letter, it is because I was gunned down or otherwise brutally killed by the hands of a police officer or a random white person by mistake; or in self-defense; or because they somehow knew I had a violent felony on my record by just looking at me; or because I looked aggressive; or because I looked suspicious; or because I refused to capitulate; or because I had shiny object in hand; or because my hand came out of my pocket too fast... or too slow; or because I once posted something inappropriate on Facebook or twitter; or because I resisted.

Though I wear suits and ties in the day and meet with elected and other suit wearing people, I know that my wearing hoodies and sweatpants when I walk to the gym in Bed-Stuy at night makes it my fault for my death. I should've policed myself better. I should've been less threatening. I should've understood that my life during the day mattered little in the night.

My darker hue, six-foot frame, and 195lb weight makes me a threat in my own neighborhood. I should have recognized that my presence in this world is transient and judged through a lens unlike my own... a whiter one.

I eulogize myself now because I need the world to know that I was scared when you stopped me; or that I was plain fed up of negotiating my presence just to make some white person feel secure or to fit in to a system that rations out air for me to breathe. I did not feel like I had to tell you where I lived. I am a grown-ass man that was exhausted with proving my legitimacy in the place of my birth.

I had to tell you this when I was 15 when I was standing in front of my building and made up my mind that I was not going to bend to your questioning 20 years later. So, I resisted. It is in that spirit of resistance that I write this letter.

I am writing to live beyond the castration of my character that you will vigorously pursue. To that end I write now because I believe that I have to tell this story now before your power tells my story- a story that will raise just enough doubt in the eyes of a jury—white or black. I write now because I am scared and my father is scared for me.

I write now because as much as I hate to admit it, I know that in this system of things, black life matters little to it, and if I do not tell my story, the right story, your story will win.

So, yes, even in death I resist your arrest (of my character). #yesIRESISTED #iflamgunneddown



0 Comments

Sort by Oldest



Add a comment...

Facebook Comments Plugin

Recent Posts



Ava Duvernay's "When They See Us" is one of the most accurate portrayals of incarceration
June 5, 2019



For formerly incarcerated, little room in Airbnb's sharing economy
August 24, 2018



Dear 02A3172: Letters To and From a Caged Bird
July 26, 2017



The Uber Soca Cruise: Magical Freedom at the Dawn of the Trump Era
November 27, 2016



I Think About My Funeral When Police Stop Me
September 29, 2016



Police & Policymakers Need to Stop (Mal)Practicing on Black Bodies
August 12, 2016

Opinion: Our Coping is a Farce
July 7, 2016

Addressing gun violence in Trinidad and Tobago
May 10, 2016



From Prisoners to the President
April 8, 2016

From Prisoners to the President: A collection of 2008 letters to President-elect Obama shows that even though many incarcerated and formerly incarce...
April 8, 2016

Archive

June 2019 (1)

August 2018 (1)

An Open Letter to Barack Obama



Alice Walker

11/05/08 12:00AM • Filed to: POLITICS

Save



AFP/Getty Images

Dear Brother Obama,

You have no idea, really, of how profound this moment is for us. Us being the black people of the Southern United States. You think you know, because you are thoughtful, and you have studied our history. But seeing you deliver the torch so many others before you carried, year after year, decade after decade, century after century, only to be struck down before igniting the flame of justice and of law, is almost more than the heart can bear. And yet, this observation is not intended to burden you, for you are of a different time, and, indeed, because of all the relay runners before you, North America is a different place. It is really only to say: Well done. We knew, through all the generations, that you were with us, in us, the best of the spirit of Africa and of the Americas. Knowing this, that you would actually

appear, someday, was part of our strength. Seeing you take your rightful place, based solely on your wisdom, stamina and character, is a balm for the weary warriors of hope, previously only sung about.

I would advise you to remember that you did not create the disaster that the world is experiencing, and you alone are not responsible for bringing the world back to balance. A primary responsibility that you do have, however, is to cultivate happiness in your own life. To make a schedule that permits sufficient time of rest and play with your gorgeous wife and lovely daughters. And so on. One gathers that your family is large. We are used to seeing men in the White House soon become juiceless and as white-haired as the building; we notice their wives and children looking strained and stressed. They soon have smiles so lacking in joy that they remind us of scissors. This is no way to lead. Nor does your family deserve this fate. One way of thinking about all this is: It is so bad now that there is no excuse not to relax. From your happy, relaxed state, you can model real success, which is all that so many people in the world really want. They may buy endless cars and houses and furs and gobble up all the attention and space they can manage, or barely manage, but this is because it is not yet clear to them that success is truly an inside job. That it is within the reach of almost everyone.

I would further advise you not to take on other people's enemies. Most damage that others do to us is out of fear, humiliation and pain. Those feelings occur in all of us, not just in those of us who profess a certain religious or racial devotion. We must learn actually not to have enemies, but only confused adversaries who are ourselves in disguise. It is understood by all that you are commander in chief of the United States and are sworn to protect our beloved country; this we understand, completely. However, as my mother used to say, quoting a Bible with which I often fought, "hate the sin, but love the sinner." There must be no more crushing of whole communities, no more torture, no more dehumanizing as a means of ruling a people's spirit. This has already happened to people of color, poor people, women, children. We see where this leads, where it has led.

A good model of how to "work with the enemy" internally is presented by the Dalai Lama, in his endless caretaking of his soul as he confronts the Chinese government that invaded Tibet. Because, finally, it is the soul that must be preserved, if one is to remain a credible leader. All else might be lost; but when the soul dies, the connection to earth, to peoples, to animals, to rivers, to mountain ranges, purple and majestic, also dies. And your smile, with which we watch you do gracious battle with unjust characterizations, distortions and lies, is that expression of healthy self-worth, spirit and soul, that, kept happy and free and relaxed, can find an answering smile in all of us, lighting our way, and brightening the world.

We are the ones we have been waiting for.

In Peace and Joy,
Alice Walker

© 2008, Alice Walker

SHARE THIS STORY



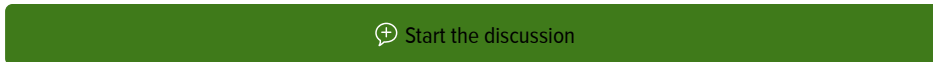
GET OUR NEWSLETTER



MORE FROM THE ROOT

- Congress Doesn't Give AF About America
- Either Rudy Giuliani Uses Bigen, or His Human Skin Glue Is Melting. Either Way, I've Got Questions
- 'They Stop Yelling At You When They Get Intubated': South Dakota Nurse Says Patients Are Denying COVID-19 to Their Dying Breath
- *The Root's* One-on-One With Barack Obama

DISCUSSION



You May Like

Sponsored Links by Taboola

She Turned Heads At The American Country Music Awards
Livingly

Teenagers Notice Girl With 'Dad' Acting Strange, They Follow Her Because They Knew Something Is Wrong
Horizontimes

Surgeon Reveals How To Fill In Balding Eyebrows This Winter
Beverly Hills MD



California Launches New Guidelines For Cars Used Less Than 50 Miles/Day
Smart Lifestyle Trends

One Star Had a Rather Tense Relationship with Andy Griffith
Lux & Lush

NFL Star Rob Gronkowski's Go To Shoes Off The Field
Wolf & Shepherd

Toni Morrison's Letter to Barack Obama

BY **TOM MCGEVERAN** | 10:36 AM JANUARY 28, 2008 | TAGS: POLITICS 2008 DEMOCRATS BARACK OBAMA HILLARY CLINTON



Legendary novelist and editor Toni Morrison's endorsement of Barack Obama is obviously not significant for her ability to move voters at the polls, which is not proven and probably not likely to be proven. But given her perceived attachment to the Clintons—Bill, she famously once called America's first black president; and Hillary she has been close to in the past—we thought it worth printing in full the letter of endorsement she sent to the Illinois senator, as released by the Obama campaign:

Dear Senator Obama,

This letter represents a first for me--a public endorsement of a Presidential candidate. I feel driven to let you know why I am writing it. One reason is it may help gather other supporters; another is that this is one of those singular moments that nations ignore at their peril. I will not rehearse the multiple crises facing us, but of one thing I am certain: this opportunity for a national evolution (even revolution) will not come again soon, and I am convinced you are the person to capture it.

May I describe to you my thoughts?

I have admired Senator Clinton for years. Her knowledge always seemed to me exhaustive; her negotiation of politics expert. However I am more compelled by the quality of mind (as far as I can measure it) of a candidate. I cared little for her gender as a source of my admiration, and the little I did care was based on the fact that no liberal woman has ever ruled in America. Only conservative or "new-centrist" ones

are allowed into that realm. Nor do I care very much for your race[s]. I would not support you if that was all you had to offer or because it might make me "proud."

In thinking carefully about the strengths of the candidates, I stunned myself when I came to the following conclusion: that in addition to keen intelligence, integrity and a rare authenticity, you exhibit something that has nothing to do with age, experience, race or gender and something I don't see in other candidates. That something is a creative imagination which coupled with brilliance equals wisdom. It is too bad if we associate it only with gray hair and old age. Or if we call searing vision naivete. Or if we believe cunning is insight. Or if we settle for finessing cures tailored for each ravaged tree in the forest while ignoring the poisonous landscape that feeds and surrounds it. Wisdom is a gift; you can't train for it, inherit it, learn it in a class, or earn it in the workplace--that access can foster the acquisition of knowledge, but not wisdom.

When, I wondered, was the last time this country was guided by such a leader? Someone whose moral center was un-embargoed? Someone with courage instead of mere ambition? Someone who truly thinks of his country's citizens as "we," not "they"? Someone who understands what it will take to help America realize the virtues it fancies about itself, what it desperately needs to become in the world?

Our future is ripe, outrageously rich in its possibilities. Yet unleashing the glory of that future will require a difficult labor, and some may be so frightened of its birth they will refuse to abandon their nostalgia for the womb.

There have been a few prescient leaders in our past, but you are the man for this time.

Good luck to you and to us.

Toni Morrison

CCWP

MENU



ISSUE 26 - WINTER 2003-04

To My Sister

by Anna Bell Chapa, CCWF

If I could give you
half of my health, I would.
If I could get you home
and do your time, I would.
If I could give you
the love only a mother could, I would.
Really would...
If I had two wishes
One would be for you and my mom
To regain your health.
The second would be for me to be
 A better person
 A better friend
 A better sister, with better feelings
And a lot more patience.

January 5, 2004

PUBLISHED BY

CCWP



[View all posts by CCWP](#)

PREVIOUS

CCWP

MENU



ISSUE 14 - MAY 2000

For My Children

by Paula Foster Stallworth, Florida State Prison

I've picked you up when you've fallen,
brushed off your skinned knees
and kissed your owies.
I've held you after your nightmares,
checked under your bed,
in your closets for the boogie man.
I've watched you grow, seen you stumble
Only to catch yourself time and time again.
I've watched you sit on the sidelines,
when you've really wanted to play.
I've watched you fight back tears
when some idiot told you, "big boys don't cry!"
during all these times I've had to stand by, helpless
to change the reality of your life.
"Why?" you ask ...
because it's all a Bittersweet Dream!
Always have loved you and
Always will –
Your birth mother

January 5, 2004

PUBLISHED BY

CCWP



[View all posts by CCWP](#)

OPEN LETTER FROM ASSATA SHAKUR

My name is Assata Shakur, and I am a 20th century escaped slave. Because of government persecution, I was left with no other choice than to flee from the political repression, racism and violence that dominate the US government's policy towards people of color. I am an ex-political prisoner, and I have been living in exile in Cuba since 1984.

I have been a political activist most of my life, and although the U.S. government has done everything in its power to criminalize me, I am not a criminal, nor have I ever been one. In the 1960s, I participated in various struggles: the black liberation movement, the student rights movement, and the movement to end the war in Vietnam. I joined the Black Panther Party. By 1969 the Black Panther Party had become the number one organization targeted by the FBI's COINTELPRO program. Because the Black Panther Party demanded the total liberation of black people, J. Edgar Hoover called it "greatest threat to the internal security of the country" and vowed to destroy it and its leaders and activists.

In 1978, my case was one of many cases brought before the United Nations Organization in a petition filed by the National Conference of Black Lawyers, the National Alliance Against Racist and Political Repression, and the United Church of Christ Commission for Racial Justice, exposing the existence of political prisoners in the United States, their political persecution, and the cruel and inhuman treatment they receive in US prisons. According to the report:

The FBI and the New York Police Department in particular, charged and accused Assata Shakur of participating in attacks on law enforcement personnel and widely circulated such charges and accusations among police agencies and units. The FBI and the NYPD further charged her as being a leader of the Black Liberation Army which the government and its respective agencies described as an organization engaged in the shooting of police officers. This description of the Black Liberation Army and the accusation of Assata Shakur's relationship to it was widely circulated by government agents among police agencies and units. As a result of these activities by the government, Ms. Shakur became a hunted person; posters in police precincts and banks described her as being involved in serious criminal activities; she was highlighted on the FBI's most wanted list; and to police at all levels she became a 'shoot-to-kill' target."

I was falsely accused in six different "criminal cases" and in all six of these cases I was eventually acquitted or the charges were dismissed. The fact that I was acquitted or that the charges were dismissed, did not

mean that I received justice in the courts, that was certainly not the case. It only meant that the "evidence" presented against me was so flimsy and false that my innocence became evident. This political persecution was part and parcel of the government's policy of eliminating political opponents by charging them with crimes and arresting them with no regard to the factual basis of such charges.

On May 2, 1973 I, along with Zayd Malik Shakur and Sundiata Acoli were stopped on the New Jersey Turnpike, supposedly for a "faulty tail light." Sundiata Acoli got out of the car to determine why we were stopped. Zayd and I remained in the car. State trooper Harper then came to the car, opened the door and began to question us. Because we were black, and riding in a car with Vermont license plates, he claimed he became "suspicious." He then drew his gun, pointed it at us, and told us to put our hands up in the air, in front of us, where he could see them. I complied and in a split second, there was a sound that came from outside the car, there was a sudden movement, and I was shot once with my arms held up in the air, and then once again from the back. Zayd Malik Shakur was later killed, trooper Werner Foerster was killed, and even though trooper Harper admitted that he shot and killed Zayd Malik Shakur, under the New Jersey felony murder law, I was charged with killing both Zayd Malik Shakur, who was my closest friend and comrade, and charged in the death of trooper Foerster. Never in my life have I felt such grief. Zayd had vowed to protect me, and to help me to get to a safe place, and it was clear that he had lost his life, trying to protect both me and Sundiata. Although he was also unarmed, and the gun that killed trooper Foerster was found under Zayd's leg, Sundiata Acoli, who was captured later, was also charged with both deaths. Neither Sundiata Acoli nor I ever received a fair trial. We were both convicted in the news media way before our trials. No news media was ever permitted to interview us, although the New Jersey police and the FBI fed stories to the press on a daily basis. In 1977, I was convicted by an all-white jury and sentenced to life plus 33 years in prison. In 1979, fearing that I would be murdered in prison, and knowing that I would never receive any justice, I was liberated from prison, aided by committed comrades who understood the depths of the injustices in my case, and who were also extremely fearful for my life.

The U.S. Senate's 1976 Church Commission report on intelligence operations inside the USA, revealed that "The FBI has attempted covertly to influence the public's perception of persons and organizations by disseminating derogatory information to the press, either anonymously or through "friendly" news contacts." This same policy is evidently still very much in effect today.

