Editors’ Introduction: Responding to Centuries of Violence, Imprisonment and Oppression

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In this special issue, we hope you will join us in honoring those ancestors on whose shoulders we all stand. Those ancestors were the dreamers of what “this land and its peoples” can be. Can be, still. We want to honor them by working for the immediate freedom of those who are imperial America’s political prisoners. In this issue, we focus on those who were members of the Black Panther Party and the Black Liberation Army. The majority of the submissions have been published elsewhere (in books or on-line). The main purpose of this publication is to bring all voices together in a commemorative manner. We pay homage to the decades of work and struggles for freedom.

These dream-holders, whether framed or captured in assertive resistance, were fueled both by the dreams of the ancients and by their own dreams of getting to a different place, a different space in commune with others. Some said, “Take me Home to the Motherland”. Others said, “We want a New Afrika here in that nation called Down South”. And still others said, “Wherever we be, we must be free with the dignity of governing our own affairs”. These are the Panther political prisoners. They are the reminders of what must not be forgotten about the horrible and ever-present contradictions of the racist American Empire. The recognition of their very presence unnerves the façade holders of US Democracy, the façade holders of US foreign policy. They have caged our African dreamers in resistance. The issue is not only that our black freedom fighters are in prison. The issue extends into the very existence of their prison and how they have used it from its inception as an ongoing tool of racist/class oppression, shielding behind cement walls the ongoing horrors of the world in which we live.

But walls are not sufficient to hide the obvious. Even a superficial glimpse at the US penal system reveals the horrors: there are more than 5 times as many black people in prison (per capita) in the US today than there were in South Africa at the end of Apartheid (Gottschalk, 2006). The majority of black college age men are in prison, while the majority of white college age men in the US are exactly where they should be—in college. More horrifically, “Black men ages twenty-five to twenty-nine are 7.6 times more likely to be in prison than White men of the same age group… . African Americans are 6.8 times as likely as Whites to be murdered, twice as likely to be robbed, and 2.1 times as likely to be raped or sexually assaulted” (Banks,
Eberhardt and Ross, 1177, 2006). In addition, black people continue to earn less than white people in this so-called ‘free’ market corporate economy. “A generation after the civil rights movement, African Americans remain segregated, and disadvantaged related to Whites with respect to employment, earnings and assets, educational achievement and attainment, and health and longevity” (ibid, 1184). All the things that the Black Panthers and the Black Liberation Army fought for have yet to be attained and established. And while the black community continues to struggle in this racist nation, black revolutionaries and freedom fighters continue to be held in prison or are in exile. Why? Because they fought back and refused to accept a life that was full of bloodshed, racist oppression and exploitation.

From that glorious period of revolutionary upheaval known as ‘The Sixties’, the US government may still hold our revolutionaries, but this does not mean that they are gone, that they do not give us hope to keep on fighting. Why would such a period of possibilities and historic significance be erased? Why do we not learn about them in our social studies and history classrooms? Why do youths and students today know so little about such recent events? Why are they unaware of these revolutionaries and their stories?

The Sixties represented a period of possibilities and the historical significance of what happened must be recorded directly by those who experienced it. The Panther whom government, corporate and Silent Majority Americans still wish to silence cannot be silenced. It is the inevitable “insurrection of subjugated knowledges” (Foucault, 1977), or The Scream! as John Holloway would say in reference to the Zapatista Uprising, that shatters the traitorous Silence. They can imprison but they cannot silence the bodies that are still breathing within maximum and super-maximum prisons. They have been in there for 20, 30, 40 years—why? Silence the bodies given prison numbers so that their communal names and stories will not be heard, will not resonate and resurrect and insurrect the twin tower prison-houses of nations. Keep them hostage for 20, 30, 40 years. Yes, this publication is Foucault’s insurrection of subjugated knowledges in the concrete-and-steel basement of the arrogant, opulent Empire.

Political prisoners hold not only dreams but also deep secrets that we all know but do not want to embrace because of the responsibilities that come with consciousness. In this special issue of the JPP we record these ‘secrets’ and make them available to generations of people so that they may
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know of the sacrifices still being made. Racism is not ‘history’. Racism is what defines our lives in this US version of democracy: “Democracy is Demonstration of CRAZY” says Fela in his song Teacher Don’t Teach Me No Nonsense. Fela, divine, sacred revolutionary Nigerian musician condemned euro-supremacist forms of governance. He understood that European Democracy does not serve Africans. The very existence of black political prisoners who are former members of the Black Panther Party and the Black Liberation Army re-enforces his understanding, and teaches us that Africans and people of African descent continue to be enslaved and colonized by European institutions, policies, prisons and economies.

This is not to exclude all those other Political Prisoners of other nationalities, communities and classes; we are all bonded in the revolution for freedom. People from all races supported and fought in the war against white supremacy. The Panther Political Prisoners are the focus of this issue because so much U.S. fascist, racist repression was strategically unleashed on The Party and its spheres of influence, such as the Attica brothers and the forces of George Jackson. The counter-intelligence program (COINTELPRO) strategically worked to crush dreamings, imaginings and even inklings of freedom. They recorded their premeditated war crimes in memos and documents, yet they have not been named war criminals. They are not sitting in prison cells for their murders, violations, infractions and attacks. In fact, the majority of the identified war criminals in this world are not people who have unleashed violence on African people and people of African descent. Yet Africans have been on the receiving end of war-related violence for centuries.

In the 1960s, murderous US government intelligence forces, police forces and corporate backroom puppeteers (including their media) conspired to attack and dismantle the Black Panther Party. They didn’t just assassinate Fred Hampton. They attempted to assassinate the image of a slave escaping from the plantation. Chances are that that slave, as Eldridge Cleaver told it, was running towards the end of the rainbow collecting knowledge, wisdom and a community of like-minded souls who were increasingly being convinced of the rightness of their humanity and of their desire for freedom and dignity. These forces assassinate and imprison; they pull strings that cause the loss of jobs and loss of homes, and they keep on discouraging the slaves from running away. They do this to maintain these conditions; to ensure that other slaves watching are scared. And yes, many are scared,
but we believe they are also hopeful. We want to be free, we must never forget that we can be free. And in attaining that freedom, we must keep on fighting. And we must emancipate ourselves from mental slavery and rid ourselves of our fears: fear of freedom, fear of our oppressors, fear of ourselves, and fear of our neighbors.

For the Black Panthers, the most threatening realization was that all along it was our fear of freedom that would keep us from being free. And with that consciousness came a pride and audacity that would never allow us to look down trembling at Authority’s feet again. Being free meant raising our heads to eye-level with Massa Gilmore, Officer Joe and Miss Ann as a new being. A human being—yes, angry, yet loving differently for seemingly the first time. Loving self, family, neighbor, and the Black Nation that existed only in our imaginations and then became grounded in our hearts. It meant a recognition of confronting a war that has been waged on us for centuries, and waging our own war for freedom. In waging our war, we had to understand theirs.

What white history likes to call the civil rights movement was (and still is) in fact a Civil War. What white society tells us is ‘black’ history is in fact a list of inhumane acts and atrocious violations white people and their institutions have committed against black people. Black history is not slavery and segregation—those institutions belong to the white man, and they need to be recognized as white history. Black history is resistance and revolution! Black history is knowledge of self despite whiteness’s rape upon our blackness, and love of self in spite of all the attempts to instill self-hatred. Black history is survival against all odds, and black history is the tradition to keep on fighting. Black is not history, and they will not succeed in making it such. Black is beautiful voices emerging from ugly white prisons. Black is a panther that never stops resisting all attempts to cage and subdue it. So what happened? What happened to the Black Panthers? What happened to the revolution? To figure this out, we must understand the goals and dreams of the Black Revolution.

For black people in the 1960s, Freedom Now meant equality of law, opportunity, and access to effective mechanisms of social, political and economic power. The murders of Emmit Till, Medgar Evers, and Malcolm X, the fleeing of Robert Williams and the murder of the Prince of Peace, Martin Luther King Jr. were all breaking points for the black community. And before, in-between and after, there were countless little known and
unknown dreamers and allies murdered in body or in spirit. The Black Revolution in the US was necessary in the 1960s, just as is necessary today.

We knew then, and we know today, that the United States will not change its power dynamics of its own volition. We are still confronting the fact that being Black means acknowledging a US societal war on its so-called second-class citizens—a war that actively maintains us at the very bottom with no effective access to official and traditional power mechanisms to change that status. It is a status-quo that they have relied on for centuries. When such a horrible acknowledgement was accepted in the 1960s, the generation of the angry children of Malcolm X uneasily but inevitably embraced the idea and practice of all-out revolution. And once embraced with the possible consequences settled in our hearts, we took that idea and proceeded to dance into the privileged sanctuaries of US power as we constructed various forms of freedom or Black Power in our communities. We gave it our best shot, some of us literally.

From Robert Williams’ Negros with Guns came Panthers with guns over Breakfast Programs and Free Health Clinics and Liberation schools and storefront offices and yes, ridding our communities of occupying armies called Police or the Forces of Law-n-Order. Dare to struggle, dare to win. It—had—to—be—DONE. It was our time of opportunity, of intoxicating possibilities jamming with revolutionary struggles all over the world. But we were defeated. We were infiltrated, we were divided and we were murdered. Many of us went to prison, some of us are still inside prison.

But all hope is not lost. To revive our consciousness and to rebuild our struggle we must start by voicing our condition. We must, despite overwhelming propaganda, address institutional and societal racism in this land of ‘freedom’, ‘equality’ and ‘opportunity’. If there is anything we exemplify in this US propaganda dream, it is that we are brave but certainly not free.

Who would believe these conditions in the United States—in the land of Democracy, of Opportunity, of Milk and Honey for all who can make it here, says the Statue of Liberty. In the 1960s, to declare it all propaganda was unbelievable, unimaginable and mostly, not safe. Yet the possibilities inspired. The international arena of revolutionary struggles provided exemplary evidence. Africans were fighting to end colonialism in Africa and we were fighting to end the internal colonies known as Black America.
We believed we could create a new kind of freedom as we banded together and made it through the Horrors unleashed upon us for our resistance efforts. Today, we must acknowledge that the horror and violence waged upon the black revolution has not left us.

We must understand that they, as well as killing Martin Luther King, Malcolm X and so many civil rights activists and violently repressing the many rebellions of the 1960s and 1970s, did not release all of the thousands whom they locked up. In the commotion, seemingly, thousands WERE actually released, wounded in mind, body and soul; but hidden and still imprisoned are the hardcore dreamers and fighters and organizers. They are the political prisoners who remain locked up in increasingly ‘more sophisticated’ prisons way off in isolated whitelands. Some were released after 5, 10, 15 years only to be re-imprisoned due to the extreme discrimination that ex-convicts in general suffer: the games of recidivism and racial profiling. How many more suffered broken spirits as well as broken bodies—for being black, ex-cons and former members of revolutionary groups?

Consider that the US didn’t imprison just bodies for having stirrings of freedom, stirrings of the nameless and faceless. It was banking on imprisoning the stirrings: the metaphysical, mysterious beyond the math of the Panopticon, the innumerable yearnings of Ya Basta human beings. With the Panthers, there was a special vengeance. Panthers dared to create and spread organization designed to connect with communal, national and inter-communal yearnings. They dared to think politically and organize in concert with others in a world jam session of revolutions. And they, along with the Indigenous folks, were your most hated groups of subjects. If one traces the audacious activism of nationalist SNCC, the children of former slaves who talked shit and acted with outrageous confidence, to that of the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense one will see a totally different kind of human being of African-descent, formerly known as an American Negro. The ‘American Way of Life’ was jeopardized with the rise of the Indigenous populations, the Puerto Rican independence movement, Chicanos declaring Atzlan, and maybe most outrageous of all, White capitalist America’s own privileged children JOINING in this revolution for a world without racism, privilege, war and hypocrisy! These dreamers had to be stopped before everyone became revolutionaries. To stop them, they targeted, murdered and imprisoned the revolutionaries.