On December 24, 1997, The New Jersey State called a press conference to announce that New Jersey State Police had written a letter to Pope John Paul II asking him to intervene on their behalf and to aid in having me extradited back to New Jersey prisons. The New Jersey State Police refused to make their letter public. Knowing that they had probably totally distort the facts, and attempted to get the Pope to do the devils work in the name of religion, I decided to write the Pope to inform him about the reality of "justice" for black people in the State of New Jersey and in the United States. (See attached Letter to the Pope).

In January of 1998, during the pope's visit to Cuba, I agreed to do an interview with NBC journalist Ralph Penza around my letter to the Pope, about my experiences in New Jersey court system, and about the changes I saw in the United States and it's treatment of Black people in the last 25 years. I agreed to do this interview because I saw this secret letter to the Pope as a vicious, vulgar, publicity maneuver on the part of the New Jersey State Police, and as a cynical attempt to manipulate Pope John Paul II. I have lived in Cuba for many years, and was completely out of touch with the sensationalist, dishonest, nature of the establishment media today. It is worse today than it was 30 years ago. After years of being victimized by the "establishment" media it was naive of me to hope that I might finally get the opportunity to tell "my side of the story." Instead of an interview with me, what took place was a "staged media event" in three parts, full of distortions, inaccuracies and outright lies. NBC purposely misrepresented the facts. Not only did NBC spend thousands of dollars promoting this "exclusive interview series" on NBC, they also spent a great deal of money advertising this "exclusive interview" on black radio stations and also placed notices in local newspapers.

DISTORTIONS AND LIES IN THE NBC SERIES

In an NBC interview Gov. Whitman was quoted as saying that "this has nothing to do with race, this had everything to do with crime." Either Gov. Whitman is completely unfamiliar with the facts in my case, or her sensitivity to racism and to the plight of black people and other people of color in the United States is at a sub-zero level. In 1973 the trial in Middlesex County had to be stopped because of the overwhelming racism expressed in the jury room. The court was finally forced to rule that the entire jury panel had been contaminated by racist comments like "If she's black, she's guilty." In an obvious effort to prevent us from being tried by "a jury of our peers the New Jersey courts ordered that a jury be selected from Morris County, New Jersey where only 2.2 percent of the population was black and 97.5 percent of potential jurors were white.

In a study done in Morris County, one of the wealthiest counties in the country, 92 percent of the registered voters said that they were familiar with the case through the news media, and 72 percent believed we were guilty based on pretrial publicity. During the jury selection process in Morris County, white supremacists from the National Social White People's Party, wearing Swastikas, demonstrated carrying signs reading "SUPPORT WHITE POLICE." The trial was later moved back to Middlesex County where 70 percent thought I was guilty based on pretrial publicity I was tried by an all-white jury, where the presumption of innocence was not the criteria for jury selection. Potential jurors were merely asked if they could "put their prejudices aside, and "render a fair verdict." The basic reality in the United States is that being black is a crime and black people are always "suspects" and an accusation is usually a conviction. Most white people still think that being a "black militant" or a "black revolutionary" is tantamount to being guilty of some kind of crime. The current situation in New Jersey's prisons, underlines the racism that dominates the politics of the state of New Jersey, in particular and in the U.S. as a whole. Although the population of New Jersey is approximately 78 percent white, more than 75 percent of New Jersey's prison population is made up of blacks and Latinos. 80 percent of the women in Jersey prisons are people of color. That may not seem like racism to Gov. Whitman, but it reeks of of racism to us.

The NBC story implied that Governor Christie Whitman raised the reward for my capture based on my interview with NBC. The fact of the matter is that she has been campaigning since she was elected into office to double the reward for my capture. In 1994, she appointed Col. Carl Williams who immediately vowed to make my capture a priority. In 1995, Gov. Whitman sought to "match a \$25,000 departmental appropriation sponsored by an "unidentified legislator." I watched a tape of Gov. Whitman's "testimony" in her interview with NBC. She gave a very dramatic, exaggerated version of what happened, but there is no evidence whatsoever to support her claim that Trooper Foerster had "four bullets in him at least, and then they got up and with his own gun, fired two bullets into his head." She claimed that she was writing Janet Reno for federal assistance in my capture, based on what she saw in the NBC interview. If this is the kind of "information" that is being passed on to Janet Reno and the Pope, it is clear that the facts have been totally distorted. Whitman also claimed that my return to prison should be a condition for "normalizing relations with Cuba". How did I get so important that my life can determine the foreign relations between two governments? Anybody who knows anything about New Jersey politics can be certain that her motives are purely political. She, like Torrecelli and several other opportunistic politicians in New Jersey came to power, as part-time lobbyists for the Batista faction – soliciting votes from right

wing Cubans. They want to use my case as a barrier for normalizing relations with Cuba, and as a pretext for maintaining the immoral blockade against the Cuban people.

In what can only be called deliberate deception and slander NBC aired a photograph of a woman with a gun in her hand implying that the woman in the photograph was me. I was not, in fact, the woman in the photograph. The photograph was taken from a highly publicized case where I was accused of bank robbery. Not only did I voluntarily insist on participating in a lineup, during which witnesses selected another woman, but during the trial, several witnesses, including the manager of the bank, testified that the woman in that photograph was not me. I was acquitted of that bank robbery. NBC aired that photograph on at least 5 different occasions, representing the woman in the photograph as me. How is it possible, that the New Jersey State Police, who claim to have a detective working full time on my case, Governor of New Jersey Christine Whitman, who claimed she reviewed all the "evidence," or NBC, which has an extensive research department, did not know that the photograph was false? It was a vile, fraudulent attempt to make me look guilty. NBC deliberately misrepresented the truth. Even after many people had called in, and there was massive fax, and e-mail campaign protesting NBC's mutilation of the facts, Ralph Penza and NBC continued to broadcast that photograph, representing it as me. Not once have the New Jersey State Police, Governor Christine Whitman, or NBC come forth and stated that I was not the woman in the photograph, or that I had been acquitted of that charge.

Another major lie and distortion was that we had left trooper Werner Foerster on the roadside to die. The truth is that there was a major cover-up as to what happened on May 2, 1973. Trooper Harper, the same man who shot me with my arms raised in the air, testified that he returned to the State Police Headquarters which was less than 200 yards away, "To seek aid." However, tape recordings and police reports made on May 2, 1973 prove that not only did Trooper Harper give several conflicting statements about what happened on the turnpike, but he never once mentioned the name of Werner Foerster, or the fact that the incident took place right in front of the Trooper Headquarters. In an effort to hide his tracks and cover his guilt he said nothing whatsoever about Foerster to his superiors or to his fellow officers.

In a clear attempt to discredit me, Col. Carl Williams of the New Jersey State Police was allowed to give blow by blow distortions of my interview. In my interview I stated that on the night of May 2, 1973 I was shot with my arms in the air, then shot again in the back. Williams stated "that is absolutely false. Our records show that she reached in her pocketbook,

pulled out a nine millimeter weapon and started firing." However, the claim that I reached into my pocketbook and pulled out a gun, while inside the car was even contested by trooper Harper. Although on three official reports, and when he testified before the grand jury he stated that he saw me take a gun out of my pocketbook, he finally admitted under cross-examination that he never saw me with my hands in a pocketbook, never saw me with a weapon inside the car, and that he did not see me shoot him.

The truth is that I was examined by 3 medical specialists: (1) A Neurologist who testified that I was immediately paralyzed immediately after the being shot.

(2) A Surgeon who testified that "It was absolutely anatomically necessary that both arms be in the air for Mrs. Chesimard to receive the wounds." The same surgeon also testified that the claim by Trooper Harper that I had been crouching in a firing position when I was shot was "totally anatomically impossible."

(3) A Pathologist who testified that "There is no conceivable way that it [the bullet] could have traveled over to hit the clavicle if her arm was down." he said "It was impossible to have that trajectory" The prosecutors presented no medical testimony whatsoever to refute the above medical evidence.

No evidence whatsoever was ever presented that I had a 9-millimeter weapon, in fact New Jersey State Police testified that the 9-millimeter weapon belonged to Zayd Malik Shakur based on a holster fitting the weapon that they was recovered from his body.

There were no fingerprints, or any other evidence whatsoever that linked me to any guns or ammunition.

The results of the Neutron Activation test to determine whether or not I had fired a weapon were negative.

Although Col. Williams refers to us as the "criminal element" neither Zayd, or Sundiata Acoli or I were criminals, we were political activists. I was a college student until the police kicked down my door in an effort to force me to "cooperate" with them and Sundiata Acoli was a computer expert who had worked for NASA, before he joined the Black Panther Party and was targeted by COINTELPRO.

In an obvious maneuver to provoke sympathy for the police, the NBC series juxtaposed my interview with the weeping widow of Werner

Foerster. While I can sympathize with her grief, I believe that her appearance was deliberately included to appeal to people's emotions, to blur the facts, to make me look like a villain, and to create the kind of lynch mob mentality that has historically been associated with white women portrayed as victims of black people. In essence the supposed interview with me became a forum for the New State Police, Foerster's widow, and the obviously hostile commentary of Ralph Penza. The two initial programs together lasted 3.5 minutes – me – 59 seconds, the widow 50 seconds, the state police 38 seconds, and Penza – 68 seconds. Not once in the interview was I ever asked about Zayd, Sundiata or their families. As the interview went on, it was painfully evident that Ralph Penza would never see me as a human being. Although I tried to talk about racism and about the victims of government and police repression, it was clear that he was totally uninterested.

I have stated publicly on various occasions that I was ashamed of participating in my trial in New Jersey trial because it was so racist, but I did testify. Even though I was extremely limited by the judge, as to what I could testify about, I testified as clearly as I could about what happened that night. After being almost fatally wounded I managed to climb in the back seat of the car to get away from the shooting. Sundiata drove the car five miles down the road carried me into a grassy area because he was afraid that the police would see the car parked on the side of the road and just start shooting into it again. Yes, it was five miles down the highway where I was captured, dragged out of the car, stomped and then left on the ground. Although I drifted in and out of consciousness I remember clearly that both while I was lying on the ground, and while I was in the ambulance, I kept hearing the State troopers ask "is she dead yet?" Because of my condition I have no independent recollection of how long I was on the ground, or how long it was before the ambulance was allowed to leave for the hospital, but in the trial transcript trooper Harper stated that it was while he was being questioned, some time after 2:00 am that a detective told him that I had just been brought into the hospital. I was the only live "suspect" in custody, and prior to that time Harper, had never told anyone that a woman had shot him.

As I watched Governor Whitman's interview the one thing that struck me was her "outrage" at my joy about being a grandmother, and my "quite nice life" as she put it here in Cuba. While I love the Cuban people and the solidarity they have shown me, the pain of being torn away from everybody I love has been intense. I have never had the opportunity to see or to hold my grandchild. If Gov. Whitman thinks that my life has been so nice, that 50 years of dealing with racism, poverty, persecution, brutality, prison, underground, exile and blatant lies has been so nice, then I'd be more than happy to let her walk in my shoes for a while so she

can get a taste of how it feels. I am a proud black woman, and I'm not about to get on the television and cry for Ralph Penza or any other journalist, but the way I have suffered in my lifetime, and the way my people have suffered, only god can bear witness to.

Col. Williams of the New Jersey State Police stated "we would do everything we could go get her off the island of Cuba and if that includes kidnaping, we would do it." I guess the theory is that if they could kidnap millions of Africans from Africa 400 years ago, they should be able to kidnap one African woman today. It is nothing but an attempt to bring about the re-incarnation of the Fugitive Slave Act. All I represent is just another slave that they want to bring back to the plantation. Well, I might be a slave, but I will go to my grave a rebellious slave. I am and I feel like a maroon woman. I will never voluntarily accept the condition of slavery, whether it's de-facto or ipso-facto, official, or unofficial.

In another recent interview, Williams talked about asking the federal government to add to the \$50,000 reward for my capture. He also talked about seeking "outside money, or something like that, a benefactor, whatever." Now who is he looking to "contribute" to that "cause"? The Ku Klux Klan, the Neo Nazi Parties, the white militia organizations? But the plot gets even thicker. He says that the money might lure bounty hunters. "There are individuals out there, I guess they call themselves 'soldiers of fortune' who might be interested in doing something, in turning her over to us" Well, in the old days they used to call them slave-catchers, trackers, or patter-rollers, now they are called mercenaries. Neither the governor nor the state police say one word about "justice." They have no moral authority to do so. The level of their moral and ethical bankruptcy is evident in their eagerness to not only break the law and hire hoodlums, all in the name of "law and order." But you know what gets to me, what makes me truly indignant? With the schools in Paterson, N.J. falling down, with areas of Newark looking like a disaster area, with the crack epidemic, with the wide-spread poverty and unemployment in New Jersey, these depraved, decadent, would-be slave-masters want federal funds to help put this "nigger wench" back in her place. They call me the "most wanted woman" in Amerika. I find that ironic. I've never felt very "wanted" before. When it came to jobs, I was never the "most wanted," when it came to "economic opportunities I was never the "most wanted, when it came to decent housing." It seems like the only time Black people are on the "most wanted" list is when they want to put us in prison.

But at this moment, I am not so concerned about myself. Everybody has to die sometime, and all I want is to go with dignity. I am more concerned about the growing poverty, the growing despair that is rife in Amerika. I am more concerned about our younger generations, who represent our

future. I am more concerned that one-third of young black are either in prison or under the jurisdiction of the "criminal in-justice system." I am more concerned about the rise of the prison-industrial complex that is turning our people into slaves again. I am more concerned about the repression, the police brutality, violence, the rising wave of racism that makes up the political landscape of the U.S. today. Our young people deserve a future, and I consider it the mandate of my ancestors to be part of the struggle to insure that they have one. They have the right to live free from political repression. The U.S. is becoming more and more of a police state and that fact compels us to fight against political repression. I urge you all, every single person who reads this statement, to fight to free all political prisoners. As the concentration camps in the U.S. turn into death camps, I urge you to fight to abolish the death penalty. I make a special, urgent appeal to you to fight to save the life of Mumia Abu-Jamal, the only political prisoner who is currently on death row.

It has been a long time since I have lived inside the United States. But during my lifetime I have seen every prominent black leader, politician or activist come under attack by the establishment media. When African – Americans appear on news programs they are usually talking about sports, entertainment or they are in handcuffs. When we have a protest they ridicule it, minimized it, or cut the numbers of the people who attended in half. The news is big business and it is owned operated by affluent white men. Unfortunately, they shape the way that many people see the world, and even the way people see themselves. Too often black journalists, and other journalists of color mimic their white counterparts. They often gear their reports to reflect the foreign policies and the domestic policies of the same people who are oppressing their people. In the establishment media, the bombing and of murder of thousands of innocent women and children in Libya or Iraq or Panama is seen as "patriotic," while those who fight for freedom, no matter where they are, are seen as "radicals," "extremists," or "terrorists."

Like most poor and oppressed people in the United States, I do not have a voice. Black people, poor people in the U.S. have no real freedom of speech, no real freedom of expression and very little freedom of the press. The black press and the progressive media has historically played an essential role in the struggle for social justice. We need to continue and to expand that tradition. We need to create media outlets that help to educate our people and our children, and not annihilate their minds. I am only one woman. I own no TV stations, or Radio Stations or Newspapers. But I feel that people need to be educated as to what is going on, and to understand the connection between the news media and the instruments of repression in Amerika. All I have is my voice, my spirit and the will to tell the truth. But I sincerely ask, those of you in the Black media, those of

you in the progressive media, those of you who believe in truth freedom,
To publish this statement and to let people know what is happening. We
have no voice, so you must be the voice of the voiceless.

Free all Political Prisoners, I send you Love and Revolutionary Greetings
From Cuba, One of the Largest, Most Resistant and Most Courageous
Palenques (Maroon Camps) That has ever existed on the Face of this
Planet.

Assata Shakur
Havana, Cuba

The Combahee River Collective Statement

Combahee River Collective

We are a collective of Black feminists who have been meeting together since 1974. [1] During that time we have been involved in the process of defining and clarifying our politics, while at the same time doing political work within our own group and in coalition with other progressive organizations and movements. The most general statement of our politics at the present time would be that we are actively committed to struggling against racial, sexual, heterosexual, and class oppression, and see as our particular task the development of integrated analysis and practice based upon the fact that the major systems of oppression are interlocking. The synthesis of these oppressions creates the conditions of our lives. As Black women we see Black feminism as the logical political movement to combat the manifold and simultaneous oppressions that all women of color face.

We will discuss four major topics in the paper that follows: (1) the genesis of contemporary Black feminism; (2) what we believe, i.e., the specific province of our politics; (3) the problems in organizing Black feminists, including a brief herstory of our collective; and (4) Black feminist issues and practice.

1. The genesis of Contemporary Black Feminism

Before looking at the recent development of Black feminism we would like to affirm that we find our origins in the historical reality of Afro-American women's continuous life-and-death struggle for survival and liberation. Black women's extremely negative relationship to the American political system (a system of white male rule) has always been determined by our membership in two oppressed racial and sexual castes. As Angela Davis points out in "Reflections on the Black Woman's Role in the Community of Slaves," Black women have always embodied, if only in their physical manifestation, an adversary stance to white male

rule and have actively resisted its inroads upon them and their communities in both dramatic and subtle ways. There have always been Black women activists—some known, like Sojourner Truth, Harriet Tubman, Frances E. W. Harper, Ida B. Wells Barnett, and Mary Church Terrell, and thousands upon thousands unknown—who have had a shared awareness of how their sexual identity combined with their racial identity to make their whole life situation and the focus of their political struggles unique. Contemporary Black feminism is the outgrowth of countless generations of personal sacrifice, militancy, and work by our mothers and sisters.

A Black feminist presence has evolved most obviously in connection with the second wave of the American women's movement beginning in the late 1960s. Black, other Third World, and working women have been involved in the feminist movement from its start, but both outside reactionary forces and racism and elitism within the movement itself have served to obscure our participation. In 1973, Black feminists, primarily located in New York, felt the necessity of forming a separate Black feminist group. This became the National Black Feminist Organization (NBFO).

Black feminist politics also have an obvious connection to movements for Black liberation, particularly those of the 1960s and 1970s. Many of us were active in those movements (Civil Rights, Black nationalism, the Black Panthers), and all of our lives were greatly affected and changed by their ideologies, their goals, and the tactics used to achieve their goals. It was our experience and disillusionment within these liberation movements, as well as experience on the periphery of the white male left, that led to the need to develop a politics that was anti-racist, unlike those of white women, and anti-sexist, unlike those of Black and white men.

There is also undeniably a personal genesis for Black Feminism, that is, the political realization that comes from the seemingly personal experiences of individual Black women's lives. Black feminists and many more Black women who do not define themselves as feminists have all

experienced sexual oppression as a constant factor in our day-to-day existence. As children we realized that we were different from boys and that we were treated differently. For example, we were told in the same breath to be quiet both for the sake of being "ladylike" and to make us less objectionable in the eyes of white people. As we grew older we became aware of the threat of physical and sexual abuse by men. However, we had no way of conceptualizing what was so apparent to us, what we knew was really happening.

Black feminists often talk about their feelings of craziness before becoming conscious of the concepts of sexual politics, patriarchal rule, and most importantly, feminism, the political analysis and practice that we women use to struggle against our oppression. The fact that racial politics and indeed racism are pervasive factors in our lives did not allow us, and still does not allow most Black women, to look more deeply into our own experiences and, from that sharing and growing consciousness, to build a politics that will change our lives and inevitably end our oppression. Our development must also be tied to the contemporary economic and political position of Black people. The post World War II generation of Black youth was the first to be able to minimally partake of certain educational and employment options, previously closed completely to Black people. Although our economic position is still at the very bottom of the American capitalistic economy, a handful of us have been able to gain certain tools as a result of tokenism in education and employment which potentially enable us to more effectively fight our oppression.

A combined anti-racist and anti-sexist position drew us together initially, and as we developed politically we addressed ourselves to heterosexism and economic oppression under capitalism.

2. What We Believe

Above all else, Our politics initially sprang from the shared belief that Black women are inherently valuable, that our liberation is a necessity not as an adjunct to somebody else's may because of our need as human persons for autonomy. This may seem so obvious as to sound simplistic,

but it is apparent that no other ostensibly progressive movement has ever considered our specific oppression as a priority or worked seriously for the ending of that oppression. Merely naming the pejorative stereotypes attributed to Black women (e.g. mammy, matriarch, Sapphire, whore, bulldagger), let alone cataloguing the cruel, often murderous, treatment we receive, indicates how little value has been placed upon our lives during four centuries of bondage in the Western hemisphere. We realize that the only people who care enough about us to work consistently for our liberation are us. Our politics evolve from a healthy love for ourselves, our sisters and our community which allows us to continue our struggle and work.

This focusing upon our own oppression is embodied in the concept of identity politics. We believe that the most profound and potentially most radical politics come directly out of our own identity, as opposed to working to end somebody else's oppression. In the case of Black women this is a particularly repugnant, dangerous, threatening, and therefore revolutionary concept because it is obvious from looking at all the political movements that have preceded us that anyone is more worthy of liberation than ourselves. We reject pedestals, queenhood, and walking ten paces behind. To be recognized as human, levelly human, is enough.

We believe that sexual politics under patriarchy is as pervasive in Black women's lives as are the politics of class and race. We also often find it difficult to separate race from class from sex oppression because in our lives they are most often experienced simultaneously. We know that there is such a thing as racial-sexual oppression which is neither solely racial nor solely sexual, e.g., the history of rape of Black women by white men as a weapon of political repression.

Although we are feminists and Lesbians, we feel solidarity with progressive Black men and do not advocate the fractionalization that white women who are separatists demand. Our situation as Black people necessitates that we have solidarity around the fact of race, which white women of course do not need to have with white men, unless it is their

negative solidarity as racial oppressors. We struggle together with Black men against racism, while we also struggle with Black men about sexism.

We realize that the liberation of all oppressed peoples necessitates the destruction of the political-economic systems of capitalism and imperialism as well as patriarchy. We are socialists because we believe that work must be organized for the collective benefit of those who do the work and create the products, and not for the profit of the bosses. Material resources must be equally distributed among those who create these resources. We are not convinced, however, that a socialist revolution that is not also a feminist and anti-racist revolution will guarantee our liberation. We have arrived at the necessity for developing an understanding of class relationships that takes into account the specific class position of Black women who are generally marginal in the labor force, while at this particular time some of us are temporarily viewed as doubly desirable tokens at white-collar and professional levels. We need to articulate the real class situation of persons who are not merely raceless, sexless workers, but for whom racial and sexual oppression are significant determinants in their working/economic lives. Although we are in essential agreement with Marx's theory as it applied to the very specific economic relationships he analyzed, we know that his analysis must be extended further in order for us to understand our specific economic situation as Black women.

A political contribution which we feel we have already made is the expansion of the feminist principle that the personal is political. In our consciousness-raising sessions, for example, we have in many ways gone beyond white women's revelations because we are dealing with the implications of race and class as well as sex. Even our Black women's style of talking/testifying in Black language about what we have experienced has a resonance that is both cultural and political. We have spent a great deal of energy delving into the cultural and experiential nature of our oppression out of necessity because none of these matters has ever been looked at before. No one before has ever examined the multilayered texture of Black women's lives. An example of this kind of

revelation/conceptualization occurred at a meeting as we discussed the ways in which our early intellectual interests had been attacked by our peers, particularly Black males. We discovered that all of us, because we were "smart" had also been considered "ugly," i.e., "smart-ugly." "Smart-ugly" crystallized the way in which most of us had been forced to develop our intellects at great cost to our "social" lives. The sanctions in the Black and white communities against Black women thinkers is comparatively much higher than for white women, particularly ones from the educated middle and upper classes.

As we have already stated, we reject the stance of Lesbian separatism because it is not a viable political analysis or strategy for us. It leaves out far too much and far too many people, particularly Black men, women, and children. We have a great deal of criticism and loathing for what men have been socialized to be in this society: what they support, how they act, and how they oppress. But we do not have the misguided notion that it is their maleness, per se—i.e., their biological maleness—that makes them what they are. As Black women we find any type of biological determinism a particularly dangerous and reactionary basis upon which to build a politic. We must also question whether Lesbian separatism is an adequate and progressive political analysis and strategy, even for those who practice it, since it so completely denies any but the sexual sources of women's oppression, negating the facts of class and race.

3. Problems in Organizing Black Feminists

During our years together as a Black feminist collective we have experienced success and defeat, joy and pain, victory and failure. We have found that it is very difficult to organize around Black feminist issues, difficult even to announce in certain contexts that we are Black feminists. We have tried to think about the reasons for our difficulties, particularly since the white women's movement continues to be strong and to grow in many directions. In this section we will discuss some of the general reasons for the organizing problems we face and also talk specifically about the stages in organizing our own collective.

The major source of difficulty in our political work is that we are not just trying to fight oppression on one front or even two, but instead to address a whole range of oppressions. We do not have racial, sexual, heterosexual, or class privilege to rely upon, nor do we have even the minimal access to resources and power that groups who possess anyone of these types of privilege have.

The psychological toll of being a Black woman and the difficulties this presents in reaching political consciousness and doing political work can never be underestimated. There is a very low value placed upon Black women's psyches in this society, which is both racist and sexist. As an early group member once said, "We are all damaged people merely by virtue of being Black women." We are dispossessed psychologically and on every other level, and yet we feel the necessity to struggle to change the condition of all Black women. In "A Black Feminist's Search for Sisterhood," Michele Wallace arrives at this conclusion:

We exists as women who are Black who are feminists, each stranded for the moment, working independently because there is not yet an environment in this society remotely congenial to our struggle—because, being on the bottom, we would have to do what no one else has done: we would have to fight the world. [2]

Wallace is pessimistic but realistic in her assessment of Black feminists' position, particularly in her allusion to the nearly classic isolation most of us face. We might use our position at the bottom, however, to make a clear leap into revolutionary action. If Black women were free, it would mean that everyone else would have to be free since our freedom would necessitate the destruction of all the systems of oppression.

Feminism is, nevertheless, very threatening to the majority of Black people because it calls into question some of the most basic assumptions about our existence, i.e., that sex should be a determinant of power relationships. Here is the way male and female roles were defined in a Black nationalist pamphlet from the early 1970s:

We understand that it is and has been traditional that the man is the head of the house. He is the leader of the house/nation because his knowledge of the world is broader, his awareness is greater, his understanding is fuller and his application of this information is wiser... After all, it is only reasonable that the man be the head of the house because he is able to defend and protect the development of his home... Women cannot do the same things as men—they are made by nature to function differently. Equality of men and women is something that cannot happen even in the abstract world. Men are not equal to other men, i.e. ability, experience or even understanding. The value of men and women can be seen as in the value of gold and silver—they are not equal but both have great value. We must realize that men and women are a complement to each other because there is no house/family without a man and his wife. Both are essential to the development of any life. [3]

The material conditions of most Black women would hardly lead them to upset both economic and sexual arrangements that seem to represent some stability in their lives. Many Black women have a good understanding of both sexism and racism, but because of the everyday constrictions of their lives, cannot risk struggling against them both.

The reaction of Black men to feminism has been notoriously negative. They are, of course, even more threatened than Black women by the possibility that Black feminists might organize around our own needs. They realize that they might not only lose valuable and hardworking allies in their struggles but that they might also be forced to change their habitually sexist ways of interacting with and oppressing Black women. Accusations that Black feminism divides the Black struggle are powerful deterrents to the growth of an autonomous Black women's movement.

Still, hundreds of women have been active at different times during the three-year existence of our group. And every Black woman who came, came out of a strongly-felt need for some level of possibility that did not previously exist in her life.

When we first started meeting early in 1974 after the NBFO first eastern regional conference, we did not have a strategy for organizing, or even a focus. We just wanted to see what we had. After a period of months of not meeting, we began to meet again late in the year and

started doing an intense variety of consciousness-raising. The overwhelming feeling that we had is that after years and years we had finally found each other. Although we were not doing political work as a group, individuals continued their involvement in Lesbian politics, sterilization abuse and abortion rights work, Third World Women's International Women's Day activities, and support activity for the trials of Dr. Kenneth Edelin, Joan Little, and Inéz García. During our first summer when membership had dropped off considerably, those of us remaining devoted serious discussion to the possibility of opening a refuge for battered women in a Black community. (There was no refuge in Boston at that time.) We also decided around that time to become an independent collective since we had serious disagreements with NBFO's bourgeois-feminist stance and their lack of a clear political focus.

We also were contacted at that time by socialist feminists, with whom we had worked on abortion rights activities, who wanted to encourage us to attend the National Socialist Feminist Conference in Yellow Springs. One of our members did attend and despite the narrowness of the ideology that was promoted at that particular conference, we became more aware of the need for us to understand our own economic situation and to make our own economic analysis.

In the fall, when some members returned, we experienced several months of comparative inactivity and internal disagreements which were first conceptualized as a Lesbian-straight split but which were also the result of class and political differences. During the summer those of us who were still meeting had determined the need to do political work and to move beyond consciousness-raising and serving exclusively as an emotional support group. At the beginning of 1976, when some of the women who had not wanted to do political work and who also had voiced disagreements stopped attending of their own accord, we again looked for a focus. We decided at that time, with the addition of new members, to become a study group. We had always shared our reading with each other, and some of us had written papers on Black feminism for group discussion a few months before this decision was made. We began functioning as a study group and also began discussing the

possibility of starting a Black feminist publication. We had a retreat in the late spring which provided a time for both political discussion and working out interpersonal issues. Currently we are planning to gather together a collection of Black feminist writing. We feel that it is absolutely essential to demonstrate the reality of our politics to other Black women and believe that we can do this through writing and distributing our work. The fact that individual Black feminists are living in isolation all over the country, that our own numbers are small, and that we have some skills in writing, printing, and publishing makes us want to carry out these kinds of projects as a means of organizing Black feminists as we continue to do political work in coalition with other groups.

4. Black Feminist Issues and Projects

During our time together we have identified and worked on many issues of particular relevance to Black women. The inclusiveness of our politics makes us concerned with any situation that impinges upon the lives of women, Third World and working people. We are of course particularly committed to working on those struggles in which race, sex, and class are simultaneous factors in oppression. We might, for example, become involved in workplace organizing at a factory that employs Third World women or picket a hospital that is cutting back on already inadequate health care to a Third World community, or set up a rape crisis center in a Black neighborhood. Organizing around welfare and daycare concerns might also be a focus. The work to be done and the countless issues that this work represents merely reflect the pervasiveness of our oppression.