J. Hoover Edgar, of FBI fascist infamy, was an extremist “pig”, yes. But
he was functional for servicing the security needs of the Empire nonetheless. He hated Black people. He went after proud, rebellious Black folks with a “crusader” vengeance. In the 1970s, the Church Commission stated that the government-sanctioned counter-intelligence program (COINTELPRO) of both the FBI AND CIA broke their own laws and regulations in crushing movements domestically and internationally (Cunningham and Browning, 2004). But crushing meant that folks were murdered, beaten, framed and poisoned. It also meant that folks who worked mysteriously lost their jobs, that folks who rented homes suddenly lost their leases, that friends suddenly distanced themselves from you, thereby fragmenting actual and sense of community. But who was brought to justice for that?

I spent 19 years of my life in prison for something I didn’t do basically because I was very vocal about my political beliefs. I believe that African-American people have the right to defend themselves against racist attacks by any means necessary. Because I publicly advocated that position as a leader of the Black Panther Party, I was targeted and framed by the U.S. government through a racist and political counter-insurgency program, known as the Counter-Intelligence Program (COINTELPRO), aimed against political (mostly Black) activists in the ‘60s. Popular myth holds that COINTELPRO was an aberration, the result of the sick mind of an individual named J. Edgar Hoover—that it never would have occurred if Hoover wasn’t head of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI). But the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) had a similar program, known as Operation Chaos, which also utilized domestic surveillance techniques in its efforts to suppress the anti-war movement, the Black nationalist movement, and the so-called New Left in the United States. The CIA engaged in this type of activity even though it had no legal mandate to. So much for the sanctity of the law. As U.S. history amply attests, the rule of law is merely the rule of privileged white men…

COINTELPRO changed the political environment. It changed how people perceived those individuals who fought for change. Police agents infiltrated the Panther Party and caused the leadership to abandon the struggle. We were placed in jail. We had to fight constantly to raise bail. Once the atmosphere changed, the support
that had been there initially disappeared. When I was finally convicted, there was nobody in court but the police, district attorneys, and the prosecutors. They were successful because there was no one in court for me. They believed the hype.

Dhoruba Bin-Wahad, 1996

Today, as you hold this Special JPP Issue your hands, 20, 30, 40 plus years have passed and the US Empire refuses to recognize and unconditionally release our courageous men and women who hold simple, honorable freedom dreams. We hope that you will join us as we continue to work to free them. This work continues our dedication to the dreaming process, to the process of optimism. To this day, the fact that they still hold their heads up high means that the sky is the limit and that we can win and create new worlds of dignity and justice.

The articles in this issue are overwhelmingly by current and former political prisoners, with a lot of help from former Black Panther members Kiilu Nyasha and Gerald Sanders, and former political prisoner from the radical left, Claude Marks. We were fortunate enough to receive two memoirs-in-progress—one by former political prisoner Dhoruba Bin-Wahad (currently living in Ghana), and the other by current political prisoner Marshall Eddie Conway who has been imprisoned for over 35 years.

We would like to thank Dylan Rodriguez for his piece. All the works of former and current Political Prisoners fit what Dylan Rodriguez refers to as “Imprisoned Radical Intellectuals”. For many, it was the Black Panther Party that nurtured visioning and intellectual capacities to think and develop grassroots lumpen praxis. A special thank you to Russell Maroon Shoatz, Jalil Muntaqim and Dhoruba Bin-Wahad who demonstrate their unique vantage points in analysis of past and current events. It is the powerful but almost totally suppressed position of those who see from the very bottom that pushes us to truly step outside the pre-structured thinking box. It was the controversial uniqueness of the Black Panther Party that pushed the thinker as well as the actor to emerge a revolutionary.

In this issue we are also pleased to include those who represent the forces of martyred revolutionary, radical intellectual and Black Panther Party Field Marshal George Jackson. His impact on both the revolutionary struggles within the prisons and on the streets during the 1960’s and 1970’s (and to this day) provide us continuing strength. Also, we hear the voices of Hugo Pinell and Ruchell Magee, both of whom have been imprisoned for over 40
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years. The current Political Prisoners, Robert “Seth” Hayes, Jalil Muntaqim, Sundiata Acoli and Veronza Bowers, like other Political Prisoners, continue to be victim to US Patriot Parole Boards that repeatedly deny them release. All have been imprisoned for over 30 years. Veronza Bowers in particular merits special mention as the sign of the times in what Dhoruba Bin-Wahad called “Democratic Fascism”. Veneer off, iron-fist refusal to release a prisoner who has technically “served” his total sentence, with the Federal Bureau of Prisons exercising its power to refuse release! This is now Year Two of an ILLEGAL holding of a free man! But what rights do we have that they are bound to respect when they make and break their own laws?

Despite all that has happened, all the political prisoners in this issue remain strong in spirit and determination. They have been exemplary human beings fighting for the best of our human potential wherever and whatever the terrain. They are still suggesting and making proposals for what our worlds can be. Heroes they are—free they must be…unconditionally and with dignity.

It has been an honor to work on this very special issue during the 40th Anniversary of the founding of the Black Panther Party and the 15th anniversary of the Journal of Prisoners on Prisons. From inside the prison’s ugliest dungeons, we found hope, we found the revolutionaries, and we bring you their revolution.

All Power Through the People!
Free All Political Prisoners!
The Dreamers Shall Win.

REFERENCES


Introduction: American Apocalypse*

Dylan Rodríguez

American Apocalypse

While America is boasting of her freedom and making the world ring with her professions of equality, she holds millions of her inhabitants in bondage.

Henry Box Brown, Narrative of the Life of Henry Box Brown (1851)

where does it all lead to?
i mean, like where are we going?
and where did we come from?
where did it all begin?
and who started it?

raúlsalinas (Raúl Salinas), “Pregúntome” (1970)

Introduction: Living Apocalypse, Radical Freedom

Amidst the current apocalypse of mass-based punishment and liquidation thrives a political lineage at war with its own disappearance, haunting and shadowing United States civil society with earthquake fantasies of liberation and freedom. Resonating the opening epigraph by Henry Box Brown, the one-time slave who escaped Virginia by sealing himself in a mail crate and emerging in Philadelphia twenty-seven hours later, these are visions of displacement and disarticulation, confronting the non-imprisoned “free world” with the sturdy deadly premises of its own definition and self-narration. Fatal unfreedom, historically articulated through imprisonment and varieties of (undeclared) warfare, and currently proliferating through epochal technologies of human immobilization and bodily disintegration, forms the grammar and materiality of American society. It is within a troubled relation to the terror and essential violence of this social coherence—as both a scholar-activist committed to radical transformation and a direct descendant of a population once targeted for genocidal extermination by

the United States of America—and I offer this book, a sustained theoretical engagement with the praxis of radical intellectuals imprisoned in the United States.

I am focusing my theoretical attention on the post-1970s formation of “radical prison praxis”, as an active current of political-intellectual work shaped by a condition of direct and unmediated confrontation with technologies of state and state-sanctioned (domestic) warfare. This political lineage refutes and displaces, confuses and short-circuits the coherent and durable sets of political assumptions that define the commonly enforced limits of public discourse and social intercourse in the United States. In part, the theoretical trajectories and political legacies of this praxis render essentially unstable and, at times, untenable the very foundations of such valorized and allegedly universal American entitlements as 1) formal protection under the fundamental (“inalienable”) rubrics of constitutional or civil “rights”, 2) mediated protection under the rule and dominion of the state’s juridical, policing, and (para)military structures, and 3) the everyday presumption of individual and collective bodily integrity, that is, a generalized freedom from anticipated or imminent physical suffering, violation, or obliteration. Departing from this condition of theoretical and material crisis, I am interested in a different philosophy of praxis, one inscribed by the very logic of violence, disappearance, and death that forms the regime from within which it is produced, returning an image (shadow? apparition? echo?) of a world in terror, at war, yet unsettlingly stable.

Imprisoned radical intellectuals critically envision (and sometimes strategize) the displacement or termination of the epochal American production of biological and cultural genocides, mass-based bodily violence, racialized domestic warfare, and targeted, coercive misery.

**LINEAGE AND “SOCIAL TRUTH”:**

**DISTINGUISHING “IMPRISONED RADICAL INTELLECTUALS”**

I have chosen the conceptual designation “imprisoned radical intellectuals” for reasons that should be clarified. First, my choice of designation foregrounds the term “imprisoned” in order to bring attention to the conditions of possibility, that is, the changing regime of rituals, practices, and juridical procedures that structure this category of intellectual and cultural production. The terms “prison intellectual”, “prison writer”, and
“radical prisoner” (terms which I freely used until the last revisions) tend to re-inscribe and naturalize the regime of imprisonment, as if it were a natural feature of the social landscape and an irreducible facet of the “prisoner’s” identity and historical subjectivity.

Second, I am addressing while exceeding current juridical and progressive activist/human rights categorizations of “political prisoners” and “prisoners of war (POWs)”. Progressive and leftist definitions of these terms, despite their subtle (and hotly debated) variations, often address a specific telos of incarceration that privileges the existence of the liberationist-radical insurrectionist/revolutionary political subject prior to her/his encounter with formal juridical criminalization, police bodily apprehension, and state captivity.

According to these definitions, political prisoners and prisoners of war are imprisoned as a direct result of their political activities in civil society—community organizing, political education, public speech, armed self-defense, artistic production, guerilla warfare—that foster or manifest insurrection against socially embedded forms of domination and subjection. Activist attorney Jill Soffiyah Elijah, who has worked on behalf of U.S. political prisoners for over two decades, outlines the broadly accepted international standard of definition:

> Political prisoners are men and women who have been incarcerated for their political views and actions. They have consciously fought against social injustice, colonialism, and/or imperialism and have been incarcerated as a result of their political commitments. Even while in prison, these men and women continue to adhere to their principles. This definition of the term “political prisoner” is accepted throughout the international community.²

Other less restrictive, though still politically centered conceptions focus on the criminalization of those already imprisoned who have taken action against systems of national, racial, gender, and/or class oppression during the time of their incarceration. Within these definitions, “common” or social prisoners may become “political prisoners” by virtue of their politically articulated actions on behalf of the oppressed, and their frequent subjection to enhanced penal consequences as a result. According to Can’t Jail the Spirit:
A Political Prisoner is a person, sanctioned by The Movement, evolved in character and deeds, who is held in confinement for support of, or identity with, a people struggling for freedom from an oppressive government or against its oppressive policies.3

In addition to personifying the (rather slippery) attribute of an “evolved” political identity, political prisoners/POWs are overwhelmingly understood as having been affiliated with particular organizations, discrete social movements, or specific counter- and anti-state uprisings that seek a liquidation of oppressive socio-political and economic structures, including (proto)slavery, (cultural and biological) genocide, military occupation, communal displacement, white supremacist apartheid, and neo-liberalism.

While my conceptualization of “imprisoned radical intellectuals” incorporates (and centers) the political prisoners and POWs encompassed by the aforementioned definitions, it also invites a broader political understanding of the abject categorization of “commonly” imprisoned people. Overwhelmingly poor, Black, and Brown, “common prisoners” remain broadly unrecognized by the activist public, rendered nameless and non-specified, while generally presumed to be outside staid and elitist conceptions of the “political”. Such politically unrecognized captives compose the vast majority of those who have become activists and political intellectuals while imprisoned, many of whom were and are engaged in unprogrammatic (or non-organizational) varieties of liberationist-directed anti-systemic activity prior to, during, and after their incarceration. Some are explicitly radical or revolutionary in their political commitments, and many more are proto-radical—that is, committed to insurrection and rebellion against structures of domination, though in the absence of a formal ideological system. Most often, rather than being a product of extant social movements or free world-based organizations, the unrecognized imprisoned activist is interpellated by the political influence and mentorship of her/his peers and predecessors (including political prisoners/POWs duly “recognized” by activists in civil society), as well as the pragmatic urgency of self-education for legal defense and political/spiritual self-defense.

I follow a dynamic, contextual definition of “the political” within my conception of the imprisoned radical intellectual, following activist and political theorist Marshall Eddie Conway’s thoughtful reflections on the socio-historical transformations he has witnessed over the time of his
incarceration (a Baltimore Black Panther imprisoned since 1970, Conway is among the longest held political prisoners in the United States). During a 2004 lecture conducted via speakerphone for an advanced seminar in Ethnic Studies, Conway was pressed by one student to offer a re-definition of the “political prisoner” that accounts for the shape of the post-1970s political landscape. His response proves instructive as a framework for conceptualizing the current condition.

The seminar [participants] had been discussing the juridical, cultural, and military proliferation of the state’s racialized domestic warfare techniques, hallmarkd by the 1980s declaration of a “War on Drugs”, and accompanied by a drastic police militarization, punitive juridical shift, and emergence of the mass incarceration form now known as the prison industrial complex. We were also critically examining the breathtaking varieties of the state’s formal and ad hoc aggression against broad categories of (poor) Black, indigenous, and Third World populations in the current historical moment, a trajectory of domestic warfare that appears to target “civilian populations” (in addition to radical “activist” and insurgent groups) for social liquidation and/or political neutralization. Speaking to this shift in socio-historical context, Conway departs from static definitions of the “political prisoner” in exchange for a more multilayered understanding:

[A political prisoner] in my opinion would be an activist, a person that stands up to injustices, a person who for whatever reason takes the position that this or that is wrong, whether they do it based on ideology or they do it based on what they think is morally right…. It’s where you’re at in [terms of] location on the one hand, and it’s where you’re at historically….

On the one hand, I think that there’s a universal classification for political prisoners and that’s movement related, activity related, ideologically related, in the sense that… these people were engaged in political activity.

But I also have learned over thirty-some years of being in jail that a lot of people become political prisoners, become conscious and become aware and act and behave based on that awareness after they have been incarcerated for criminal activity or other kinds of activities.
That’s on one level, on another level I’m also aware [that] there are people forced into the position of [becoming] political prisoners because of some act of the government or some opposition they have presented to the government.6

Following Conway’s political inventory, I emphasize the historical and cultural specificity of the “imprisoned radical intellectual” in order to foreground the counter- and anti-systemic, radical and revolutionary materiality of this political lineage. Imprisoned radical intellectuals, as I argue throughout the book, are politically constituted by the prison’s regime of immobilization and bodily disintegration. The state’s (and prison’s) technologies of incarceration do not only repress or delimit the praxis of imprisoned activists—this programmatic violence inhabits, occupies, and interpellates political and historical subjects within a specific structure of political confrontation. It is precisely this unstable tension—at times an explosive or fatal confrontation—between the oppressive regime of the prison and the materialized political subjectivity of the captive radical intellectual that catalyzes and shapes a pathway of radicalism and insurgency.

Imprisoned radical intellectuals densely articulate, through multiple voices and vernaculars, the proliferation and extension of the prison’s regimented technologies of domination into the everyday systems of social formation. The allegedly excessive, exceptional, or abnormal violence of the prison regime’s violence is, within this political-intellectual lineage, reconceptualized as a fundamental organizing logic of the United States in its local, translocal, and global enactments: as such, this is a body of “radical” praxis in the etymological sense of the term, as a political labor that emanates from and is directed toward transforming or destroying the “roots” of a particular social formation, engaged in critical opposition to its constitutive logics of organization and historical possibility. Truly, this is a lineage that exposes the symbiosis of love and hate, revolution and creative destruction, in the process of envisioning the end of oppressive violence and programmatic human domination.

To appropriate Frantz Fanon’s meditation in a different time and place, a war of social truths rages beneath the normalized violence of any such condition of domination. It is the Manichean relation between colonized and colonizer, “native” and “settler”, or here, free and unfree that conditions the subaltern truths of both imminent and manifest insurgencies. Speaking to the anti-colonialist nationalism of the Algerian revolution, Fanon writes:
The problem of truth ought also to be considered. In every age, among the people truth is the property of the national cause. No absolute verity, no discourse on the purity of the soul, can shake this position. The native replies to the living lie of the colonial situation by an equal falsehood. His [sic] dealings with his fellow-nationals are open; they are strained and incomprehensible with regard to the settlers. Truth is that which hurries on the break-up of the colonialisr regime; it is that which promotes the emergence of the nation; it is all that protects the natives, and ruins the foreigners. In this colonialist context there is no truthful behavior: and the good is quite simply that which is evil for “them”.7

Truth, for Fanon, is precisely that which generates and multiplies the historical possibility of disruptive, subversive movement against colonial oppression. The evident rhetoric of oppositionality, of the subaltern “good” that necessarily materializes “evil” in the eyes of domination, offers a stunning departure from the language of negotiation, dialogue, progress, moderation, and peace that has become hegemonic in discourses of social change and social justice, in and outside the United States. The native’s “equal falsehood” is, in fact, a necessary and ethical response to a regime that renders a hegemonic truth through the regulated death and deterioration of the native’s body and society. Perhaps most importantly, the political language of opposition is premised on its open-endedness and contingency, a particular refusal to soothe the anxiety generated in the attempt to displace a condition of violent peace for the sake of something else, a world beyond agendas, platforms, and practical proposals. There are no guarantees, or arrogant expectations, of an ultimate state of liberation waiting on the other side of the politically immediate struggle against the settler colony.

A similar political vernacular and vision haunt the recent history of radical prison praxis. The reductive conception of the prison as simply a site of “resistance” to state violence vastly underestimates the complexity of political discourse generated by its resident, radical organic intellectuals. This body of knowledge and truth is premised on the utter impossibility of dialogue and communication with the force—discursive, embodied, institutionalized—of one’s own domination. Longtime U.S. political prisoner Marilyn Buck,8 imprisoned for assisting in the liberation and eventual political refuge of Assata Shakur, offers powerful testimony from
the Dublin (CA) women’s prison in her 2000 article, “Prisons, Social Control, and Political Prisoners”. Arguing against the tendency of progressive and radical social movements to institutionalize politics through conservative organizational forms, Buck articulates a form of political commitment that foreshadows a new—though historically rooted—political language.

There is always room to debate politics, points of view, strategies, and tactics. To confront differences and questions is a good thing. Any struggle for liberation demands free and open debate of ideas and practices. At the same time, active struggles need to support those who act consciously and politically. To do so is a part of asserting the right to struggle, as well as defending activism and promoting stronger resistance to the military, financial, and political apparatus that denies our society and the whole world true equality and justice.9 [emphasis added]

Buck’s insistence on the necessity of conflict and exchange among and within such “active struggles” begs the question of how imprisoned activists might project themselves into the social movements of the free world as well as the ongoing, de-centered political skirmishes occurring in civil society. Her conception of a “free and open debate” among activists as the condition of possibility for viable liberation struggle foregound the current condition of mass (and political) imprisonment as perhaps the fundamental obstacle to an authentic political radicalism—where the categorical status of unfreedom is tolerated or otherwise compromised by activists in the free world, their putative visions of social transformation fall into complicity with the contemporary material symbiosis of punishment and human containment.

Most important in the above passage is Buck’s audacious assertion of a moral, political, and historical right to struggle. In addition to offering an incipient, alternate political theory of resistance, opposition, and revolutionary movement that demystifies the state’s naturalized monopoly on both legitimate violence and the moral/juridical right to determine the acceptable (non-criminalized) modes of political struggle within its formal domain, the notion of a right to struggle is akin to a transhistorical political mandate. Buck reminds activists and intellectuals in civil society that the genesis of radical, liberatory power hinges on the pronouncement
and actualization of this right, compelling the invention of new languages, strategies, and fantasies of struggle against domination and oppression.

WHITE SUPREMACY AND THE PRISON INDUSTRIAL COMPLEX:
“A SOCIETY STRUCTURED IN DOMINANCE”

In addition to generating a unique vernacular of freedom, liberation, and political struggle, this radical intellectual lineage composes an extensive theorization of state and state-sanctioned bodily violence as the central and productive technology of a “society structured in dominance”. Stuart Hall’s oft-quoted elaboration of racism as a central socio-cultural production—and dynamic, politically structuring component—of modern social formations bespeaks the specificity of racist and racial ideologies as they are produced and “made operative” in different historical moments. His essay, “Race, Articulation, and Societies Structured in Dominance”, rigorously examines the “ideological articulation” between racism and class relations, popular culture, and other modes of social thought and “popular consciousness”. Hall is worth quoting at length for the purpose of situating his theorization within this discussion of the United States carceral formation:

In each case, in specific social formations, racism as an ideological configuration has been reconstituted by the dominant class relations, and thoroughly reworked. If it has performed the function of that cementing ideology which secures a whole social formation under a dominant class, its pertinent differences from other such hegemonic ideologies require it to be registered in detail. Here, racism is particularly powerful and its imprint on popular consciousness especially deep, because in such racial characteristics as colour, ethnic origin, geographical position, etc., racism discovers what other ideologies have to construct: an apparently ‘natural’ and universal basis in nature itself. Yet, despite this apparent grounding in biological givens, outside history racism, when it appears, has an effect on other ideological formations within the same society, and its development promotes a transformation of the whole ideological field in which it becomes operative.  

Imprisoned radical intellectuals put a finer point on Hall’s conception of racism’s multiple (and transformative) articulations within social
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formation, conceptualizing imprisonment, punishment, and policing as the categorical practices through which hegemonic, overlapping conceptions of “freedom” and “peace”—themselves structured in dominance—cohere the United States “society”. A close examination of these regimes of social ordering—prisons, the law, (domestic/undeclared) warfare, and policing—contextualizes an historicized definition of white supremacy, which is essential to the theoretical framework of this book.

White supremacist regimes, organic (if not unique) to the United States—from racial chattel slavery and frontier genocide to recent and current modes of land displacement and (domestic/undeclared) warfare, are sociologically entangled with the state’s changing paradigms, strategies, and technologies of human incarceration and punishment. The historical nature of this entanglement is widely acknowledged, although explanations of the structuring relations of force vary widely and conflict deeply. For our theoretical purposes, white supremacy may be understood as a logic of social organization that produces regimented, institutionalized, and militarized conceptions of hierarchies of “human” difference. There are three essential components to this theoretical framework.

First, as an historical discourse of power, white supremacy is premised on the conception and enforcement of the universalized white (European and euro-american) “human” vis-à-vis the rigorous production, penal discipline, and frequent social, political, and biological neutralization or extermination of the (non-white) sub- or non-human. While such hierarchies of differences are overwhelmingly constituted through discourses of “race”, they are also made through references to and productions of “ethnicity”, “nationality”, “religion”, “biology”, and other discursive regimes. It is, however, the fundamental and durable opposition between the white universal human, and the peculiar non-white sub/semi/non-human, that reproduces white supremacy as a force of social order.