Issues and projects that collective members have actually worked on are sterilization abuse, abortion rights, battered women, rape and health care. We have also done many workshops and educationals on Black feminism on college campuses, at women's conferences, and most recently for high school women.

One issue that is of major concern to us and that we have begun to publicly address is racism in the white women's movement. As Black

feminists we are made constantly and painfully aware of how little effort white women have made to understand and combat their racism, which requires among other things that they have a more than superficial comprehension of race, color, and Black history and culture. Eliminating racism in the white women's movement is by definition work for white women to do, but we will continue to speak to and demand accountability on this issue.

In the practice of our politics we do not believe that the end always justifies the means. Many reactionary and destructive acts have been done in the name of achieving "correct" political goals. As feminists we do not want to mess over people in the name of politics. We believe in collective process and a nonhierarchical distribution of power within our own group and in our vision of a revolutionary society. We are committed to a continual examination of our politics as they develop through criticism and self-criticism as an essential aspect of our practice. In her introduction to *Sisterhood is Powerful* Robin Morgan writes:

I haven't the faintest notion what possible revolutionary role white heterosexual men could fulfill, since they are the very embodiment of reactionary-vested-interest-power.

As Black feminists and Lesbians we know that we have a very definite revolutionary task to perform and we are ready for the lifetime of work and struggle before us.

[1] This statement is dated April 1977.

[2] Wallace, Michele. "A Black Feminist's Search for Sisterhood," *The Village Voice*, 28 July 1975, pp. 6-7.

[3] Mumininas of Committee for Unified Newark, Mwanamke Mwananchi (The Nationalist Woman), Newark, N.J., ©1971, pp. 4-5.

THE COMBAHEE RIVER COLLECTIVE: "The Combahee River Collective Statement," copyright © 1978 by Zillah Eisenstein.

An Open Letter to Black High School Students

Marin County Jail
March 23, 1971

Dear Sisters and Brothers,

At least a decade separates me and others of my age from you, Black men and women in America's high schools. But this difference is unimportant compared to the strong ties that unite us in a common struggle for the freedom of our people. Our responsibility towards you runs deep. In the course of fighting to overthrow the conditions which have locked our people in an iron cycle of deprivation, we have accumulated a multitude of experiences, experiences which must become your experiences — the victories as well as the defeats, the truths as well as the errors. We feel accountable to you in yet another way. You have grown to maturity in the heat of battle, you are the living reflections of new realities, new values which categorically reject the subservient role Black people have been compelled to play for centuries. Your aggressiveness and boldness must become our aggressiveness and boldness.

In the process of struggling against the many manifestations of racism — the overt segregation in the South, our political impotence, our economic paralysis, our uninhabitable housing, our inadequate schools — an extremely important fact gradually revealed itself to us. We could never hope to eliminate all these conditions as long as we harbored the belief that with a little prodding, America would open its doors to us.

Racism is not an accidental aberration which wandered into the history of this country through the attitudes of a group of evil white people. On the contrary, it is deeply embedded in the very fabric of this country — its economy, its political structures and all the institutions which form the basis of this society. In a word, racism cannot be separated from capitalism. To attempt to treat it separately would be like treating the symptom of a disease rather than the disease itself, like administering ~~iodine~~ iodine to a cancerous sore while ignoring the fact that the cancer had already spread throughout the body.

From the initial stages of ~~development~~ this country's development, it was our destiny to perform all the dirtiest, most laborious tasks which were essential to the success of America's economy — an

An Open Letter to My Sister, Miss Angela Davis

James Baldwin
JANUARY 7, 1971 ISSUE

November 19, 1970

Dear Sister:

One might have hoped that, by this hour, the very sight of chains on black flesh, or the very sight of chains, would be so intolerable a sight for the American people, and so unbearable a memory, that they would themselves spontaneously rise up and strike off the manacles. But, no, they appear to glory in their chains; now, more than ever, they appear to measure their safety in chains and corpses. And so, *Newsweek*, civilized defender of the indefensible, attempts to drown you in a sea of crocodile tears (“it remained to be seen what sort of personal liberation she had achieved”) and puts you on its cover, chained.

You look exceedingly alone—as alone, say, as the Jewish housewife in the boxcar headed for Dachau, or as any one of our ancestors, chained together in the name of Jesus, headed for a Christian land.

Well. Since we live in an age in which silence is not only criminal but suicidal, I have been making as much noise as I can, here in Europe, on radio and television—in fact, have just returned from a land, Germany, which was made notorious by a silent majority not so very long ago. I was asked to speak on the case of Miss Angela Davis, and did so. Very probably an exercise in futility, but one must let no opportunity slide.

I am something like twenty years older than you, of that generation, therefore, of which George Jackson ventures that “there are no healthy brothers—*none at all*.” I am in no way equipped to dispute this speculation (not, anyway, without descending into what, at the moment, would be irrelevant subtleties) for I know too well what he means. My own state of health is certainly precarious enough. In considering you, and Huey, and George and (especially) Jonathan Jackson, I began to apprehend what you may have had in mind when you spoke of the uses to which we could put the experience of the slave. What has happened, it seems to me, and to put it far too simply, is that a whole new generation of people have assessed and absorbed their history, and, in that tremendous action, have freed themselves of it and will never be victims again. This may seem an odd, indefensibly impertinent and insensitive thing to say to a sister in prison, battling for her life—for all

our lives. Yet, I dare to say, for I think that you will perhaps not misunderstand me, and I do not say it, after all, from the position of a spectator.

I am trying to suggest that you—for example—do not appear to be your father's daughter in the same way that I am my father's son. At bottom, my father's expectations and mine were the same, the expectations of his generation and mine were the same; and neither the immense difference in our ages nor the move from the South to the North could alter these expectations or make our lives more viable. For, in fact, to use the brutal parlance of that hour, the interior language of that despair, he was just a nigger—a nigger laborer preacher, and so was I. I jumped the track but that's of no more importance here, in itself, than the fact that *some* poor Spaniards become rich bull fighters, or that *some* poor black boys become rich—boxers, for example. That's rarely, if ever, afforded the people more than a great emotional catharsis, though I don't mean to be condescending about that, either. But when Cassius Clay became Muhammed Ali and refused to put on that uniform (and sacrificed all that money!) a very different impact was made on the people and a very different kind of instruction had begun.

The American triumph—in which the American tragedy has always been implicit—was to make black people despise themselves. When I was little I despised myself, I did not know any better. And this meant, albeit unconsciously, or against my will, or in great pain, that I also despised my father. *And* my mother. *And* my brothers. *And* my sisters. Black people were killing each other every Saturday night out on Lenox Avenue, when I was growing up; and no one explained to them, or to me, that it was *intended* that they should; that they were penned where they were, like animals, in order that they should consider themselves no better than animals. Everything supported this sense of reality, nothing denied it: and so one was ready, when it came time to go to work, to be treated as a slave. So one was ready, when human terrors came, to bow before a white God and beg Jesus for salvation—this same white God who was unable to raise a finger to do so little as to help you pay your rent, unable to be awakened in time to help you save your child!

There is always, of course, more to any picture than can speedily be perceived and in all of this—groaning and moaning, watching, calculating, clowning, surviving, and outwitting, some tremendous strength was nevertheless being forged, which is part of our legacy today. But that particular aspect of our journey now begins to be behind us. The secret is out: we are men!

But the blunt, open articulation of this secret has frightened the nation to death. I wish I could say, “to life,” but that is much to demand of a disparate collection of displaced people still cowering in their wagon trains and singing “Onward Christian Soldiers.” The nation, *if* America is a nation, is not in the least prepared for this day. It is a day which the Americans never expected or desired to see, however piously they may declare their belief

in “progress and democracy.” These words, now, on American lips, have become a kind of universal obscenity: for this most unhappy people, strong believers in arithmetic, never expected to be confronted with the algebra of their history.

One way of gauging a nation’s health, or of discerning what it really considers to be its interests—or to what extent it can be considered as a nation as distinguished from a coalition of special interests—is to examine those people it elects to represent or protect it. One glance at the American leaders (or figure-heads) conveys that America is on the edge of absolute chaos, and also suggests the future to which American interests, if not the bulk of the American people, appear willing to consign the blacks. (Indeed, one look at our past conveys that.) It is clear that for the bulk of our (nominal) countrymen, we are all expendable. And Messrs. Nixon, Agnew, Mitchell, and Hoover, to say nothing, of course, of the *Kings’ Row* basket case, the winning Ronnie Reagan, will not hesitate for an instant to carry out what they insist is the will of the people.

But what, in America, is the will of the people? And who, for the above-named, *are* the people? The people, whoever they may be, know as much about the forces which have placed the above-named gentlemen in power as they do about the forces responsible for the slaughter in Vietnam. The will of the people, in America, has always been at the mercy of an ignorance not merely phenomenal, but sacred, and sacredly cultivated: the better to be used by a carnivorous economy which democratically slaughters and victimizes whites and blacks alike. But most white Americans do not dare admit this (though they suspect it) and this fact contains mortal danger for the blacks and tragedy for the nation.

Or, to put it another way, as long as white Americans take refuge in their whiteness—for so long as they are unable to walk out of this most monstrous of traps—they will allow millions of people to be slaughtered in their name, and will be manipulated into and surrender themselves to what they will think of—and justify—as a racial war. They will never, so long as their whiteness puts so sinister a distance between themselves and their own experience and the experience of others, feel themselves sufficiently human, *sufficiently worthwhile*, to become responsible for themselves, their leaders, their country, their children, or their fate. They will perish (as we once put it in our black church) in their sins—that is, in their delusions. And this is happening, needless to say, already, all around us.

Only a handful of the millions of people in this vast place are aware that the fate intended for you, Sister Angela, and for George Jackson, and for the numberless prisoners in our concentration camps—for that is what they are—is a fate which is about to engulf them, too. White lives, for the forces which rule in this country, are no more sacred than black ones, as many and many a student is discovering, as the white American corpses in Vietnam prove. If the American people are unable to contend with their elected leaders for

the redemption of their own honor and the lives of their own children, we, the blacks, the most rejected of the Western children, can expect very little help at their hands: which, after all, is nothing new. What the Americans do not realize is that a war between brothers, in the same cities, on the same soil, is not a *racial* war but a *civil* war. But the American delusion is not only that their brothers all are white but that the whites are all their brothers.

So be it. We cannot awaken this sleeper, and God knows we have tried. We must do what we can do, and fortify and save each other—*we* are not drowning in an apathetic self-contempt, we *do* feel ourselves sufficiently worthwhile to contend even with inexorable forces in order to change our fate and the fate of our children and the condition of the world! We know that a man is not a thing and is not to be placed at the mercy of things. We know that air and water belong to all mankind and not merely to industrialists. We know that a baby does not come into the world merely to be the instrument of someone else's profit. We know that democracy does not mean the coercion of all into a deadly—and, finally, wicked—mediocrity but the liberty for all to aspire to the best that is in him, or that has ever been.

We know that we, the blacks, and not only we, the blacks, have been, and are, the victims of a system whose only fuel is greed, whose only god is profit. We know that the fruits of this system have been ignorance, despair, and death, and we know that the system is doomed because the world can no longer afford it—if, indeed, it ever could have. And we know that, for the perpetuation of this system, we have all been mercilessly brutalized, and have been told nothing but lies, lies about ourselves and our kinsmen and our past, and about love, life, and death, so that both soul and body have been bound in hell.

The enormous revolution in black consciousness which has occurred in your generation, my dear sister, means the beginning or the end of America. Some of us, white and black, know how great a price has already been paid to bring into existence a new consciousness, a new people, an unprecedented nation. If we know, and do nothing, we are worse than the murderers hired in our name.

If we know, then we must fight for your life as though it were our own—which it is—and render impassable with our bodies the corridor to the gas chamber. For, if they take you in the morning, they will be coming for us that night.

Therefore: peace.

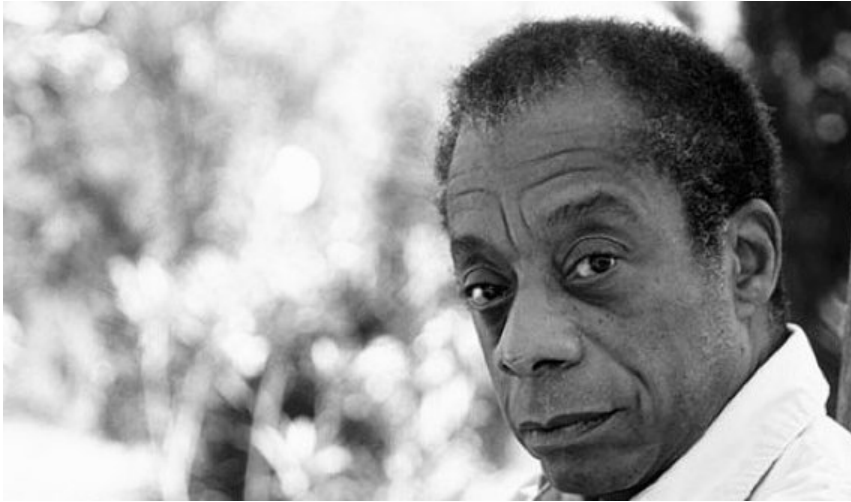
Brother James

© 1963-2020 NYREV, Inc. All rights reserved.

A Letter to My Nephew

James Baldwin's thoughts on his nephew's future—in a country with a terrible history of racism—first appeared in *The Progressive* magazine in 1962. Over 50 years later his words are as powerful as ever.

by James Baldwin
December 1, 1962



*James Baldwin's thoughts on his nephew's future—in a country with a terrible history of racism—first appeared in *The Progressive* magazine in 1962. Over 50 years later his words are, sadly, more relevant than ever.*

Dear James:

I have begun this letter five times and torn it up five times. I keep seeing your face, which is also the face of your father and my brother. I have known both of you all your lives and have carried your daddy in my arms and on my shoulders, kissed him and spanked him and watched him learn to walk. I don't know if you have known anybody from that far back, if you have loved anybody that long, first as an infant, then as a child, then as a man. You gain a strange perspective on time and human pain and effort.

Other people cannot see what I see whenever I look into your father's

face, for behind your father's face as it is today are all those other faces which were his. Let him laugh and I see a cellar your father does not remember and a house he does not remember and I hear in his present laughter his laughter as a child. Let him curse and I remember his falling down the cellar steps and howling and I remember with pain his tears which my hand or your grandmother's hand so easily wiped away, but no one's hand can wipe away those tears he sheds invisibly today which one hears in his laughter and in his speech and in his songs.

I know what the world has done to my brother and how narrowly he has survived it and I know, which is much worse, and this is the crime of which I accuse my country and my countrymen and for which neither I nor time nor history will ever forgive them, that they have destroyed and are destroying hundreds of thousands of lives and do not know it and do not want to know it. One can be--indeed, one must strive to become--tough and philosophical concerning destruction and death, for this is what most of mankind has been best at since we have heard of war; remember, I said most of mankind, but it is not permissible that the authors of devastation should also be innocent. It is the innocence which constitutes the crime.

They have destroyed and are destroying hundreds of thousands of lives and do not know it and do not want to know it.