Secondly, in order to understand white supremacy as a complex technology of human domination, one need look no further than radical political geographer andabolitionist activist Ruthie Gilmore’s conception of “racism” as the primary weaponry of white supremacy. Her conceptualization departs from hackneyed definitions of racism (as well as “racial discrimination”, “racial inequality”, and “race relations”) that obscure historical relations of power and domination, and instead magnifies the centrality of race to the programmatic and hierarchical organization of life and death:
Racism is the state-sanctioned and/or extra-legal production and exploitation of group-differentiated vulnerabilities to premature death, in distinct yet densely interconnected political geographies.\(^\text{13}\)

As a logic of social organization, white supremacy is scaffolded by technologies of killing that sediment in Gilmore’s definition of racism, recalling histories of militarized mass-based liquidation as well as normalized and institutionalized forms of racial population control and targeted decimation, including coerced inaccessibility to shelter, nutrition, and health care.

Thirdly, white supremacy must be understood as inextricably gendered; its modalities of articulation and violence are specific to constructions and expropriations of the male/female “biological” and projections of masculine/feminine sexuality and social existence.\(^\text{14}\) Critical race theorist Dorothy Roberts, in her study of U.S. judicial aggression against Black women’s reproductive freedoms, writes,

Black procreation helped to sustain slavery, giving slave masters an economic incentive to govern Black women’s reproductive lives. Slave women’s childbearing replenished the enslaved labor force: Black women bore children who belonged to the slaveowner from the moment of their conception. This feature of slavery made control of reproduction a central aspect of whites’ subjugation of African people in America. It marked Black women from the beginning as objects whose decisions about reproduction should be subject to social regulation rather than their own will….

All of these violations were sanctioned by law. Racism created for white slaveowners the possibility of unrestrained reproductive control. The social order established by powerful white men was founded on two inseparable ingredients: the dehumanization of Africans on the basis of race, and the control of women’s sexuality and reproduction.\(^\text{15}\)

Native American scholar and radical antiviolence activist Andrea Smith resonates Roberts in her contention that,
Communities of color become pollution from which the state must constantly purify itself. Women of color become particularly dangerous to the world order as they have the ability to reproduce the next generations of communities of color.…

Colonizers such as Andrew Jackson recommended that troops systematically kill Indian women and children after massacres in order to complete extermination.…

Consequently, Native women and women of color deserve no bodily integrity… [o]r, as Chicago-based reproductive rights activist Sharon Powell describes it, women of color are “better dead than pregnant”.16 [emphasis added]

White supremacy, in this historical and theoretical context, may be conceptualized as a socially ordering logic rather than an “extremist” or otherwise marginal political ideology. By way of illustration, this is to consider the American social formation as the template for the Ku Klux Klan (a proudly “White Christian” organization), and to comprehend the complex role of “mainstream” American civil society (in conjunction with its precedent colonial, frontier, and plantation forms) as simultaneously the Klan’s periodic political antagonist and historical partner in violence.17

To consider white supremacy as American social formation facilitates a discussion of the modalities through which this material racial logic constitutes and over-determines the social, political, economic, and cultural structures that compose the contemporary hegemony and constitute the common sense that is organic to its ordering. For the purposes of this text, I conceptualize white supremacy through its fundamental contrapuntality: the inscription of a fundamental relation between freedom and unfreedom, life and death, historically derived from the socially constitutive American production of white life/mobility through Black, Brown, and indigenous death/immobilization. The contemporary prison regime is, in this context, simultaneously the materialization of U.S. civil society’s presumptive white corporate identity (inclusive of its post-civil rights “multicultural” articulations) and the production of a social logic essential to the current social order—a fabrication and criminalization of disorder for the sake of extracting and dramatizing order, compliance, authority.

Thus, while Hall references racism as the ideological glue of a given hegemony, I am arguing that in the current era of mass imprisonment, white
supremacist unfreedom—specifically, carceral technologies of human immobilization and bodily disintegration—provides the institutional form, cultural discourse, and ethical basis of social coherence, safety, and civic peace. It is, therefore, the normal functioning of the prison that bears interrogation, as opposed to its “brutal”, “unconstitutional”, “racist”, “homophobic”, or “sexist” excesses, corruptions, and institutional imperfections. The work of imprisoned radical intellectuals traces the contours and continuities of American civil society as a dynamic locality of white freedom, domesticating and proliferating the twinned constitutive logics of white bodily mobility and ascendant white historical/political subjectivity (“freedom”) across scales of varying magnitude—from the grandiose racial property and white existential claims of the United States’ political and juridical foundations, to the ongoing construction of the white American telos, and corresponding material narration of the white nationalist bildungsroman.

Sometimes forgotten in the wash of the current epoch of “globalized” and hyper-mobile technologies of power are the regimes of bodily immobilization that counterpose social formation and global civil society with the production of new mass-based carceral forms, (undeclared) war zones, and what might be called unfree worlds. Radical political geographer and abolitionist activist Ruthie Gilmore situates California’s rapid post-1980s prison expansion amidst the multiple political, cultural, and economic crises generated and compounded by the processes of “globalization”. Her analysis opens new lines of insight into the emergence of the prison regime as a fundamental and generative, rather than supplemental and static dimension of local and global American hegemonies. Moving through Gilmore’s theoretical lead, we can more easily comprehend the qualitative transformation of policing, jurisprudence, and imprisonment technologies into forms of power that extend significantly beyond their nominally limited juridical, administrative, or punitive functions.

Rejecting the two predominant critical explanations for the emergence of the prison industrial complex; namely, institutionalized racism and “carceral Keynesianism”, Gilmore argues that in the age of globalized capital:

[T]he expansion of prison constitutes a geographical solution to socio-economic problems, politically organized by the state which is itself in the process of radical restructuring. This view brings the complexities and contradictions of globalization home, by showing
how already existing social, political and economic relations constitute the conditions of possibility (but not inevitability) for ways to solve major problems. Gilmore argues that the Goldwater/Nixon electoral bloc’s serial, reactionary “law and order” campaigns fueled an ascendant Right wing that recoded domestic political insurrection or dissidence—incribed most centrally on the movements and collective bodies of radical and liberationist Black and Third World people during the late 1960s—as criminality and rogue racial (read “anti-white”) vengeance.

Simultaneous with the genesis of this “moral panic” surrounding racially and politically over-determined “crime” was a mounting macro-economic crisis that reached its nadir in the 1973-1977 global recession. Widespread racialized “class” displacements followed, as corporations moved investment and structural focus away from industrial production and cast entire regions and populations of the United States into veritable economic obsolescence: in particular, the vital disappearance of domestic “heavy industries” (the factory-based production of auto, steel, rubber, etc.) and “rural extractive industries” (timber, fishing, mining) almost instantaneously obsolesced the labor of masses of people. Gilmore thus argues that the statecraft arising from this socio-economic crisis materialized in the formation of the “integument of the prison industrial complex”, inaugurating a “modus operandi for solving crises [through] the relentless identification, coercive control, and violent elimination of foreign and domestic enemies”. In resonance with Gilmore’s analysis, political prisoner Linda Evans (released in 2001) and activist Eve Goldberg write: “Like the military/industrial complex, the prison industrial complex is an interweaving of private business and government interests. Its twofold purpose is profit and social control. Its public rationale is the fight against crime.”

Gilmore’s conception of “post-Keynesian militarism” elaborates this nexus of state-corporate alliance, social control, and state violence. As the Right wing asserted its hegemony within the legislative and juridical apparatuses in and beyond the 1980s, it was confronted with another basic political challenge.

[Having abandoned the Keynesian full employment/aggregate guarantee approach to downturns, the power bloc that emerged
from the 1980s onward faced the political problem of how to carry out its agenda—how, in other words, to go about its post-Keynesian state-building project in order to retain and reproduce victories. Capital might be the object of desire, but voters mattered. The new bloc, having achieved power under crisis conditions, consolidated around a popular anti-crime campaign that revived Richard Nixon’s successful law and order pitch. Thus the state rebuilt itself by building prisons fashioned from surpluses that the emergent post-golden-age political economy was not absorbing in other ways.21

Statecraft under these conditions required a qualitative transformation and expansion of the existing prison apparatus, over and above a mere refinement of its existing juridical or punitive technologies.

The relative (white) public consent to the breathtaking violence underlying this state project was enabled by the fact that the fodder of its production involved the massive social liquidation of human beings who, upon conviction, encountered civil death and de jure slave status vis-à-vis the provisions of the Thirteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution: “Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, except as a punishment for crime, whereof the party shall have been duly convicted, shall exist within the United States, or anyplace subject to their jurisdiction.” [emphasis added] Further, the overwhelming criminalization of poor Black and Brown populations saturated this structural expansion with a white supremacist re-codification of the requirements for U.S. civil society’s intercourse and reproduction, as well as its very modality of self-articulation (now pitched in contrast or opposition to the social specter of Black/Brown criminality).

The budding structure of mass-based, white supremacist penality—as both formalized state violence and state-sanctioned articulation of racist domination—spurred the genesis of a new wave of punitive juridical measures (not the other way around). Accompanying these formal juridical innovations was a brilliant wave of state-popular cultural production, encompassing and exceeding the searing and enveloping “War on Drugs” discourse of the 1980s renaissance of white civil society under the political and symbolic stewardship of Ronald Reagan. Providing a common sense explanation for the new state coercion, this legal and cultural labor generated an overwhelming popular acceptance of, and ideological investment in the
transformation of the prison into a primary apparatus for the maintenance and reproduction of social order.

As the U.S. prison, jail, INS/Homeland Security detainee, and incarcerated youth population approaches and surpasses the 2.5 million mark (as of this writing), the quantitative evidence only refracts the prison’s qualitative transformation. Activist-scholar and former political prisoner Angela Y. Davis has written and spoken extensively of the structures of “invisibility” accompanying the formation of state and corporate alliances through the development of a mass imprisonment regime. Echoing Davis, political prisoner Jalil Muntaqim argues that the elaboration and circulation of a racially coded punitive state discourse assumes a material life of its own, as the constant dramatization of criminality, personal endangerment, and vengeance interpellates civil society’s subjects.

By shaping the collective consciousness and attitudes, the politicians are then able to pass into law draconian sanctions. Sanctions that appease the will of the people demanding a safe society… ultimately serve the interest of restructuring the industrial-military complex, by forging an infrastructure for the proliferation of prison building…. [It] anesthetizes the collective consciousness towards the desired end of permitting hundreds of thousands, if not millions more people to be incarcerated at no moral or psychic detriment to those who constitute the majority of Americans [emphasis added]

Muntaqim reminds us that the political and economic impetus behind this historical formation has generated a popular ethos of repression that renders criminalized populations and incarcerated people the collective objects of a normalized state violence. The most insidious aspect of this violence is that it is not simply a repressive response to social upheaval, collective disobedience, or criminal activity; that is, the (neo)liberal white supremacist state is not simply coercive, but is also productive of and symbiotic with the logic and culture of what Gilmore aptly names “industrialized punishment”. Carceral state violence is thus the figurative and material nexus of multiple logics of domination and hegemony in the post-1960s era: it is a white supremacist formation that is simultaneously (although always unevenly) constituted by a vectoring of power trajectories that entwines “race”,
“gender”, “class”, “sexuality”, “age”, and bodily/mental “(dis)ability”. To the extent that the state has come to rely on the pageantry of socio-political crisis for its various productions of social coherence, it has also reconstructed the political and cultural fabric of policing, punishment, and incarceration. The following section discusses the manner in which a new and necessary exterior to civil society, premised on the rehabilitation and security of civil society’s common white supremacist normativity, has transformed the prison into a constitutive center of the existing hegemony. This new constitutive center re-inscribes social formation by consolidating the emergent carceral formation as a new site of structured anti-sociality and civic death.

**RECONSTRUCTING THE HOMELAND: “LAW AND ORDER” AND THE WHITE ATLANTIC**

The historically unprecedented repression of the Black, Native American, Puerto Rican, Chicana/o and other US-based Third World liberation movements during and beyond the 1960s and 1970s forged a peculiar intersection between official and illicit forms of state and state-sanctioned violence. Policing, carceral, and punitive technologies were invented, developed, and refined at scales from the local to the national, encompassing a wide variety of organizing and deployment strategies. While the notorious Counter-intelligence Program (COINTELPRO) of J. Edgar Hoover’s FBI remains the most historically prominent incidence of the warfare waged by the state against domestic political movements, the multifarious spectacle of Hooverite repression at times obscures the broader—and far more sweeping—convergence of historical blocs and state formation that defined this era and its current legacies.

Spurring a rhetoric that would, within a decade, decisively shape the development of a bureaucratized, exponentially expanded, and widely militarized domestic police force, Arizona Senator Barry Goldwater’s 1964 acceptance of the Republican Party/GOP nomination for the Presidential candidacy was a harbinger for white civil society at a moment of amplified political anxiety:

Now, my fellow Americans, the tide has been running against freedom. Our people have followed false prophets. We must, and we
shall, return to proven ways—not because they are old, but because they are true. We must, and we shall, set the tide running again in the cause of freedom… freedom—balanced so that liberty lacking order will not become the slavery of the prison cell; balanced so that liberty lacking order will not become the license of the mob and of the jungle. 25

Echoing the racial juxtapositions of Joseph Conrad’s Heart of Darkness, Goldwater elaborated a white populist conception of liberty and security defined through the militarized containment—and ultimate liquidation—of the lurking urban/mob/jungle threat. Goldwater’s strident conviction was to defend white civil society from its aggressors—an intimate, racial self-defense that generated a paradigm for law and order statecraft that remains a central facet of U.S. political life. Although his bid for the presidency failed, Goldwater’s cultural thematic prevailed.

Security from domestic violence, no less than from foreign aggression, is the most elementary and fundamental purpose of any government, and a government that cannot fulfill that purpose is one that cannot long command the loyalty of its citizens. History shows us—demonstrates that nothing—nothing prepares the way for tyranny more than the failure of public officials to keep the streets from bullies and marauders. 26

The exponential growth of the police industry in the United States closely followed the dictates of the Goldwater (and eventually Nixon) “law and order” bloc. 27 An allegory of bodily confrontation between innocent white vulnerability and Black/Brown criminal physicality instantiated a binding historical telos for the 1960s and 1970s White Reconstruction, a post-civil rights revival that required the simultaneous and decisive disruption of U.S.-based Black, Third World, and Indigenous liberation movements and their counterpart urban insurrections. Law and order was essentially an agenda for white liberation, instantiated through white civil society’s awakening to the possibility of its own political disarticulation at the hands of Black and Third World insurrectionists and revolutionaries. U.S. civil society’s invigorated institutionality—shaped by the burgeoning of foundation-funded non-profit organizations and non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and
mediated by the private sector, conservative and liberal faith communities, and corporate mass media—aligned with the law and order state as a virtual recruit and mass participant during the emergence of the Goldwater-Nixon bloc. Elaborating the popular anxieties sprouting around the apparent and imminent displacement of the unique white supremacist hegemony of the United States, this historical bloc amounted to a broadly based political reconsolidation of a white civil society that had momentarily strolled with the specter of its own incoherence.

The militant reformism of the Civil Rights Movement had not only broken (and brokered) the legal structures of segregation and Jim Crow, but additionally foreshadowed a lapse and spasm within the white supremacist body politic’s historical ascendancy. As it moved to reconfigure around the crisis yielded by this local and national struggle against official apartheid, white civil society was concurrently met with blossoming, radical struggles organized through and against historical structures of racial domination and “national” oppression. New forms of organized resistance to racist state violence were hallmarked during this period by the regional and national manifestations of the Black Panther Party and underground Black Liberation Army, and multiplied through the emergence of the Young Lords, Weather Underground, George Jackson Brigade, (U.S. Chinatown-based) Red Guards, Katipunan ng Demokratikong Pilipino, and other radical self-defense, anti-imperialist, and domestic revolutionary organizations. Along with the upsurge of urban insurrections against police brutality and other forms of state-sanctioned murder, these movements demystified and attacked the primary institutions of white supremacist hegemony and Black/Brown premature death: police, military, property, and law. Simultaneously, struggles for native american sovereignty openly declared and defended liberated territories while valorizing a politics of national treason, disrupting the presumptive juridical monopoly and sanctity of the U.S. Constitution (the legal heart of the white body politic). Similarly, Puerto Rican independentistas waged an anti-colonial struggle on multiple fronts within the domestic spheres of American empire, culminating in the political trial of fourteen activists who refused to recognize the legitimacy of U.S. law and quickly became prisoners of war.

The emergence of a definitive era of U.S. based (and frequently internationalist) liberation and revolutionary movements encompassed political and juridical claims that directly antagonized the constitutive logic
of the nation’s historical formation as a white settler society. Such notions as “Black liberation”, “Native American sovereignty”, and Puerto Rican “self-determination” represented unanswerable demands on the United States of America, blaspheming the sanctity of American white localities. While examples of political violence committed by people of color against white bodies were few and far between, the culmination of the state’s strategic (and self-legitimating) use of unmediated physical force against Third World liberationists—at home and abroad—nonetheless articulated as self-defensive moral, cultural,32 and material structures of white militarization. White civil society braced at the possibility of blowback for collective grievances that were gravely historical.

Thus, the politics of law and order entailed a pedagogical refining of a budding white supremacist desire for surveillance, policing, caging, and (pre-emptively) exterminating those who embodied the gathering storm of dissidence—organized and disarticulated, radical and proto-political. Articulated through and against the progressive and radical counter-communities who threatened the disruption and transformation of the American social formation’s normative whiteness, this reinvigorated white civil society asserted its essential stewardship of the state through the versatile mechanism of racialized criminalization. In this sense, COINTELPRO’s illegal and unconstitutional abuses of state power, unabashed use of strategic and deadly violence, and development of invasive, terrorizing surveillance technologies might be seen as the state’s prototyping of the current era’s broadly revivified (and significantly extra-state) domestic low-intensity warfare techniques against racially pathologized “activist” and “civilian” populations alike.33

J. Edgar Hoover’s formalization of a venerated racist state strategy—the criminalization of Black, Brown, and Red liberationists—simply reflected and foreshadowed the imperative of white civil society’s impulse toward self-preservation in this moment.34 The emergent technology of racialized criminalization was galvanized by Richard Nixon’s rise to the executive office and the subsequent, massive federal and local investment in militarized police forces.35 Perhaps most importantly, this domestic military technology both incorporated and exceeded COINTELPRO’s narrower objectives of containing urban uprising and liquidating domestic radicals, (proto)revolutionaries, and sovereignty fighters. Outdoing the FBI’s secret counter-intelligence campaign, “law and order” constituted a novel
discursive technology of domestic warfare that spoke through the reified body of the state executive.

Goldwater’s ominous forecast of tyranny’s onset shot through a civic consciousness that was absorbing the possibility of white freedom’s rollback, and while white self-defense formed the template for an aggressive white supremacist state, the message remained intensely grandiose and global. His was the foreshadowing of white civil society’s globalization, literally the reconstruction of domestic white hegemony and the unmitigated construction of a White Atlantic.

I believe that we must look beyond the defense of freedom today to its extension tomorrow…. I can see and I suggest that all thoughtful men must contemplate the flowering of an Atlantic civilization, the whole world of Europe unified and free, trading openly across its borders, communicating openly across the world. This is a goal far, far more meaningful than a moon shot.

…I can also see—and all free men must thrill to—the events of this Atlantic civilization joined by its great ocean highway to the United States. What a destiny, what a destiny can be ours to stand as a great central pillar linking Europe, the Americans and the venerable and vital peoples and cultures of the Pacific. I can see a day when all the Americas, North and South, will be linked in a mighty system, a system in which the errors and misunderstandings of the past will be submerged one by one in a rising tide of prosperity and interdependence…. But we pledge—we pledge that human sympathy—what our neighbors to the South call that attitude of “simpatico”—no less than enlightened self-interest will be our guide.36

Couched in the rhetoric of civic security and personal safety, this discourse offered white civil society political rescue and a new structure of collective sentimentality. The smooth symbiosis between “racial” and “criminal” discourse was the stuff of the new white civil society, in fact, the central premise of the post-1960s White Reconstruction. Goldwater rendered a white supremacist populist conception of liberty and security, defined through the militarized containment—and ultimate liquidation—of the lurking “urban threat”. His declaration of virtual domestic warfare in this speech, while
presumptuous, blueprinted the watershed Nixon victory of 1968 and the onset of the emergent police-prison hegemony in the United States. Policing and criminal justice emerged in this way as socially productive technologies during a crucial historical conjuncture, forging an indelible link between the site and scene of the prison and the corresponding world of a consolidated and coherent—though always endangered—normative white civil society.

**Whiteness as Property (Interest): A Note on “Multiculturalism” and White Supremacy**

To foreground US civil society as normatively white is not to posit a discrete “ethnic” or “racial” identity as the uncontested or non-contradictory determination of the social. This is to say, civil society is not “white” in the apartheid—that is official, totalizing, and closed—sense. Goldwater’s (and his heirs’) normative civil whiteness implies an ongoing and complex relation of hierarchy, discipline, power, and violence that has come to oversee the current and increasingly incorporative “multicultural” modalities of white supremacy, wherein “people of color” are selectively and incrementally solicited, rewarded, and absorbed into the operative functionings of white supremacist institutions (e.g., the military, police, and school) and discourses (e.g., patriotism). This multicultural turn is effectively the neo-liberal and neo-conservative assimilationism of a post-apartheid state and civil regime. The social formation of the current epoch is aggressively normatively white, to the extent that multiculturalism is based on an empirical production of “diversity” fostered and sustained by a white supremacist organizing logic, and, as evidenced in the formation of the prison regime, premised on an astronomically scaled institutionalization of Black and Indigenous peoples civil and social death (Black and Native American imprisonment significantly exceeds all other group-based incarceration rates).

American civil society (in both its local and global articulations) aggressively constructs normative whiteness as bio-political power, creatively transposing the technologies of racism and white supremacy into alternate (putatively “non-white”) racial identifications and embodiments. The contemporary hegemony of law and order, its materialization into a “way of life,” is based on a discursive and material expansion of civil society’s normative whiteness, to the extent that “nonwhites” or “people of color” have increasingly invested in the protection of this sanctified property.
interest: the sustenance of civil society and its reproduction on a scale of
globalized magnitude as the United States of America. This identification
marks the “multiculturalization” of white supremacy, a paradigm shift that
offers promise for the global project of the “white civilian” ontology.