Now, my dear namesake, these innocent and well meaning people, your countrymen, have caused you to be born under conditions not far removed from those described for us by Charles Dickens in the London of more than a hundred years ago. I hear the chorus of the innocents

screaming, "No, this is not true. How bitter you are," but I am writing this letter to you to try to tell you something about how to handle them, for most of them do not yet really know that you exist. I know the conditions under which you were born for I was there. Your countrymen were not there and haven't made it yet. Your grandmother was also there and no one has ever accused her of being bitter. I suggest that the innocent check with her. She isn't hard to find. Your countrymen don't know that she exists either, though she has been working for them all their lives.

Well, you were born; here you came, something like fifteen years ago, and though your father and mother and grandmother, looking about the streets through which they were carrying you, staring at the walls into which they brought you, had every reason to be heavy-hearted, yet they were not, for here you were, big James, named for me. You were a big baby. I was not. Here you were to be loved. To be loved, baby, hard at once and forever to strengthen you against the loveless world. Remember that. I know how black it looks today for you. It looked black that day too. Yes, we were trembling. We have not stopped trembling yet, but if we had not loved each other, none of us would have survived, and now you must survive because we love you and for the sake of your children and your children's children.

This innocent country set you down in a ghetto in which, in fact, it intended that you should perish. Let me spell out precisely what I mean by that for the heart of the matter is here and the crux of my dispute with my country. You were born where you were born and faced the future that you faced because you were black and for no other reason. The limits to your ambition were thus expected to be settled. You were born into a society which spelled out with brutal clarity and in as many ways as possible that you were a worthless

human being. You were not expected to aspire to excellence. You were expected to make peace with mediocrity. Wherever you have turned, James, in your short time on this earth, you have been told where you could go and what you could do and how you could do it, where you could live and whom you could marry.

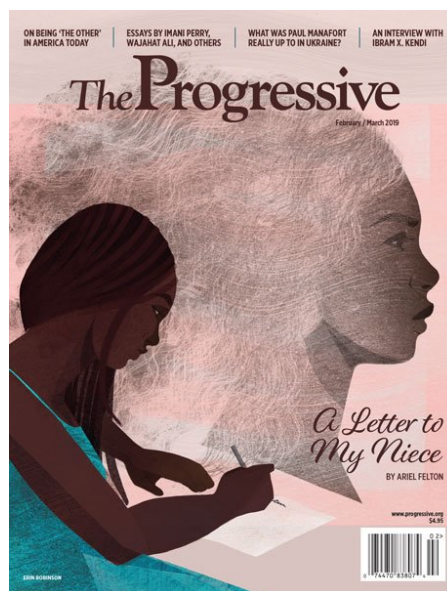
I know your countrymen do not agree with me here and I hear them. saying, "You exaggerate." They do not know Harlem and I do. So do you. Take no one's word for anything, including mine, but trust your experience. Know whence you came. If you know whence you came, there is really no limit to where you can go. The details and symbols of your life have been deliberately constructed to make you believe what white people say about you. Please try to remember that what they believe, as well as what they do and cause you to endure, does not testify to your inferiority, but to their inhumanity and fear.

Please try to be clear, dear James, through the storm which rages about your youthful head today, about the reality which lies behind the words "acceptance" and "integration." There is no reason for you to try to become like white men and there is no basis whatever for their impertinent assumption that they must accept you. The really terrible thing, old buddy, is that you must accept them, and I mean that very seriously. You must accept them and accept them with love, for these innocent people have no other hope. They are in effect still trapped in a history which they do not understand and until they understand it, they cannot be released from it. They have had to believe for many years, and for innumerable reasons, that black men are inferior to white men.

They are trapped in a history which they do not understand and until they understand it, they cannot be released from it.

Many of them indeed know better, but as you will discover, people find it very difficult to act on what they know. To act is to be committed and to be committed is to be in danger. In this case the danger in the minds and hearts of most white Americans is the loss of their identity. Try to imagine how you would feel if you woke up one morning to find the sun shivering and all the stars aflame. You would be frightened because it is out of the order of nature. Any upheaval in the universe is terrifying because it so profoundly attacks one's sense of one's own reality. Well, the black man has functioned in the white man's world as a fixed star, as an immovable pillar, and as he moves out of his place, heaven and earth are shaken to their foundations.

You don't be afraid. I said it was intended that you should perish, in the ghetto, perish by never being allowed to go beyond and behind the white man's definition, by never being allowed to spell your proper name. You have, and many of us have, defeated this intention and by a terrible law, a terrible paradox, those innocents who believed that your imprisonment made them safe are losing their grasp of reality. But these men are your brothers, your lost younger brothers, and if the word "integration" means anything, this is what it means, that we with love shall force our brothers to see



If you're enjoying this essay, check out "[Letter to my Niece](#)" by Ariel Felton. And please [sign up for our free newsletter](#) to stay up to date on The

themselves as they are, to cease fleeing *Progressive's latest.*
 from reality and begin to change it, for
 this is your home, my friend. Do not be driven from it. Great men have
 done great things here and will again and we can make America what
 America must become.

It will be hard, James, but you come from sturdy peasant stock, men
 who picked cotton, dammed rivers, built railroads, and in the teeth of
 the most terrifying odds, achieved an unassailable and monumental
 dignity. You come from a long line of great poets, some of the greatest
 poets since Homer. One of them said, "The very time I thought I was
 lost, my dungeon shook and my chains fell off."

You know and I know that the country is celebrating one hundred
 years of freedom one hundred years too early. We cannot be free until
 they are free. God bless you, James, and Godspeed.

Your uncle,

James

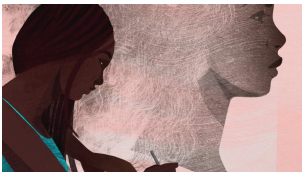
Tags

CIVIL RIGHTS / CRIMINAL JUSTICE / CULTURE / BLACK HISTORY / RACISM

by James Baldwin December 1, 1962

[View More](#)

Related



A Letter to My Niece

As a baby, you knew nothing of the definitions the world was going to
 press onto you later in life—black, female, Southern. The world had not
 yet told you who you were, who you could or should be. You just were.

Feb 1, 2019



Striking Steel



“No matter how many centuries have been devoted to the official story that black people are shameful, we have been the grace note of American history. And yet if I am honest, shame is what I feel. Not in blackness though, in Americanness.”

Feb 1, 2019



A Century Later, a Little-Known Mass Hanging of Black Soldiers Still Haunts Us

100 years after one of the least-known and saddest chapters in American history, families of executed black soldiers have petitioned Trump for

justice.

Dec 8, 2017



Infiltrate Hate: Spike Lee’s “BlacKkKlansman”

The movie is Lee’s best and most radical film in decades, and a lot of fun as well.

Aug 3, 2018



Overcoming a History of Bias in a Budding Industry

The marijuana industry is blossoming, along with multiple challenges to correcting decades of injustice around the plant.

May 24, 2019



Black America's State of Surveillance

This is not a broken system, it is a system working perfectly as intended, to the detriment of all.

Mar 30, 2015



The Public Education of Linda Brown

Her father’s name is on the landmark U.S. Supreme Court case, Brown v. Board of Education, a milestone in ending racial segregation in public education.

Mar 28, 2018

Martin Luther King, Jr.
Birmingham City Jail
April 16, 1963

Bishop C. C. J. Carpenter
Bishop Joseph A. Durick
Rabbi Milton L. Grafman
Bishop Nolan B. Harmon
The Rev. George H. Murray
The Rev. Edward V. Ramage
The Rev. Earl Stallings

My dear Fellow Clergymen,

While confined here in the Birmingham City Jail, I came across your recent statement calling our present activities "unwise and untimely." Seldom, if ever, do I pause to answer criticism of my work and ideas. If I sought to answer all of the criticisms that cross my desk, my secretaries would be engaged in little else in the course of the day, and I would have no time for constructive work. But since I feel that you are men of genuine goodwill and your criticisms are sincerely set forth, I would like to answer your statement in what I hope will be patient and reasonable terms.

I think I should give the reason for my being in Birmingham, since you have been influenced by the argument of "outsiders coming in." I have the honor of serving as president of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, an organization operating in every Southern state with headquarters in Atlanta, Georgia. We have some eighty-five affiliate organizations all across the south— one being the Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights. Whenever necessary and possible we share staff, educational and financial resources with our affiliates. Several months ago our local affiliate here in Birmingham invited us to be on call to engage in a nonviolent direct action program if such were deemed necessary. We readily consented and when the hour came we lived up to our promises. So I am here, along with several members of my staff, because we were invited

(2)

here. I am here because I have basic organizational ties here.

Beyond this, I am in Birmingham because injustice is here. Just as the eighth century prophets left their little villages and carried their "thus saith the Lord" far beyond the boundaries of their home towns; and just as the Apostle Paul left his little village of Tarsus and carried the gospel of Jesus Christ to practically every hamlet and city of the Greco-Roman world, I too am compelled to carry the gospel of freedom beyond my particular home town. Like Paul, I must constantly respond to the Macedonian call for aid.

Moreover, I am cognizant of the interrelatedness of all communities and states. I cannot sit idly by in Atlanta and not be concerned about what happens in Birmingham. Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly. Never again can we afford to live with the narrow, provincial "outside agitator" idea. Anyone who lives inside the United States can never be considered an outsider anywhere in this country.

You deplore the demonstrations that are presently taking place in Birmingham. But I am sorry that your statement did not express a similar concern for the conditions that brought the demonstrations into being. I am sure that each of you would want to go beyond the superficial social analyst who looks merely at effects, and does not grapple with underlying causes. I would not hesitate to say that it is unfortunate that so-called demonstrations are taking place in Birmingham at this time, but I would say in more emphatic terms that it is even more unfortunate that the white power structure of this city left the Negro community with no other alternative.

In any nonviolent campaign there are four basic steps: (1) Collection of the facts to determine whether injustices are alive. (2) Negotiation. (3) Self-purification and (4) Direct Action. We have gone through all of these steps in Birmingham. There can be no gainsaying of the fact that racial in-

(3)

justice engulfs this community. Birmingham is probably the most thoroughly segregated city in the United States. Its ugly record of police brutality is known in every section of this country. Its unjust treatment of Negroes in the courts is a notorious reality. There have been more unsolved bombings of Negro homes and churches in Birmingham than any city in this nation. These are the hard, brutal and unbelievable facts. On the basis of these conditions Negro leaders sought to negotiate with the city fathers. But the political leaders consistently refused to engage in good faith negotiation.

Then came the opportunity last September to talk with some of the leaders of the economic community. In these negotiating sessions certain promises were made by the merchants - such as the promise to remove the humiliating racial signs from the stores. On the basis of these promises Rev. Shuttlesworth and the leaders of the Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights agreed to call a moratorium on any type of demonstrations. As the weeks and months unfolded we realized that we were the victims of a broken promise. The signs remained. Like so many experiences of the past we were confronted with blasted hopes, and the dark shadow of a deep disappointment settled upon us. So we had no alternative except that of preparing for direct action, whereby we would present our very bodies as a means of laying our case before the conscience of the local and national community. We were not unmindful of the difficulties involved. So we decided to go through a process of self-purification. We started having workshops on nonviolence and repeatedly asked ourselves the questions, "Are you able to accept blows without retaliating?" "Are you able to endure the ordeals of jail?" We decided to set our direct action program around the Easter season, realizing that with the exception of Christmas, this was the largest shopping period of the year. Knowing that a strong withdrawal program would be the by-product of direct action,

(4)

we felt that this was the best time to bring pressure on the merchants for the needed changes. Then it occurred to us that the March election was ahead and so we speedily decided to postpone action until after election day. When we discovered that Mr. Connor was in the run-off, we decided again to postpone action so that the demonstrations could not be used to cloud the issues. At this time we agreed to begin our nonviolent witness the day after the run-off.

This reveals that we did not move irresponsibly into direct action. We too wanted to see Mr. Connor defeated; so we went through postponement after postponement to aid in this community need. After this we felt that direct action could be delayed no longer.

You may well ask, "Why direct action? Why sit-ins, marches, etc? Isn't negotiation a better path?" You are exactly right in your call for negotiation. Indeed, this is the purpose of direct action. Nonviolent direct action seeks to create such a crisis and establish such creative tension that a community that has constantly refused to negotiate is forced to confront the issue. It seeks so to dramatize the issue that it can no longer be ignored. I just referred to the creation of tension as a part of the work of the nonviolent resister. This may sound rather shocking. But I must confess that I am not afraid of the word tension. I have earnestly worked and preached against violent tension, but there is a type of constructive nonviolent tension that is necessary for growth. Just as Socrates felt that it was necessary to create a tension in the mind so that individuals could rise from the bondage of myths and half-truths to the unfettered realm of creative analysis and objective appraisal, we must see the need of having nonviolent gadflies to create the kind of tension in society that will help men to rise from the dark depths of prejudice and racism to the majestic heights of understanding and brotherhood. So

(5)

the purpose of the direct action is to create a situation so crisis-packed that it will inevitably open the door to negotiation. We, therefore, concur with you in your call for negotiation. Too long has our beloved Southland been bogged in the tragic attempt to live in monologue rather than dialogue.

One of the basic points in your statement is that our acts are untimely. Some have asked, "Why didn't you give the new administration time to act?" The only answer that I can give to this inquiry is that the new administration must be prodded about as much as the outgoing one before it acts. We will be sadly mistaken if we feel that the election of Mr. Boutwell will bring the millenium to Birmingham. While Mr. Boutwell is much more articulate and gentle than Mr. Connor, they are both segregationists, dedicated to the task of maintaining the status quo. The hope I see in Mr. Boutwell is that he will be reasonable enough to see the futility of massive resistance to desegregation. But he will not see this without pressure from the devotees of civil rights. My friends, I must say to you that we have not made a single gain in civil rights without determined legal and nonviolent pressure. History is the long and tragic story of the fact that privileged groups seldom give up their privileges voluntarily. Individuals may see the moral light and voluntarily give up their unjust posture; but as Reinhold Niebuhr has reminded us, groups are more immoral than individuals.

We know through painful experience that freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor; it must be demanded by the oppressed. Frankly, I have never yet engaged in a direct action movement that was "well timed," according to the timetable of those who have not suffered unduly from the disease of segregation. For years now I have heard the words "Wait!" It rings in the ear of every Negro with a piercing familiarity. This "Wait" has almost always meant "Never." It has been a tranquilizing thalidomide, relieving the emotional stress for a moment, only to give birth to an ill-formed infant of frustration. We must come to see with the distinguished jurist of yesterday that "justice too long

(6)

delayed is justice denied." We have waited for more than three hundred and forty years for our constitutional and God-given rights. The nations of Asia and Africa are moving with jet-like speed toward the goal of political independence, and we still creep at horse and buggy pace toward the gaining of a cup of coffee at a lunch counter. I guess it is easy for those who have never felt the stinging facts of segregation to say, "Wait." But when you have seen vicious mobs lynch your mothers and fathers at will and drown your sisters and brothers at whim; when you have seen hate filled policemen curse, kick, brutalize and even kill your black brothers and sisters with impunity; when you see the vast majority of your twenty million Negro brothers smothering in an air tight cage of poverty in the midst of an affluent society; when you suddenly find your tongue twisted and your speech stammering as you seek to explain to your six-year old daughter why she can't go to the public amusement park that has just been advertised on television, and see tears welling up in her little eyes when she is told that Funtown is closed to colored children, and see the depressing clouds of inferiority begin to form in her little mental sky, and see her begin to distort her little personality by unconsciously developing a bitterness toward white people; when you have to concoct an answer for a five-year old son asking in agonizing pathos: "Daddy, why do white people treat colored people so mean?"; when you take a cross country drive and find it necessary to sleep night after night in the uncomfortable corners of your automobile because no motel will accept you; when you are humiliated day in and day out by nagging signs reading "white" and "colored;" when your first name becomes "nigger" and your middle name becomes "boy" (however old you are) and your last name becomes "John," and when your wife and mother are never given the respected title "Mrs.;" when you are harried by day and haunted by night by the fact that you are a Negro, living constantly at tip-toe stance

(7)

never quite knowing what to expect next, and plagued with inner fears and outer resentments; when you are forever fighting a degenerating sense of "nobodiness;" then you will understand why we find it difficult to wait. There comes a time when the cup of endurance runs over, and men are no longer willing to be plunged into an abyss of injustice where they experience the bleakness of corroding despair. I hope, Sirs, you can understand our legitimate and unavoidable impatience.