To blur the boundaries and limits of legitimate racist state violence is
the act at the heart of the current American policing modality, and this
rearticulation of the state—a political labor that disembodies the formal
state while re-embodying it in the lives of its subjects—entails more than the
institutionalization of police impunity: it calls for the deputation of white civil
society itself. President George W. Bush’s October 2003 pronouncement of
the Homeland Security Appropriations Act was enunciated as no less than
the extension and elaboration of the Goldwaterist mandate:

On September the 11th, 2001, enemies of freedom made our country
a battleground. Their method is the mass murder of the innocent,
and their goal is to make all Americans live in fear…. The danger
to America gives all of you an essential role in the war on terror.
You’ve done fine work under difficult and urgent circumstances,
and on behalf of a grateful nation, I thank you all for what you do
for the security and safety of our fellow citizens.38

While white citizens have always served as appendages of the U.S. state as its
self-appointed (and juridically sanctioned) eyes and ears, the distinctiveness
of the current moment lies in the technologies of interpellation which imbue
a new conception of white locality—it is a “here” that is, in practice, entitled
(even compelled) to be everywhere.39

In contradistinction to civil society’s normative whiteness, the carceral
formation of the U.S. prison regime, itself generated and reproduced by the
white supremacist logic of targeted, though rigorously mass-based policing,
criminalization, and imprisonment technologies, is normatively embodied
Black, Brown, and Indigenous. While many journalists and scholars
belabor the point of Black/Native American/Latino “over-representation” in
census counts of the imprisoned population, this rhetoric of empirical racial
inequity or institutional bias—and conspicuous absence of a discourse of
“white under-representation” among the imprisoned—elides the historical
context and legacies of the White Reconstruction. Revising Marx’s classical
discussion of the “usefulness of crime” to the regime of capital, radical
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Criminologist Nils Christie frames the emergence of this carceral formation as the lifeblood of nationalized, domestic warfare(s). Read in the context of Goldwater’s White Atlantic and the Bush/Ashcroft Homeland Security imaginaries, Christie’s meditation can be interpreted as an explication of the white supremacist logic of carceral organization, “law and order’s” culminating act:

Crime does not exist. Crime is created. First there are acts. Then follows a long process of giving meaning to these acts.

…The social system has changed into one where there are fewer restraints against perceiving even minor transgressions of laws as crimes and their actors as criminals…. This new situation, with an unlimited reservoir of acts which can be defined as crimes, also creates unlimited possibilities for warfare against all sorts of unwanted acts.

With a living tradition from the period where natural crimes were the only ones, combined with an unlimited reservoir of what can be seen as crimes in modern times, the ground has been prepared. The crime control market is waiting for its entrepreneurs.40

Christie’s historicization of the crime control market as a production premised on access to the limitless raw material of “unwanted acts” resonates both the circulation of capital and the materiality of ownership. This begs the question: What, under the terms of white civil society, forms the baseline of its putative protection from criminality and disorder, the countless unwanted acts of aggression that threaten to destabilize the “social system”? Critical race theorist Cheryl I. Harris’ legal-historical theorization of “whiteness as property” responds to this crucial question. Her working answer illuminates the intersection of property and subjectivity, a convergence that articulates civil society’s persistent propositions of universalizing values of collective white (and putatively multicultural) identity—a form of “corporate ownership”—which, simultaneously, invents and remakes material boundaries of racial unassimilability and otherness.

Correctly positing that “the origins of property rights in the United States are rooted in racial domination”, Harris exposes the juridical means through which concepts of nationhood, ownership, and civil subjectivity have emanated from the fabricated materiality of whiteness. In the epoch
of chattel slavery, Harris writes: “Whiteness was the characteristic, the attribute, the property of free human beings.” Far from being eroded by the formal abolition of the slave plantation (and Constitutional relocation of enslavement to the site of the prison), law and property have continuously intertwined through the reproduction of civil society’s constitutive whiteness. In fact, Harris contends that the possession and protection of an ontologically propertied whiteness remains a pillar of contemporary jurisprudence.

In ways so embedded that it is rarely apparent, the set of assumptions, privileges, and benefits that accompany the status of being white have become a valuable asset… Whites have come to expect and rely on these benefits, and over time these expectations have been affirmed, legitimated, and protected by the law. Even though the law is neither uniform nor explicit in all instances, in protecting the settled expectations based on white privilege, American law has recognized a property interest in whiteness that, although unacknowledged, now forms the background against which legal disputes are framed, argued, and adjudicated.41

Conceptualizing whiteness as a form of property, and white civic identity as a collective entitlement to ownership (of property, Others, and propertied Others), implies that when “non-whites” threaten, attack, or steal the common property of white civil society, they are actually violating the sanctified materiality, and the vicarious and deeply valued collective bodily integrity of whiteness. Multiculturalism is, in this sense, a keystone for the re-articulation of white supremacy as a simultaneously (and often contradictorily) incorporative and exclusionary regime of social ordering: it bears witness to both the spectacle of “diversity” as showcased through various state and civil institutions, and the proliferation of the post-1970s prison industrial complex as the normative white supremacist materialization of Goldwater’s White Atlantic.

**METHODODOLOGY (OR ITS FAILURE): THE TERMS OF COLLABORATION**

The genealogical and theoretical work of this project draws widely from publicly circulated texts, as well as interviews, correspondence, and informal conversations that I conducted or participated in over the course of eight
years. Throughout this book are passages from the published communiqués, polemics, scholarly articles, essays, memoirs, testimonials, and legal documents composed by such widely recognized radical intellectuals and political prisoners as George Jackson, Angela Y. Davis, Leonard Peltier, Mumia Abu-Jamal, Assata Shakur, Laura Whitehorn, Marilyn Buck, and others. Equally significant, however, are the unpublished, undercirculated, or heretofore uncirculated texts produced by captive intellectuals who remain largely outside the non-imprisoned public’s (and particularly the U.S. Left’s) fields of political vision or concern. By way of example, the private correspondence, visiting room conversations, legal scholarship, theoretical meditations, creative writing, and scholarly essays of Viet Mike Ngo (as of this writing imprisoned in Soledad Prison, CA) have been crucial to the development of this book from its earliest stages through the final revisions. Ngo’s status as a common or “social” prisoner, textually prolific yet virtually anonymous to the overlapping “literary”, “academic”, and “activist” publics, refracts in individualized form the massive and violent social extermination of human beings through current regimes of state captivity and carceral punishment.

The inherent repressiveness of methodology, conventionally conceived as a relatively stable and closed system (or “discipline”) of scholarly inquiry, looms over this book. Moving from the text of a personal correspondence penned by Ngo in 2002, the remainder of this introduction mediates on the propositions, structured violence, and failures of “methodology” as it passes through (and aggresses) the embodied figure of one imprisoned radical intellectual, in this case a putatively “Asian” subject (Ngo identifies as Vietnamese).

Troubled relations of freedom and unfreedom, life and death constantly surface in the moments of political contact and possibility inscribed here, as well as in the absence of intimacies rendered difficult or impossible by gendered white supremacist hierarchies. Even this relation with Ngo, in other words, is a relatively “privileged” one, to the extent that Ngo’s subjectivity—not to mention my own, as the “free” and variously identified Filipino, Asian, or “Hispanic” visitor—is not a primary object of the prison’s racist hyper-violence (“Asian” prisoners often escape the normative racial classifications of many jails and prisons, and are not as massively or eagerly addressed and punished under “prison gang” penalties and institutional segregations). By way of example, Kijana Tashiri Askari (Harrison), another longtime correspondent, is imprisoned in 24 hour isolation in the California
Security Housing Unit (Pelican Bay State Prison) under the official rubric of (Black) “gang affiliation”. Hugo “Yogi” Pinell, a Black Nicaraguan, has been imprisoned for over three decades under similar circumstances, and is incarcerated in the same “unit” as Askari (they often shout communication to one another across closed cell doors). I have had the opportunity to meet “in person” with both Askari and Pinell, but our relations are manifest within the violence of a particular structure and racial geography of distance and alienation: we are not allowed “contact visits”, and our conversations are closely monitored by guards who are standing within earshot; furthermore, Pelican Bay State Prison is located in a part of California that is difficult to access, being six to eight hours away from the closest major airport and near the border of Oregon. Finally, neither Askari nor Pinell are allowed phone calls, and their mail correspondence is frequently denied or censored. This is, to invoke the terms of Orlando Patterson, the very picture of an ultramodern “social death”, the virtual liquidation of affective and (extended) familial ties through a historically specific articulation of penal slavery.

The history of my privileged relation to Ngo, in this sense, reinscribes and amplifies the failure of methodology in the nexus of a white supremacist continuum of freedom and unfreedom, one that is fundamentally structured by an institutional hierarchy of capture and punishment that reserves and ranks its technologies of violence for deployment on a landscape directly defined by the institutional genealogies of U.S. chattel slavery, an essentially anti-black technology. I am meditating, through the context of this privileged relation to Ngo, on the structured violence of attempts at political collaboration between the broadly structured categories of “free” and “unfree”, and am attempting to offer a conception of praxis that attempts to fracture the coherence and order of civil society’s banal notions of the “political” as well as conventional academic renditions of the “methodological”.

Ngo is part of a lineage of social prisoners whose organizing, teaching, and legal work have antagonized the California Department of Corrections (CDC). As of September 2004, he had nine pending cases or writs of habeas corpus against the CDC over matters such as racial segregation, institutional retaliation, religious freedom, and sexual harassment. He has said:

They really don’t know what to do with me and my comrades right now. I mean, one minute they want to transfer us, another minute they tell us “we changed our minds,” because they don’t know
what to do with us, because we’re thinking outside the box. We’re fighting. We’re actually standing up saying, “you know what? I have the right to challenge your policy, challenge the way you run things. Just ‘cause you’re a pig and I’m an inmate doesn’t mean that I have to listen to what you say. That your word is law.”

Since the winter of 2000, Ngo and I have developed an ongoing, critical dialogue about the structure of engagement between civil society’s activists and those radical intellectuals and activists who live in state captivity.

Ngo has lucidly located his political work within a recent historical lineage of radical and revolutionary praxis. Various thinkers as George Jackson, Assata Shakur, Ché Guevara, Ho Chi Minh, Toni Morrison, Angela Davis, and Frantz Fanon, he speaks to an epochal condition illuminated and enriched by his living encounters with the current prison regime. Ngo’s written work, which includes published pieces and unpublished notebooks of journal entries and political meditations, moves within a contemporary genealogy of “prison letters” produced by captive U.S. radicals, liberationists, and revolutionaries: consider the examples of Jackson’s *Soledad Brother*; public correspondence in Davis, et. al.’s *If They Come in the Morning*; News and Letters Committees’ *Revolutionary Prisoners Speak*; or former political prisoner Ray Luc Levasseur’s online compilation “Letters from Exile.” By way of example, a personal note written by Ngo in January 2002 reflects on the history of our critical collaboration while offering a concise philosophy of praxis:

I wanted to meet you ‘cuz I heard you were radical…. I was hoping we could collaborate our work—specifically, I was hoping to liberate myself. When I realized this wasn’t going to happen, I was comforted by the fact that my writing was being used by someone whose politics were like my own.

For Ngo, the scene of the meeting with the non-imprisoned radical activist provokes a sudden revision of familiar political terms, conditioning the collaborative praxis of the “radical” free and “unfree” through the desire and political necessity of liberation, suggesting a living freedom that requires (at least) a material end to the condition of imprisonment. Ngo foregrounds the constitutive failure of this meeting by rendering the premises of its political structuring explicit. As he describes, the possibility of a “radicalism” with
integrity—that is, one that does not presume or reinscribe structures of civil and social death—hinges on the liquidation of the essential dichotomy on which the meeting itself is founded.

Failing the persistent test of a radical freedom, mutually obtained and embodied, the meeting becomes a reifying event: the charade of “collaboration” reproduces the violent condition of its genesis, for there would have been no (alleged) collaboration without the sturdy existence of the imprisonment regime, the contemporary formalization of what Fanon terms “systematized de-humanization”. In this sense, the only “good” meeting, that is, the only liberatory meeting, is the one that foments the collapse of its condition, the disarticulation of what has been, in the American national formation, the necessary linkage between freedom and imprisonment. It is the methodology of liberation that remains the central and vexing question here, to the extent that it confronts the non-imprisoned activist/scholar with the physical (as well as political-intellectual) contingencies of insurgency, insurrection, and transformation in relation to their cohorts held captive.

The meeting that matters, then, is the one that displaces the condition of its reification, critically exposing and demystifying the structures and technologies through which “a relation between people takes on the character of a thing and thus acquires a ‘phantom objectivity’, an autonomy that seems so strictly rational and all-embracing as to conceal every trace of its fundamental nature: the relation between people”. Reflecting Georg Lukács’ notion of reification is the common sense conception of the “free world’s” relation (or non-relation) to the imprisoned world as a “thing,” a natural feature of the social landscape, rather than an expansive and mind-boggling technology of domination and subjection. This common sense evinces “prisons” as somewhere outside of and away from civil society, when these modes of human capture in fact surround, enmesh, and articulate with the normative everyday of the social formation.

Ngo suggests that our attempt at “collaborative work” is radically insufficient, and that there can be no authentic relation of integrity or equity between those inhabiting the formal and opposed categories of free and unfree. He is, instead, momentarily solaced by the hope that my pedagogical appropriations of his intellectual work (although such appropriations must often go anonymous and unaccredited to minimize further endangerment of the imprisoned) are somehow relevant to his political desires, visions, and fantasies. Perhaps, then, the vernacular of “collaboration” (or coalition, solidarity, partnership, etc.) exaggerates the political and historical
possibilities of these meetings between free and unfree, to the extent that one of the “collaborators” is categorically immobilized—not at liberty to move, speak, and practise.

During a May 2002 phone interview that we recorded for a course I was teaching entitled “Imprisoned U.S. Radical Intellectuals and Social Movements,” Ngo elaborated on the political implications of his January note.

You have to find people who love you, and that’s the biggest problem in here in prison. If we had more access to people who think and feel like us... it helps us do the work. Because we’re so isolated in here and out there at least you guys have the opportunity to sit down and break bread with each other.... With people who love and feel the way you do.... That’s where you get your energy from.

We get our energy from our despair and our hate and a lot of things that have to do with love too, and love of wanting to live. But it’s overwhelming at times; so you have to use whatever advantages you have; and for a free person, that is your advantage. So definitely utilize it. That’s something me (sic) and my comrades dream of.53

While uneven, conflict-ridden relations of personal and structural power are inherent to any form of political collaboration, there is a qualitative difference to the engagement of which Ngo speaks here. Only in the meeting of the nominally free subject of civil society and the imprisoned subject of the carceral formation is there a bodily confrontation between people juridically and civically defined as alive (“citizen”) and dead (“inmate”).

More pointedly, as Sharon Patricia Holland contends, the “free” (non-imprisoned) activist/scholar/theorist’s movement into communities intimate with death—whatever form or force that death embodies—requires a principled entanglement with institutional, intellectual, and bodily marginality, if not more immediate varieties of clear and present endangerment.

Speaking about death and the dead necessitates that critics move beyond familiar country and into liminal spaces. These liminal spaces are present whenever a scholar moves between
the borders separating nations and communities, disciplines and departments.54

To situate Holland’s critique within the dominion of the United States prison regime is to depart from the presumptive mobility of civic (and academic) freedom, the hallmark of the (white) Western professional intellectual subject, and to “move” instead into zones of conflict and (undeclared/domestic) warfare.

Ngo writes and speaks constantly of being decisively de-linked from the political modalities of civil society. In the following passage from the same January 2002 communique, the illicit and subversive work of cultural production reconstitutes a Fanonian “literature of warfare”, produced as both means and end, momentarily gratifying writer and recipient, although ultimately incomplete in the absence of the actualized dream of liberation.

Over the past year, I’ve come to terms with the fact that the conditions of my existence dictate my mode of warfare. At this point in time, my warfare must entail writing and teaching. I’m disheartened that this mode lacks urgency, but pleased that I may be alive to enjoy my work. And knowing that my work helps your teaching eases my mind. I’m doing what I can for now. Until other options show themselves to me to be worthy of a greater sacrifice, I’ll live with what I’m doing now.55

Recasting praxis through an open-ended, though nonetheless material conception of liberation’s urgency—he is not simply invoking a metaphoric liberation that elides (or purports to transcend) his bodily incarceration—Ngo speaks to a vision of radical freedom that is authentic to its context. Since the time of our initial meeting, he has communicated a theoretical corpus through a variety of strategic gestures, historical allegories, tactical silences, and vernacular codes (including poetry, correspondence, and memoir). Ngo’s work refigures the time and context of a methodology that is premised on his imprisonment.

While a clear vision of freedom in struggle is the defining aspect of his political intellectual work, Ngo has always been clear that he expects to
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die in captivity. He insists that even if he re-entered the “free world”, he would not experience freedom unless his imprisoned “comrades” were to accompany him.56 Contradicting the individualizing political logic of many current and popular prisoner support organizations and campaigns—most conspicuously, the significant sector of liberal-to-progressive international support magnetized around the cases of Leonard Peltier and Mumia Abu-Jamal—Ngo’s conception of radical freedom illuminates the fatal categorical condition of imprisonment. There are no individuals within the regime of imprisonment, only sub-categories of punishment and classification that evaporate the individual into her/his condition of existence. Appropriately, Ngo’s principaled refusal to individualize his condition (and thus, his “liberation”) invokes the radically de-individuating gestures of both Peltier and Abu-Jamal. Peltier writes in My Life is My Sun Dance:

This book is not a plea or a justification. Neither is it an explanation or an apology for the events that overtook my life and many other lives in 1975 and made me unwittingly—and, yes, even unwillingly—a symbol, a focus for the sufferings of my people. But all of my people are suffering, so I’m in no way special in that regard.

You must understand. . . I am ordinary. Painfully ordinary. This isn’t modesty. This is fact. If so, I honor your ordinariness, your humanness, your spirituality. I hope you will honor mine. That ordinariness is our bond, you and I. We are ordinary. We are human. The Creator made us this way. Imperfect. Inadequate. Ordinary.57

Radical intellectuals who are captives of the state, insofar as they are defined and categorized as civically dead, are formally de-individuated upon imprisonment. Imprisoned people are, in an official sense, non-people. Further, as mentioned above, they become a form of captive chattel in accordance with the provisions of the Thirteenth Amendment, through which they are made immediately available for “involuntary servitude”, or slavery. Their presumptive rights to formal recognition as “individuals” or legal subjects under the juridical and philosophical mores of American bourgeois liberalism disappear, replaced by a structure of unmediated subjection to state coercion.

Essentially, imprisoned people have no “right” to exist as political beings or social subjects. Often, the state punishes and pre-empts the political work
and affective labor of its captives through physical violence, forced narcotic sedation, isolation, and relocation (often to prisons that are hundreds or thousands of miles away from family, loved ones, and political supporters). What, then, is the significance of political praxis for people whose right to exist has been eliminated? What is an appropriate “methodology” of engagement with this lineage of radical, revolutionary, and liberationist political subjects who are, by force of condition, putative “non-subjects”? Perhaps these are the very questions that underwrite the permanently troubled relation between the free and unfree (or the imprisoned and non-imprisoned) as the structure of political-intellectual “collaboration” begs the question of how “politics” happens at the carceral underside of social formation. Imprisoned radical intellectuals are practitioners of a qualitatively different “politics”, precisely because their field of engagement is defined through a relation of direct violence with the state. This condition of confrontation constitutes a discrete modality of praxis that is incommensurable with the myriad forms of political practice in civil society.

The condition of praxis over-determines its political significance, particularly when carried out by juridically dead people: that which is reasonably demanded by the free becomes grounds for punitive sanction against the unfree. Prisoners striking and rebelling for acknowledgement of non-existent human rights—as in the Attica Rebellion of 1971—thus amount to far more than “reformist” struggles against fascistic and localized regimes of domination. Assertions of political personhood by the imprisoned are a constrained attempt to decisively delegitimize the carceral formation’s official attempts to eliminate them from the realm of the “political”, as well as to generate new discursive-material terrain for political struggle against a state regime that consistently militates and militarizes against any such possibility. This is to say that the structuring of unfreedom extinguishes the possibility of legitimate political subjectivity a priori, while constructing a discrete border at which “politics” is presumed subversive in and of itself.

At the risk of stating the obvious, I am arguing that the study of and critical engagement with contemporary prison praxis represents a relation of appropriation and translation, structurally dominated by free world (professional and non-professional) intellectuals and activists whose necessarily exploitative use of these texts (for there is little material benefit and much potential punishment in store for their authors) is often endorsed and encouraged by their imprisoned counterparts. The living figure and political specter of the imprisoned political intellectual represents a crisis
of meaning for the “methodology” of the non-imprisoned scholar as well as a fundamental disruption of the free world activist’s operative assumptions (e.g., bodily mobility, political subjectivity, access to civil society). It is through the lens of this failure of methodology that this article must be read and (re)interpreted.

**ENDNOTES**

1 During the oft-forgotten “Philippine-American War” at the turn of the 20th century, between 1 and 2 million Filipinos—almost all civilians—were slaughtered by the U.S. military. Given that this military conquest occurred before the era of weapons of mass destruction, the killing was breathtaking in scope and intensity, and was in fact a direct continuation of the North American indigenous genocide. See Dylan Rodríguez, “‘A Million Deaths?’: Genocide and the Subject of Filipino American Studies,” *Positively No Pilipinos Allowed: Mapping ‘Filipino America’ Formations* (Tiongson, et. al., eds.) (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2005).


By way of further example, Amnesty International offers the following definitions of “conscientious objector” and “political prisoner”:

Amnesty International (AI) considers a conscientious objector to be all those who are imprisoned, detained or otherwise physically restricted by reason of their political, religious or other conscientiously held beliefs or by reason of their ethnic origin, sex, colour, language, national or social origin, economic status, birth or other status. Amnesty International works towards the unconditional and immediate release of prisoners of conscience.

…Amnesty International uses a broad interpretation of the term political prisoner so as to cover all cases with a significant political element, for example criminal offences committed with a political motive or within a clear political context. Amnesty International does not call for the release of all political prisoners within this definition, nor does it call on governments to give political prisoners special conditions. Amnesty International works to ensure that all political prisoners receive a fair trial in accordance with international standards, and Amnesty International opposes the use of torture and cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment in all cases—both criminal and political—without reservation. (Political prisoners in Azerbaijan and Armenia: Amnesty International’s concerns and recommendations, AI Index: EUR 04/001/2002, 20 January 2002)

The Jericho Movement, on the other hand, suggests a more explicitly politicized definition of “political prisoner,” grounded in histories of Black and Third World liberation struggles: “[P]olitical prisoners are in prison today because they fought
for self-determination for the people and stood up against police brutality, racism, miseducation and the unjust incarceration. The fight to free them is part and parcel of the growing effort to dismantle the entire prison industrial complex.” (Jericho Movement website, http://www.thejerichomovement.com/aboutus.html)

Finally, the Out of Control Lesbian Committee to Support Women Political Prisoners focuses its work on women political prisoners, who “are in prison for various reasons from opposing policies of the U.S. government through revolutionary activities, participating in the Puerto Rican Independence movement, Black Liberation, American Indian Movement, to anti-nuclear activities, etc.” (Out of Control Lesbian Committee to Support Women Political Prisoners website, www.prisonactivist.org/ooc/#about)


Marshall Eddie Conway was an active member and leader of the Black Panther Party (BPP) chapter in Baltimore, Maryland during the 1960s and 1970s. Conway helped to expose and expel a key FBI COINTELPRO infiltrator into the BPP, Warren Hart. According to Conway, Hart, under government and FBI direction and protection, had actually “founded” the Baltimore chapter. Hart subsequently used his purported leadership position to gain privileged access to the inner workings of the Panther Central Committee, and reported his findings to the National Security Agency (NSA). Conway’s disruption of Hart’s domestic espionage operation led to his being specifically targeted by COINTELPRO for neutralization. In 1970, Conway was arrested and charged with the murder of one police officer and the attempted murder of two others. Although no physical evidence linked him to the scene of the alleged crimes, and the government was later revealed to have used a paid informant during the trial (who testified that Conway “confessed” to him), Conway was nonetheless convicted and given a sentence of life plus 30 years. There is a campaign to win his release. Marshall Eddie Conway may be reached at #116469, P.O. Box 534, Jessup, MD, 20794.