You express a great deal of anxiety over our willingness to break laws. This is certainly a legitimate concern. Since we so diligently urge people to obey the Supreme Court's decision of 1954 outlawing segregation in the public schools, it is rather strange and paradoxical to find us consciously breaking laws. One may well ask, "how can you advocate breaking some laws and obeying others?" The answer is found in the fact that there are two types of laws: There are just and there are unjust laws. I would agree with Saint Augustine that "An unjust law is no law at all."

Now what is the difference between the two? How does one determine when a law is just or unjust? A just law is a man-made code that squares with the moral law or the law of God. An unjust law is a code that is out of harmony with the moral law. To put it in the terms of Saint Thomas Aquinas, an unjust law is a human law that is not rooted in eternal and natural law. Any law that uplifts human personality is just. Any law that degrades human personality is unjust. All segregation statutes are unjust because segregation distorts the soul and damages the personality. It gives the segregator a false sense of superiority, and the segregated a false sense of inferiority. To use the words of Martin Buber, the great Jewish philosopher, segregation substitutes an "I-it" relationship for the "I-thou" relationship, and ends up relegating persons to the status of things. So segregation is not only politically, economically and sociologically unsound,

(8)

but it is morally wrong and sinful. Paul Tillich has said that sin is separation. Isn't segregation an existential expression of man's tragic separation, an expression of his awful estrangement, his terrible sinfulness. So I can urge them to disobey segregation ordinances because they are morally wrong.

Let us turn to a more concrete example of just and unjust laws. An unjust law is a code that a majority inflicts on a minority that is not binding on itself. This is difference made legal. On the other hand a just law is a code that a majority compels a minority to follow that it is willing to follow itself. This is sameness made legal.

Let me give another explanation. An unjust law is a code inflicted upon a minority which that minority had no part in enacting or creating because they did not have the unhampered right to vote. Who can say that the legislature of Alabama which set up the segregation laws was democratically elected? Throughout the state of Alabama all types of conniving methods are used to prevent Negroes from becoming registered voters and there are some counties without a single Negro registered to vote despite the fact that the Negro constitutes a majority of the population. Can any law set up in such a state be considered democratically structured?

These are just a few examples of unjust and just laws. There are some instances when a law is just on its face and unjust in its application. For instance, I was arrested Friday on charge of parading without a permit. Now there is nothing wrong with an ordinance which requires a permit for a parade, but when the ordinance is used to preserve segregation and to deny citizens the First Amendment privilege of peaceful assembly and peaceful protest, then it becomes unjust.

I hope you can see the distinction I am trying to point out. In no sense do I advocate evading or defying the law as the rabid segregationist would do.

(9)

This would lead to anarchy. One who breaks an unjust law must do it openly, lovingly, (not hatefully as the white mothers did in New Orleans when they were seen on television screaming "nigger, nigger, nigger") and with a willingness to accept the penalty. I submit that an individual who breaks a law that conscience tells him is unjust, and willingly accepts the penalty by staying in jail to arouse the conscience of the community over its injustice, is in reality expressing the very highest respect for law.

Of course, there is nothing new about this kind of civil disobedience. It was seen sublimely in the refusal of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego to obey the laws of Nebuchadnezzar because a higher moral law was involved. It was practiced superbly by the early Christians who were willing to face hungry lions and the excruciating pain of chopping blocks, before submitting to certain unjust laws of the Roman empire. To a degree academic freedom is a reality today because Socrates practiced civil disobedience.

We can never forget that everything Hitler did in Germany was "legal" and everything the Hungarian freedom fighters did in Hungary was "illegal." It was "illegal" to aid and comfort a Jew in Hitler's Germany. But I am sure that if I had lived in Germany during that time I would have aided and comforted my Jewish brothers even though it was illegal. If I lived in a communist country today where certain principles dear to the Christian faith are suppressed, I believe I would openly advocate disobeying these anti-religious laws.

I must make two honest confessions to you, my Christian and Jewish brothers. First, I must confess that over the last few years I have been gravely disappointed with the white moderate. I have almost reached the regrettable conclusion that the Negro's great stumbling block in the stride toward freedom is not the White Citizen's Council-er or the Klu Klux Klanner, but the white moderate who is more devoted to "order" than to justice; who prefers a negative

(10)

peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice; who constantly says "I agree with you in the goal you seek, but I can't agree with your methods of direct action;" who paternalistically feels that he can set the time-table for another man's freedom; who lives by the myth of time and who constantly advises the Negro to wait until a "more convenient season." Shallow understanding from people of goodwill is more frustrating than absolute misunderstanding from people of ill will. Lukewarm acceptance is much more bewildering than outright rejection.

I had hoped that the white moderate would understand that law and order exist for the purpose of establishing justice, and that when they fail to do this they become the dangerously structured dams that block the flow of social progress. I had hoped that the white moderate would understand that the present tension in the South is merely a necessary phase of the transition from an obnoxious negative peace, where the Negro passively accepted his unjust plight, to a substance-filled positive peace, where all men will respect the dignity and worth of human personality. Actually, we who engage in nonviolent direct action are not the creators of tension. We merely bring to the surface the hidden tension that is already alive. We bring it out in the open where it can be seen and dealt with. Like a boil that can never be cured as long as it is covered up but must be opened with all its pus-flowing ugliness to the natural medicines of air and light, injustice must likewise be exposed, with all of the tension its exposing creates, to the light of human conscience and the air of national opinion before it can be cured.

In your statement you asserted that our actions, even though peaceful, must be condemned because they precipitate violence. But can this assertion be logically made? Isn't this like condemning the robbed man because his possession of money precipitated the evil act of robbery? Isn't this like

(11) -A-

condemning Socrates because his unswerving commitment to truth and his philosophical delvings precipitated the misguided popular mind to make him drink the hemlock? Isn't this like condemning Jesus because His unique God-Consciousness and never-ceasing devotion to His will precipitated the evil act of crucifixion? We must come to see, as federal courts have consistently affirmed, that it is immoral to urge an individual to withdraw his efforts to gain his basic constitutional rights because the quest precipitates violence. Society must protect the robbed and punish the robber.

I had also hoped that the white moderate would reject the myth of time. I received a letter this morning from a white brother in Texas which said: "All Christians know that the colored people will receive equal rights eventually, but it is possible that you are in too great of a religious hurry. It has taken Christianity almost 2000 years to accomplish what it has. The teachings of Christ take time to come to earth." All that is said here grows out of a tragic misconception of time. It is the strangely irrational notion that there is something in the very flow of time that will inevitably cure all ills. Actually time is neutral. It can be used either destructively or constructively. I am coming to feel that the people of ill-will have used time much more effectively than the people of good will. We will have to repent in this generation not merely for the vitriolic words and actions of the bad people, but for the appalling silence of the good people. We must come to see that human progress never rolls in on wheels of inevitability. It comes through the tireless efforts and persistent work of men willing to be co-workers with God, and without this hard work time itself becomes an ally of the forces of social stagnation. We must use time creatively, and forever realize that the time is always ripe to do right. Now is the time to make real the promise of democracy,

11 -B-

and transform our pending national elegy into a creative psalm of brotherhood. Now is the time to lift our national policy from the quicksand of racial injustice to the solid rock of human dignity.

You spoke of our activity in Birmingham as extreme. At first I was rather disappointed that fellow clergymen would see my nonviolent efforts as those of the extremist. I started thinking about the fact that I stand in the middle of two opposing forces in the Negro community. One is a force of complacency made up of Negroes who, as a result of long years of oppression, have been so completely drained of self-respect and a sense of "somebodiness" that they have adjusted to segregation, and, of a few Negroes in the middle class who, because of a degree of academic and economic security, and because at points they profit by segregation, have unconsciously become insensitive to the problems of the masses. The other force is one of bitterness, and hatred and becomes perilously close to advocating violence. It is expressed in the various black nationalist groups that are springing up over the nation, the largest and best known being Elijah Muhammad's Muslim movement. This movement is nourished by the contemporary frustration over the continued existence of racial discrimination. It is made up of people who have lost faith in America, who have absolutely repudiated Christianity, and who have concluded that the white man is an incurable "devil." I have tried to stand between these two forces saying that we need not follow the "do-nothingism" of the complacent or the hatred and despair of the black nationalist. There is a more excellent way of love and nonviolent protest. I'm grateful to God that, through the Negro church, the dimension of nonviolence entered our struggle. If this philosophy had not emerged, I am convinced that by now many streets of the South would be flowing with floods of blood. And I am further convinced that if our white brothers dismiss as "rabble rousers" and "outside agitators" those of us who are working through the channels of

(12)

nonviolent direct action and refuse to support our nonviolent efforts, millions of Negroes, out of frustration and despair, will seek solace and security in black nationalist ideologies, a development that will lead inevitably to a frightening racial nightmare.

Oppressed people cannot remain oppressed forever. The urge for freedom will eventually come. This is what has happened to the American Negro. Something within has reminded him of his birthright of freedom; something without has reminded him that he can gain it. Consciously and unconsciously, he has been swept in by what the Germans call the Zeitgeist, and with his black brother of Africa, and his brown and yellow brothers of Asia, South America and the Caribbean, he is moving with a sense of cosmic urgency toward the promise land of racial justice. Recognizing this vital urge that has engulfed the Negro community, one should readily understand public demonstrations. The Negro has many pent up resentments and latent frustrations. He has to get them out. So let him march sometime; let him have his prayer pilgrimages to the city hall; understand why he must have sit-ins and freedom rides. If his repressed emotions do not come out in these nonviolent ways, they will come out in ominous expressions of violence. This is not a threat; it is a fact of history. So I have not said to my people "get rid of your discontent." But I have tried to say that this normal and healthy discontent can be channelized through the creative outlet of nonviolent direct action. Now this approach is being dismissed as extremist. I must admit that I was initially disappointed in being so categorized .

But as I continue to think about the matter I gradually gained a bit of satisfaction from being considered an extremist. Was not Jesus an extremist in love- "Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, pray for them that despitefully use you." Was not Amos an extremist for justice - "Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream." Was not Paul

(13)

an extremist for the gospel of Jesus Christ - "I bear in my body the marks of the Lord Jesus." Was not Martin Luther an extremist - "here I stand; I can do none other so help me God." Was not John Bunyan an extremist - "I will stay in jail to the end of my days before I make a butchery of my conscience." Was not Abraham Lincoln an extremist - "This nation cannot survive half slave and half free." Was not Thomas Jefferson an extremist - We hold these truths to be self evident that all men are created equal." So the question is not whether we will be extremist but what kind of extremist will we be. Will we be extremists for hate or will we be extremists for love? Will we be extremists for the preservation of injustice - or will we be extremists for the cause of justice? In that dramatic scene on Calvary's hill, three men were crucified. We must not forget that all three were crucified for the same crime. The crime of extremism. Two were extremists for immorality, and thusly fell below their environment. The other, Jesus Christ, was an extremist for love, truth, and goodness, and thereby rose above his environment. So, after all, maybe the South, the nation and the world are in dire need of creative extremists.

I had hoped that the white moderate would see this. Maybe I was too optimistic. Maybe I expected too much. I guess I should have realized that few members of a race that has oppressed another race can understand or appreciate the deep groans and passionate yearnings of those that have been oppressed and still fewer have the vision to see that injustice must be rooted out by strong, persistent and determined action. I am thankful, however, that some of our white brothers have grasped the meaning of this social revolution and committed themselves to it. They are still all too small in quantity, but they are big in quality. Some like Ralph McGill, Lillian Smith, Harry Golden and James Dabbs have written about our struggle in eloquent, prophetic and understanding terms. Others have marched with us down nameless streets of the South. They have languished in filthy roach-infested jails, suffering the abuse and brutality of angry policemen who

(14)

see them as "dirty nigger lovers." They, unlike so many of their moderate brothers and sisters, have recognized the urgency of the moment and sensed the need for powerful "action" antidotes to combat the disease of segregation.

Let me rush on to mention my other disappointment. I have been so greatly disappointed with the white church and its leadership. Of course, there are some notable exceptions. I am not unmindful of the fact that each of you has taken some significant stands on this issue. I commend you, Rev. Stallings, for your Christian stand on this past Sunday, in welcoming Negroes to your worship service on a non-segregated basis. I commend the Catholic leaders of this state for integrating Springhill College several years ago.

But despite these notable exceptions I must honestly reiterate that I have been disappointed with the church. I say it as a minister of the gospel, who loves the church; who was nurtured in its bosom; who has been sustained by its spiritual blessings and who will remain true to it as long as the cord of life shall lengthen.

I had the strange feeling when I was suddenly catapulted into the leadership of the bus protest in Montgomery several years ago that we would have the support of the white church. I felt that the white ministers, priests and rabbis of the South would be some of our strongest allies. Instead, some have been outright opponents, refusing to understand the freedom movement and misrepresenting its leaders; all too many others have been more cautious than courageous and have remained silent behind the anesthetizing security of stained-glass windows.

In spite of my shattered dreams of the past, I came to Birmingham with the hope that the white religious leadership of this community would see the justice of our cause, and with deep moral concern, serve as the channel through which our just grievances could get to the power structure. I had hoped that

(15)

each of you would understand. But again I have been disappointed.

I have heard numerous religious leaders of the South call upon their worshippers to comply with a desegregation decision because it is the law, but I have longed to hear white ministers say, "follow this decree because integration is morally right and the Negro is your brother." In the midst of blatant injustices inflicted upon the Negro, I have watched white churches stand on the sideline and merely mouth pious irrelevances and sanctimonious trivialities. In the midst of a mighty struggle to rid our nation of racial and economic injustice, I have heard so many ministers say, "those are social issues with which the gospel has no real concern", and I have watched so many churches commit themselves to a completely other-worldly religion which made a strange distinction between body and soul, the sacred and the secular.

So here we are moving toward the exit of the twentieth century with a religious community largely adjusted to the status quo, standing as a tail-light behind other community agencies rather than a headlight leading men to higher levels of justice.

I have travelled the length and breadth of Alabama, Mississippi and all the other southern states. On sweltering summer days and crisp autumn mornings I have looked at her beautiful churches with their lofty spires pointing heavenward. I have beheld the impressive outlay of her massive religious education buildings. Over and over again I have found myself asking: "What kind of people worship here? Who is their God? Where were their voices when the lips of Governor Barnett dripped with words of interposition and nullification? Where were they when Governor Wallace gave the clarion call for defiance and hatred? Where were their voices of support when tired, bruised and weary Negro men

(16)

and women decided to rise from the dark dungeons of complacency to the bright hills of creative protest?"

Yes, these questions are still in my mind. In deep disappointment, I have wept over the laxity of the church. But be assured that my tears have been tears of love. There can be no deep disappointment where there is not deep love. Yes, I love the church; I love her sacred walls. How could I do otherwise? I am in the rather unique position of being the son, the grandson and the great-grandson of preachers. Yes, I see the church as the body of Christ. But, oh! How we have blemished and scarred that body through social neglect and fear of being nonconformists.

There was a time when the Church was very powerful. It was during that period when the early Christians rejoiced when they were deemed worthy to suffer for what they believed. In those days the Church was not merely a thermometer that recorded the ideas and principles of popular opinion; it was a thermostat that transformed the mores of society. Wherever the early Christians entered a town the power structure got disturbed and immediately sought to convict them for being "disturbers of the peace" and "outside agitators." But they went on with the conviction that they were "a colony of heaven", and had to obey God rather than man. They were small in number but big in commitment. They were too God-intoxicated to be "astronomically intimidated." They brought an end to such ancient evils as infanticide and gladiatorial contest.

Things are different now. The contemporary church is so often a weak, ineffectual voice with an uncertain sound. It is so often the arch supporter of the status quo. Far from being disturbed by the presence of the church,

(17)

the power structure of the average community is consoled by the church's silent and often vocal sanction of things as they are.

But the judgement of God is upon the church as never before. If the church of today does not recapture the sacrificial spirit of the early church, it will lose its authentic ring, forfeit the loyalty of millions, and be dismissed as an irrelevant social club with no meaning for the twentieth century. I am meeting young people every day whose disappointment with the church has risen to outright disgust.

Maybe again, I have been too optimistic. Is organized religion too inextricably bound to status-quo to save our nation and the world? Maybe I must turn my faith to the inner spiritual church, the church within the church, as the true ecclesia and the hope of the world. But again I am thankful to God that some noble souls from the ranks of organized religion have broken loose from the paralyzing chains of conformity and joined us as active partners in the struggle for freedom. They have left their secure congregations and walked the streets of Albany, Georgia, with us. They have gone through the highways of the South on tortuous rides for freedom. Yes, they have gone to jail with us. Some have been kicked out of their churches, and lost support of their bishops and fellow ministers. But they have gone with the faith that right defeated is stronger than evil triumphant. These men have been the leaven in the lump of the race. Their witness has been the spiritual salt that has preserved the true meaning of the Gospel in these troubled times. They have carved a tunnel of hope through the dark mountain of disappointment.

I hope the church as a whole will meet the challenge of this decisive hour. But even if the church does not come to the aid of justice, I have no despair about the future. I have no fear about the outcome of our struggle in

(18)

Birmingham, even if our motives are presently misunderstood. We will reach the goal of freedom in Birmingham and all over the nation, because the goal of America is freedom. Abused and scorned though we may be, our destiny is tied up with the destiny of America. Before the pilgrims landed at Plymouth we were here. Before the pen of Jefferson etched across the pages of history the majestic words of the Declaration of Independence, we were here. For more than two centuries our fore-parents labored here without wages; they made cotton king; and they built the homes of their masters in the midst of brutal injustice and shameful humiliation--and yet out of a bottomless vitality they continued to thrive and develop. If the inexpressible cruelties of slavery could not stop us, the opposition we now face will surely fail. We will win our freedom because the sacred heritage of our nation and the eternal will of God are embodied in our echoing demands.

I must close now. But before closing I am impelled to mention one other point in your statement that troubled me profoundly. You warmly commended the Birmingham police force for keeping "order" and "preventing violence." I don't believe you would have so warmly commended the police force if you had seen its angry violent dogs literally biting six unarmed, nonviolent Negroes. I don't believe you would so quickly commend the policemen if you would observe their ugly and inhuman treatment of Negroes here in the city jail; if you would watch them push and curse old Negro women and young Negro girls; if you would see them slap and kick old Negro men and young boys; if you will observe them, as they did on two occasions, refuse to give us food because we wanted to sing our grace together. I'm sorry that I can't join you in your praise for the police department.

(19)

It is true that they have been rather disciplined in their public handling of the demonstrators. In this sense they have been rather publicly "non-violent." But for what purpose? To preserve the evil system of segregation. Over the last few years I have consistently preached that nonviolence demands that the means we use must be as pure as the ends we seek. So I have tried to make it clear that it is wrong to use immoral means to attain moral ends. But not I must affirm that it is just as wrong, or even more so to use moral means to preserve immoral ends. Maybe Mr. Connor and his policemen have been rather publicly nonviolent, as Chief Pritchett was in Albany, Georgia, but they have used the moral means of nonviolence to maintain the immoral end of flagrant racial injustice. T. S. Eliot has said that there is no greater treason than to do the right deed for the wrong reason.

I wish you had commended the Negro sit-inners and demonstrators of Birmingham for their sublime courage, their willingness to suffer and their amazing discipline in the midst of the most inhuman provocation. One day the South will recognize its real heroes. They will be the James Merediths, courageously and with a majestic sense of purpose, facing jeering and hostile mobs and the agonizing loneliness that characterizes the life of the pioneer. They will be old oppressed, battered Negro women, symbolized in a seventy-two year old woman of Montgomery, Alabama, who rose up with a sense of dignity and with her people decided not to ride the segregated buses, and respond to one who inquired about her tiredness with ungrammatical profundity; "my feet is tired, but my soul is rested." They will be the young high school and college students, young ministers of the gospel and a host of their elders courageously and non-violently sitting-in at lunch counters and willingly going to jail for conscience

(20)

sake. One day the South will know that when these disinherited children of God sat down at lunch counters they were in reality standing up for the best in the American dream and the most sacred values in our Judeo-Christian heritage, and thusly, carrying our whole nation back to those great wells of democracy which were dug deep by the founding fathers in the formulation of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence.

Never before have I written a letter this long, (or should I say a book?). I'm afraid that it is much too long to take your precious time. I can assure you that it would have been much shorter if I had been writing from a comfortable desk, but what else is there to do when you are alone for days in the dull monotony of a narrow jail cell other than write long letters, think strange thoughts, and pray long prayers?

If I have said anything in this letter that is an overstatement of the truth and is indicative of an unreasonable impatience, I beg you to forgive me. If I have said anything in this letter that is an understatement of the truth and is indicative of my having a patience that makes me patient with anything less than brotherhood, I beg God to forgive me.

I hope this letter finds you strong in the faith. I also hope that circumstances will soon make it possible for me to meet each of you, not as an integrationist or a civil rights leader, but as a fellow clergyman and a Christian brother. Let us all hope that the dark clouds of racial prejudice will soon pass away and the deep fog of misunderstanding will be lifted from our fear-drenched communities and in some not too distant tomorrow the radiant stars of love and brotherhood will shine over our great nation with all of their scintillating beauty.

Yours for the cause of Peace and Brotherhood

Martin Luther King, Jr.

MLKswm

Martin Luther King

Letter from Birmingham Jail (1963)

[Abridged]

April 16, 1963

My Dear Fellow Clergymen,

While confined here in the Birmingham City Jail, I came across your recent statement calling our present activities “unwise and untimely.” Seldom, if ever, do I pause to answer criticism of my work and ideas ... But since I feel that you are men of genuine good will and your criticisms are sincerely set forth, I would like to answer your statement in what I hope will be patient and reasonable terms.

I think I should give the reason for my being in Birmingham, since you have been influenced by the argument of “outsiders coming in.” I have the honor of serving as president of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, an organization operating in every Southern state with headquarters in Atlanta, Georgia. We have some 85 affiliate organizations all across the South ... Several months ago our local affiliate here in Birmingham invited us to be on call to engage in a nonviolent direct action program if such were deemed necessary. We readily consented...

But more basically, I am in Birmingham because injustice is here. Just as the prophets of the eighth century B.C. left their villages and carried their “thus saith the Lord” far beyond the boundaries of their home towns, and just as the Apostle Paul left his village of Tarsus and carried the gospel of Jesus Christ to the far corners of the Greco-Roman world, so am I compelled to carry the gospel of freedom beyond my own home town. Like Paul, I must constantly respond to the Macedonian call for aid.

Moreover, I am cognizant of the interrelatedness of all communities and states. I cannot sit idly by in Atlanta and not be concerned about what happens in Birmingham. Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly. Never again can we afford to live with the narrow, provincial “outside agitator” idea. Anyone who lives inside the United States can never be considered an outsider anywhere within its bounds...

In any nonviolent campaign there are four basic steps: 1) collection of the facts to determine whether injustices are alive; 2) negotiation; 3) self-purification; and 4) direct action. We have gone through all of these steps in Birmingham ... Birmingham is probably the most thoroughly segregated city in the United States. Its ugly record of police brutality is known in every section of the country. Its unjust treatment of Negroes in the courts is a notorious reality. There have been more unsolved bombings of Negro homes and churches in Birmingham than in any city in this nation. These are the hard, brutal, and unbelievable facts. On the basis of these conditions Negro leaders sought to negotiate with the city fathers. But the political leaders consistently refused to engage in good faith negotiation.

Then came the opportunity last September to talk with some of the leaders of the economic community. In these negotiating sessions certain promises were made by the merchants—such as the promise to remove the humiliating racial signs from the stores. On the basis of these promises Reverend Shuttlesworth and the leaders of the Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights agreed to call a moratorium on any type of demonstrations. As the weeks and months unfolded we realized that we were the victims of a broken promise. The signs remained. As in so many experiences in the past, we were confronted with blasted hopes, and the dark shadow of a deep disappointment settled upon us. So we had no alternative except that of preparing for direct action, whereby we would present our very bodies as a means of laying our case before the conscience of the local and national community. We were not unmindful of the difficulties involved. So we decided to go through the process of self-purification. We started having workshops on nonviolence and repeatedly asked ourselves the questions, “are you able to accept the blows without retaliating?” “Are you able to endure the ordeals of jail?” ...

You may well ask, “Why direct action? Why sit-ins, marches, etc.? Isn’t negotiation a better path?” You are exactly right in your call for negotiation. Indeed, this is the purpose of direct action. Nonviolent direct action seeks to create such a crisis and establish such creative tension in a community that has constantly refused to negotiate is forced to confront the issue. ... Just as Socrates felt that it was necessary to create a tension in the mind so that individuals could rise from the bondage of myths and half-truths to the unfettered realm of creative analysis and objective appraisal, we must see the need for nonviolent gadflies to create the kind of tension in society that will help men rise from the dark depths of prejudice and racism to the majestic heights of understanding and brotherhood. ...

My friends, I must say to you that we have not made a single gain in civil rights without legal and nonviolent pressure. History is the long and tragic story of the fact that privileged groups seldom give up their privileges voluntarily. Individuals may see the moral light and give up their unjust posture; but as Reinhold Niebuhr has reminded us, groups are more immoral than individuals.

We know through painful experience that freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor; it must be demanded by the oppressed. Frankly I have never yet engaged in a direct action movement that was “well timed,” according to the timetable of those who have not suffered unduly from the disease of segregation. For years now I have heard the word “Wait!” It rings in the ear of every Negro with a piercing familiarity. This “wait” has almost always meant “never.” It has been a tranquilizing Thalidomide, relieving the emotional stress for a moment, only to give birth to an ill-formed infant of frustration. We must come to see with the distinguished jurist of yesterday that “justice too long delayed is justice denied.” We have waited for more than 340 years for our constitutional and God-given rights. The nations of Asia and Africa are moving with jetlike speed toward the goal of political independence, and we still creep at horse and buggy pace toward the gaining of a cup of coffee at a lunch counter.

Perhaps it is easy for those who have never felt the stinging darts of segregation to say wait. But when you have seen vicious mobs lynch your mothers and fathers at will and drown your sisters and brothers at whim; when you have seen hate-filled policemen curse, kick, brutalize, and even kill your black brothers and sisters with impunity; when you see the vast majority of your 20 million

Negro brothers smothering in an airtight cage of poverty in the midst of an affluent society; when you suddenly find your tongue twisted and your speech stammering as you seek to explain to your six-year-old daughter why she can't go to the public amusement park that has just been advertised on television, and see the tears welling up in her little eyes when she is told that Funtown is closed to colored children, and see the depressing clouds of inferiority begin to form in her little mental sky, and see her begin to distort her little personality by unconsciously developing a bitterness toward white people; when you have to concoct an answer for a five-year-old son who is asking in agonizing pathos: "Daddy, why do white people treat colored people so mean?" when you take a cross country drive and find it necessary to sleep night after night in the uncomfortable corners of your automobile because no motel will accept you; when you are humiliated day in and day out by nagging signs reading "white" men and "colored" when your first name becomes "nigger" and your middle name becomes "boy" (however old you are) and your last name becomes "John," and when your wife and mother are never given the respected title of "Mrs." when you are harried by day and haunted by night by the fact that you are a Negro, living constantly at tip-toe stance, never quite knowing what to expect next, and plagued with inner fears and outer resentments; when you are forever fighting a degenerating sense of "nobodiness"—then you will understand why we find it difficult to wait. There comes a time when the cup of endurance runs over, and men are no longer willing to be plunged into an abyss of injustice where they experience the bleakness of corroding despair. I hope, sirs, you can understand our legitimate and unavoidable impatience.

You express a great deal of anxiety over our willingness to break laws. This is certainly a legitimate concern. Since we so diligently urge people to obey the Supreme Court's decision of 1954 outlawing segregation in the public schools, at first glance it may seem rather paradoxical for us consciously to break laws. One may wonder: "How can you advocate breaking some laws and obeying others?" The answer lies in the fact that there are two types of laws: just and unjust. I would be the first to advocate obeying just laws. One has not only a legal but a moral responsibility to obey just laws. Conversely, one has a moral responsibility to disobey unjust laws. I would agree with St. Augustine that "an unjust law is no law at all."

Now, what is the difference between the two? How does one determine whether a law is just or unjust? A just law is a man-made code that squares with the moral law or the law of God. An unjust law is a code that is out of harmony with the moral law. To put it in the terms of St. Thomas Aquinas: An unjust law is a human law that is not rooted in eternal law and natural law. Any law that uplifts human personality is just. Any law that degrades human personality is unjust. All segregation statutes are unjust because segregation distorts the soul and damages the personality. It gives the segregator a false sense of superiority and the segregated a false sense of inferiority. Segregation, to use the terminology of the Jewish philosopher Martin Buber, substitutes an "I-it" relationship for an "I-thou" relationship and ends up relegating persons to the status of things. Hence segregation is not only politically, economically and sociologically unsound, it is morally wrong and awful...

I hope you are able to see the distinction I am trying to point out. In no sense do I advocate evading or defying the law, as would the rabid segregationist. That would lead to anarchy. One who breaks an unjust law must do so openly, lovingly, and with a willingness to accept the penalty. I submit that

an individual who breaks a law that conscience tells him is unjust and who willingly accepts the penalty of imprisonment in order to arouse the conscience of the community over its injustice, is in reality expressing the highest respect for law.

Of course, there is nothing new about this kind of civil disobedience. It was evidenced sublimely in the refusal of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego to obey the laws of Nebuchadnezzar, on the ground that a higher moral law was at stake. It was practiced superbly by the early Christians, who were willing to face hungry lions and the excruciating pain of chopping blocks rather than submit to certain unjust laws of the Roman Empire. To a degree, academic freedom is a reality today because Socrates practiced civil disobedience. In our own nation, the Boston Tea Party represented a massive act of civil disobedience.

We should never forget that everything Adolf Hitler did in Germany was "legal" and everything the Hungarian freedom fighters did in Hungary was "illegal." It was "illegal" to aid and comfort a Jew in Hitler's Germany. Even so, I am sure that, had I lived in Germany at the time, I would have aided and comforted my Jewish brothers. If today I lived in a Communist country where certain principles dear to the Christian faith are suppressed, I would openly advocate disobeying that country's antireligious laws.

I must make two honest confessions to you, my Christian and Jewish brothers. First, I must confess that over the last few years I have been gravely disappointed with the white moderate. I have almost reached the regrettable conclusion that the Negro's great stumbling block in the stride toward freedom is not the White Citizens' Council or the Ku Klux Klanner, but the white moderate who is more devoted to "order" than to justice; who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice; who constantly says "I agree with you in the goal you seek, but I can't agree with your methods of direct action" who paternistically feels that he can set the timetable for another man's freedom; who lives by the myth of time and who constantly advises the Negro to wait until a "more convenient season." Shallow understanding from people of good will is more frustrating than absolute misunderstanding from people of ill will. Lukewarm acceptance is much more bewildering than outright rejection. ...

You spoke of our activity in Birmingham as extreme. At first I was rather disappointed that fellow clergymen would see my nonviolent efforts as those of an extremist. I started thinking about the fact that I stand in the middle of two opposing forces in the Negro community. One is a force of complacency made up of Negroes who, as a result of long years of oppression, have been so completely drained of self-respect and a sense of "somebodiness" that they have adjusted to segregation, and a few Negroes in the middle class who, because of a degree of academic and economic security, and at points they profit from segregation, have unconsciously become insensitive to the problems of the masses. The other force is one of bitterness and hatred and comes perilously close to advocating violence. It is expressed in the various black nationalist groups that are springing up over the nation, the largest and best known being Elijah Muhammad's Muslim movement. This movement is nourished by the contemporary frustration over the continued existence of racial discrimination. It is made up of people who have lost faith in America, who have absolutely repudiated Christianity, and who have concluded that the white man is an incurable "devil." ...

The Negro has many pent-up resentments and latent frustrations. He has to get them out. So let him march sometime; let him have his prayer pilgrimages to the city hall; understand why he must have sit-ins and freedom rides. If his repressed emotions do not come out in these nonviolent ways, they will come out in ominous expressions of violence. This is not a threat; it is a fact of history. So I have not said to my people, "Get rid of your discontent." But I have tried to say that this normal and healthy discontent can be channeled through the creative outlet of nonviolent direct action. ...

In spite of my shattered dreams of the past, I came to Birmingham with the hope that the white religious leadership in the community would see the justice of our cause and, with deep moral concern, serve as the channel through which our just grievances could get to the power structure. I had hoped that each of you would understand. But again I have been disappointed.

I have heard numerous religious leaders of the South call upon their worshippers to comply with a desegregation decision because it is the law, but I have longed to hear white ministers declare: "Follow this decree because integration is morally right and the Negro is your brother." In the midst of blatant injustices inflicted upon the Negro, I have watched white churchmen stand on the sideline and merely mouth pious irrelevancies and sanctimonious trivialities. In the midst of a mighty struggle to rid our nation of racial and economic injustice, I have heard so many ministers say, "Those are social issues with which the Gospel has no real concern," and I have watched so many churches commit themselves to a completely other-worldly religion which made a strange distinction between body and soul, the sacred and the secular. ...

I hope this letter finds you strong in the faith. I also hope that circumstances will soon make it possible for me to meet each of you, not as an integrationist or a civil rights leader, but as a fellow clergyman and a Christian brother. Let us all hope that the dark clouds of racial prejudice will soon pass away and the deep fog of misunderstanding will be lifted from our fear-drenched communities and in some not too distant tomorrow the radiant stars of love and brotherhood will shine over our great nation with all of their scintillating beauty.

Yours for the cause of Peace and Brotherhood,

M. L. King, Jr.

CLAUDIA JONES

BEYOND CONTAINMENT

Autobiographical Reflections,
Essays and Poems

Edited by Carole Boyce Davies

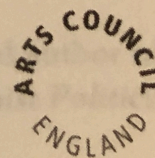
With an Afterword by Alrick X. Cambridge



An Adinkra symbol meaning

Ntesie matemasi

A symbol of knowledge and wisdom



Ayebia Clarke Publishing Limited gratefully acknowledges Arts Council SE Funding

To Elizabeth Gurley Flynn²⁵

(1955)

I think I'll always see you everywhere –
At morn – when sunlight's radiance bathes all things like verse
Proclaiming man, not beast,
Is king of all the universe.

I'll see you in young shooting sprouts
That sneer at weeds – age-gnarled in doubt
Of users who defile in epithet,
A life well-lived in service, built from strife.

I'll see you too at noontime
When the sun in orbit
Flings its rays like thyme through skies on days that hurt
Causing you to weld anew full courage spurt

I'll see you oft at twilight's dusk
Before the sun will fade
I'll conjure up your twinkling laugh
Your eyes so much like jade.

I'll see you in the dark of night
When Nature seeks her rest
Except the reedy crickets
Who muse in watch, I guess.

I'll think of you forever
And how your spirit rings
Because your faith leaps as a flame
Sweet nurture to all things

Of all the times I'll miss you most
Is when I'm least aware
Because you will intrude I know – Upon my inner ear
Beloved comrade – when from you I tear –
My mind, my heart, my thoughts, you'll hear!

For Consuela – Anti-Fascista*²⁶

(1955)

It seems I knew you long before our common ties – of conscious choice
Threw under single skies, those like us
Who, fused by our mold
Became their targets as of old

I knew you in Jarama's hills
Through men and women drilled
In majesty, whose dignity
Rejected shirts and skirts of dimity.

I heard you in Guernica's songs
Proud melodies that burst from tongues
As yet unknown to me – full thronged
With Liberty.

Anti-anti-fascistas!
That was your name
I sang your fame
Long 'fore my witness of your bane of pain

I saw you in the passion-flower
In roses full of flame
Pure valley lily, whose bower
Marks resemblance to your name.

Oh wondrous Spanish sister
Long-locked from all you care
Listen – while I tell you what you strain to hear
And beckon all from far and near

We swear that we will never rest
Until they hear not plea
But sainted sacrifice to set
A small proud nation free

* Dedicated to Blanca Consuela Torresola, now serving 4 years in the Federal Reformatory for Women in Alderson, W. Va, USA and who, upon completion of this sentence faces an 140 year jail term in her native Puerto Rico for her heroic participation in the struggle for Puerto Rican independence.

O anti-fascist sister – you whose eyes turn to stars still
I've learned your wondrous secret – source of spirit and of will
I've learned that what sustains you heart, mind and peace of soul
Is knowledge that their justice – can never reach its goal!

Farewell To Claudia Jones (1955)

Elizabeth Gurley Flynn

Nearer and nearer drew this day, dear comrade
When I from you sadly part,
Day after day, a dark foreboding sorrow
Crept through my anxious heart.

No more to see you striding down the pathway,
No more to see your smiling eyes and face
No more to hear your gay and pealing laughter,
No more to feel your love, in this sad place.

How I will miss you, words will fail to utter,
I am alone, my thoughts unshared, these weary days
I feel bereft and empty, on this dreary and gray morning,
Facing my lonely future, hemmed by prison ways.

Sometimes I feel you've never been in Alderson,
So full of life, so detached from here you seem,
So proud of walk, of talk, of work, of being,
Your presence here is like a fading dream.

Yet as the sun shines now, through fog and darkness,
I feel a sudden joy that you are gone,
That once again you walk the streets of Harlem,
That today for you at least is Freedom's dawn.

I will be strong in our common faith, dear comrade,
I will be self-sufficient, to our ideals firm and true,
I will be strong to keep my mind and soul outside a prison,
Inspired by ever loving memories of you.



Daniel Murray. Asst.

— OFFICE OF —
ANTI-LYNCHING BUREAU.
2939 PRINCETON AVE. CHICAGO

V. 7 (11)

To the Members of the Anti-Lynching Bureau;—

The year of 1901 with its lynching record is a thing of the past. There were 135 human beings that met death at the hands of mobs during this year. Not only is the list larger than for four years past, but the barbarism of this lawlessness is on the increase. Six human beings were burned alive between January 1st 1901 and Jan. 1st 1902. More persons met death in this horrible manner the past twelve months than in three years before and in proportion as the number roasted alive increases, in the same proportion has there been an indifference manifested by the public. Time was when the country resounded with denunciation and the horror of burning a human being by so called christian and civilized people. The newspapers were full of it. The last time a human being was made fuel for flames it was scarcely noticed in the papers editorially. And the chairman of your bureau finds it harder every year to get such matter printed. In other words, the need for agitation and publication of facts is greater than ever, while the avenues through which to make such publications have decreased.

Nowhere does this apathetic condition prevail to a greater extent than within the membership of the Anti-Lynching Bureau. When the bureau was first organized three years ago, it was thought that every man, woman, and child who had a drop of Negro blood in his veins and every person else who wanted to see mob law put down would gladly contribute 25 cents per year to this end. There were upward of 300 responses to the first appeal, and less than 50 per cent renewed at the end of that year. The third year of the bureau's existence is half over and altho the chairman has determined to issue a periodical, there are absolutely no funds in the treasury to pay postage much less the printer.

Nevertheless my faith in the justice of our cause and the absolute need of this agitation, leads me to again address those who have shown 25 cents worth of interest in the matter heretofore. I send with this circular a pamphlet which friends have helped to pay for. It was thought best to begin with what to us was the beginning of history for our race in the United States the Reconstruction period. In view of the recent agitation in Congress and out anent the disfranchisement of the Negro and the causes alleged therefor, it was thought best to throw some light on those times and give some unwritten history. This history is written by one who can say with Julius Caesar of the history he wrote: "All of which I saw and part of which I was." He has given his time and money to aid the publication. Will not the members of the bureau bestir themselves to circulate this number and aid in the publication of others. We can only change public sentiment and enforce laws by educating the people., giving them facts. This you can do by 1st, Renewing your membership in the Anti-Lynching Bureau and securing others. 2nd, By paying for the copy sent you and purchasing others to distribute. 3rd, By sending a copy of the Reconstruction "Review" to your Congressman together with a letter urging the cutting down of the representation in Congress of the states which have nullified the Constitution. It rests with you to say whether the Anti-Lynching Bureau shall be strengthened to do its work for the future.

Jan. 1st, 1902.

Ida B. Wells-Barnett, Chairman.

The American Yawp Reader



David Walker's Appeal to the Colored Citizens of the World, 1829

David Walker's Appeal to the Colored Citizens of the World, 1829

David Walker was the son of an enslaved man and a free Black woman. He traveled widely before settling in Boston where he worked in and owned clothing stores and involved himself in various reform causes. In 1829, he wrote the remarkable Appeal to the Colored Citizens of the World. In it, he exposed the hypocrisies of American claims of freedom and Christianity, attacked the plan to colonize Black Americans in Africa, and predicted that God's justice promised violence for the enslaving United States.

1

Having travelled over a considerable portion of these United States, and having, in the course of my travels, taken the most accurate observations of things as they exist—the result of my observations has warranted the full and unshaken conviction, that we, (coloured people of these United States,) are the most degraded, wretched, and abject set of beings that ever lived since the world began; and I pray God that none like us ever may live again until time shall be no more. They tell us of the Israelites in Egypt, the Helots in Sparta, and of the Roman Slaves, which last were made up from almost every nation under heaven, whose sufferings under those ancient and heathen nations, were, in comparison with ours, under this enlightened and Christian nation, no more than a cypher—or, in other words, those heathen nations of antiquity, had but little more among them than the name and form of slavery; while wretchedness and endless miseries were reserved, apparently in a phial, to be poured out upon our fathers, ourselves and our children, by *Christian* Americans!

1

... But against all accusations which may or can be preferred against me, I appeal to Heaven for my motive in writing—who knows what my object is, if possible, to awaken in the breasts of my afflicted, degraded and slumbering brethren, a spirit of inquiry and investigation respecting our miseries and wretchedness in this *Republican Land of Liberty!!!!!!*

...Will any of us leave our homes and go to Africa? I hope not. Let them commence their attack upon us as they did on our brethren in Ohio, driving and beating us from our country, and my soul for theirs, they will have enough of it. Let no man of us budge one step, and let slave-holders come to beat us from our country. America is more our country, than it is the whites—we have enriched it with our *blood and tears*. The greatest riches in all America have arisen from our blood and tears:—and will they drive us from our property and homes, which we have earned with our *blood*? They must look sharp or this very thing will bring swift destruction upon them. The Americans have got so fat on our blood and groans, that they have almost forgotten the God of armies. But let them go on...

I also ask the attention of the world of mankind to the declaration of these very American people, of the United States. *A declaration made July 4, 1776*. It says, “When in the course of human events, it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another, and to assume among the Powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which the laws of nature and of nature’s God entitle them. A decent respect for the opinions of mankind requires, that they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation.— We hold these truths to be self evident—that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights: that among these, are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” See your Declaration Americans!!! Do you understand your own language? Hear your language, proclaimed to the world, July 4th, 1776—”We hold these truths to be self evident—that ALL MEN ARE CREATED EQUAL!! that they *are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights*, that among these are life, *liberty*, and the pursuit of happiness!!” Compare your own language above, extracted from your Declaration of Independence, with your cruelties and murders inflicted by your cruel and unmerciful fathers and yourselves on our fathers and on us—men who have never given your fathers or you the least provocation!!!!!!

Now, Americans! I ask you candidly, was your sufferings under Great Britain, one hundredth part as cruel and tyrannical as you have rendered ours under you? Some of you, no doubt, believe that we will never throw off your murderous government and “provide new guards for our future se-

curity.” If Satan has made you believe it, will he not deceive you? Do the whites say, I being a black man, ought to be humble, which I readily admit? I ask them, ought they not to be as humble as I? or do they think that they can measure arms with Jehovah? Will not the Lord yet humble them? or will not these very coloured people whom they now treat worse than brutes, yet under God, humble them low down enough? Some of the whites are ignorant enough to tell us that we ought to be submissive to them, that they may keep their feet on our throats. And if we do not submit to be beaten to death by them, we are bad creatures and of course must be damned, &c. If any man wishes to hear this doctrine openly preached to us by the American preachers, let him go into the Southern and Western sections of this country—I do not speak from hear say—what I have written, is what I have seen and heard myself. No man may think that my book is made up of conjecture— I have travelled and observed nearly the whole of those things myself, and what little I did not get by my own observation, I received from those among the whites and blacks, in whom the greatest confidence may be placed.

The Americans may be as vigilant as they please, but they cannot be vigilant enough for the Lord, neither can they hide themselves, where he will not find and bring them out.

David Walker, *An Appeal to the Colored Citizens of the World* (Boston: 1830), 3-4, 73, 84, 86.

Available through Documenting the American South, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

← Dorothea Dix defends the mentally ill, 1843

William Lloyd Garrison Introduces The Liberator, 1831 →