Buck is a white anti-imperialist and anti-racist political prisoner. After being imprisoned in 1973 for purchasing handgun ammunition, Buck served four years in a West Virginia federal prison. After receiving furlough, she refused to return to the prison and went underground for eight years. She was apprehended and tried in 1985
for assisting in Assata Shakur’s escape from prison, and was additionally sentenced (with her co-defendants Dr. Mutulu Shakur and Sekou Odinga) for conspiracy to commit armed bank robbery in support of the Black liberation struggle. In 1988, Buck was sentenced to an additional decade in prison as part of the infamous “Resistance Conspiracy” case, in which she and others were convicted of “conspiracy to protest and alter government policies through use of violence” against government and military property. (See generally Prison Activist Resource Center website, http://www.prisonactivist.org/pps+pows/marilyn buck/). Marilyn Buck may be reached via correspondence at: #00482-285, 5701 8th. St., Camp Parks, Unit B, Dublin, CA, 94568.


In addition to the following passages from Roberts and Smith, see generally Anannya Bhattacharjee, “Private Fists and Public Force,” and Judith A.M. Scully, “Killing the Black Community,” in Policing the National Body: Race, Gender, and Criminalization (Cambridge: South End Press, 2002). For a sociological examination of the crucial role of white women in contemporary white supremacist movements and organizations, see Kathleen M. Blee, Inside Organized Racism: Women in the Hate Movement (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 2002).


The Klan’s primary website, at www.kkk.bz, conspicuously displays passages from the Bible alongside gratuitous images of the Capitol building, American eagle, and
U.S. flag. It is, quite literally, a classic American nationalist organization. Other white supremacist organizations, including Patriot groups, neo-Nazis, and white militias, evince a similar commitment to the flourishing of a particular vision of American exceptionalism that draws from its core political and cultural legacies, including republicanism, “white rights,” and “Christian values”.  


The figure 2.5 million includes imprisoned populations that are almost always excluded from common carceral body counts. The most frequently quoted figures are from the United States Bureau of Justice Statistics. See, for example, Harrison and Karberg, “Prison and Jail Inmates at Midyear 2003,” U.S. Department of Justice (NCJ 203947, May 2004). According to the BJS, as of June 2003 there were 2,078,570 prisoners held in Federal or State prisons and local jails. In addition, the U.S. Department of Justice’s Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention writes in its 2002 annual report that there were 108,931 children incarcerated as of 1999 (OJJDP Annual Report 2002, NCJ 202038, p. 59). It is almost certain that the current population of imprisoned children exceeds this figure, especially since a growing number of youth under the age of 18 are being sent to adult jails and prisons (statistics on incarcerated populations typically have a 1 to 2 year lag, due to the time expended in collecting and calculating data). Finally, the Department of Homeland Security, which bureaucratically absorbed the older Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS), reports that in 2002, there were 188,547 non-citizens held in INS prisons on an average day (memorandum from Acting Inspector General Clark Kent Ervin, “Major Management Challenges Facing the Department of Homeland Security,” March 2003).  

Jalil Muntaqim (a.k.a. Anthony Jalil Bottom) first affiliated with the Black Panther Party when he was 18 years old, after being recruited by elementary school friends who had since become Panthers. On August 28, 1971, he was captured along with Albert Nuh Washington in a midnight shoot-out with San Francisco police. It has been alleged that Muntaqim and Washington attempted to assassinate a police sergeant in retaliation for the August 21, 1971 assassination of George Jackson. Subsequently, Muntaqim, Washington, and Herman Bell—who came to be known as the “New York Three”—were charged with a host of revolutionary underground activities, including the assassination of NYC police officers for which they were given life sentences. Muntaqim has actively worked with a wide variety of activist and educational campaigns and organizations since his imprisonment, including his founding call for the Jericho Amnesty march in 1998 (which eventually catalyzed the formation of the Jericho Amnesty Movement) and the National Prisoners Campaign to Petition the United Nations in 1976. See Can’t Jail the Spirit (5th ed.) (Chicago: Committee to End the Marion Lockdown, 2002), p. 136-140. Also see “The New


26 Ibid.


In addition to the aforementioned texts by Melendez, Torres, and Velásquez, see the cluster of articles by and interviews with the *independentistas* in Churchill and Vander Wall’s (eds.) *Cages of Steel: the Politics of Imprisonment in the United States* (Washington, D.C.: Maisonneuve Press, 1992).


Goldwater, “Nomination Acceptance Speech at the 28th Republican National Convention”.


Attorney General John Ashcroft, whose reactionary tendencies have at times offended even the conservative consensus that glues the Clinton-Bush axis, is among the most visible proponents of this important social project. Articulating a versatile discursive frame that ingeniously links the global policing of Empire to the highly personalized security of domestic white communities, Ashcroft’s announcement of a reshaped, post-911 “National Neighborhood Watch” magically renders the “neighborhood” as the front line of anti-terrorist, anti-crime struggle. The populist glue of Ashcroft’s appeal lies in its mobilization of white sentimentality, the shameless invoking of the time-honored melodrama of white bodily integrity under immediate, racial threat and
harm—here, it is the potentiality of violence done to white bodies that is dramatized as the essential national-cum-racial injustice and tragedy.


42 The official name of the California Department of Corrections prison in Soledad is “Correctional Training Facility at Soledad”. The place is more widely known as “Soledad Prison”. Viet Mike Ngo was incarcerated at age seventeen for the retaliation killing of a fourteen year old rival gang member. Ngo is a writer, activist, and political educator who has participated as a guest speaker and lecturer in a variety of educational and political venues. While housed in San Quentin, he petitioned the Marin County Superior Court for a writ of habeas corpus regarding the administration’s illegal racial segregation of inmates in housing and discipline. Ngo may be reached via mail at: E-21895, P.O. Box 689, Y-201 (L), Soledad, CA 93960.


44 Ngo, “A conversation with Mike Ngo”, NeoSlave Narratives: Prison Writing and Abolitionism (2005) (James, ed.).


46 Angela Y. Davis, et. al., If They Come in the Morning (New York: Third Press, 1971). This collection contains “prison letters” from Huey Newton, Angela Y. Davis, Ericka Huggins, Bobby Seale, Fleeta Drumgo, John Clutchette, and Ruchell Magee.


48 Levasseur is a white anti-imperialist political prisoner and veteran of the Vietnam War. After his return from the war in 1967, he says that he “was deeply affected by the devastation of the war on the Vietnamese people and their country”. Levasseur subsequently worked with a number of organizations, including Southern Student Organizing Committee in Tennessee, Vietnam Veterans Against the War, Red Star North bookstore, and a variety of underground groups. He was captured by federal agents in 1984, and was eventually tried and convicted for bombing U.S. military facilities, military contractors, and corporations connected to the apartheid regime in South Africa. He received a 45 year sentence. In 1986, he was indicted with seven others on charges of seditious conspiracy and additional charges under RICO laws. Levasseur was accused of membership in the underground Sam Melville-Jonathan Jackson Unit and the United Freedom Front. They were acquitted of the conspiracy charge, and the RICO charges were eventually dismissed. Ray Luc Levasseur was released from federal prison in August 2004.
This site is maintained by Levasseur’s friends, family, and supporters, and contains links to letters and essays, as well as “updates” on other anti-imperialist political prisoners. See http://home.earthlink.net/~neoludd/.

Viet Mike Ngo, correspondence, January 2002 (undated).


Ngo, “A conversation with Mike Ngo”, NeoSlave Narratives: Prison Writing and Abolitionism (James, ed.).


Viet Mike Ngo, correspondence, January 2002 (undated).

Interview with Viet Mike Ngo, San Quentin State Prison, (date excluded).


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Liberation or Gangsterism: Freedom or Slavery?
*Russell Maroon Shoatz*

Each generation must, out of relative obscurity, discover its mission—fulfill it or betray it.

_The Wretched of the Earth, Frantz Fanon*

**INTRODUCTION**

Within two generations the youth of this country have come full circle. Starting off in 1955, youth were being driven by two major motivations. One was to acquire enough education or apprenticeships, make use of their unskilled labor or street smarts to land “good” jobs or establish hustles, and make as much money and obtain as many material trappings as possible. The other was to use the education, apprenticeships, unskilled labor, street smarts, jobs, hustles and material trappings provided by them to win a measure of respect and dignity from their peers and society in general. Simultaneously, they were learning to respect themselves as individuals of self-worth—beyond simply eating, sleeping, laboring and having sex.

**THE FIRST WAVE: 1955 TO CIRCA 1980**

The Civil Rights Movement in the South successfully motivated Black, Puerto Rican, Euro-Amerikan, Native Amerikan, Chicano Mexicano Indigenous and Asian youth to use their time, energies, creativity and imaginations to discover their true self-worth and earn the respect of the entire world, while struggling towards even broader goals that were not measured by one’s material possessions. And over time each segment cheered on, supported, worked in solidarity with and/or discovered their own common interests and closely linked missions, connected to broader people’s goals.

Thus, Black youth elevated the Civil Rights Movement to the Black Power and Black Liberation Movements. Puerto Rican youth energized their elders’ on-going struggle to win independence for their home islands. Euro-Amerikan youth attacked the lies, hypocrisy and oppression that their parents were training them to uphold in the schools, society and overseas. Native Amerikan youth were returning to their suppressed ancestral ways and fighting to regain control over some of their land. Asian youth were struggling to overcome a system and culture that had always used and abused them.
Indeed, all of them came to clearly see that neither education, jobs, money, hustles nor material trappings could, by themselves, win them the victories they needed, or the new type of dignity and respect they deserved. Moreover, from 1955 until about 1975, these youths joined, formulated, led and supported struggles world-wide against racial oppression and bigotry, colonialism, and oppression of women and youth. In the process, they were winning themselves the respect, admiration and gratitude of the world’s oppressed, as well as that of their peers. Furthermore, in addition to becoming people that societies must take seriously, they were positive contributors who had much to give and were willing to sacrifice to achieve goals. They were youth who were capable of imagining a better world and fighting to realize it, while still remaining youthful and having a good time while doing it. All in all, it earned them a much deserved place in history.

**From the Mountain to the Sewer**

Yet here we are 30 years later and the youth nowadays are ridiculed and have been stripped of that hard earned freedom, self-respect and dignity. They are being told—over and over—that the only way to regain them is again to acquire education, skills, good jobs, or the right hustle(s). This means, once again, to acquire as much money and material things as one can in order again to win respect and dignity from one’s peers and society—and thereby begin to start loving one’s self, and seeing one’s self as more than simply a eating, sleeping, working and sexual animal.

How the hell did we get back to 1955!?

First off, let me make clear that even with all of the glorious strides the youth made within the First Wave, they were not the only ones fighting for radical and in many cases revolutionary changes. In fact, more than anything, they were usually only the tip of the spear. They were the shock troops of a global struggle, motivated by youthful energy and impatience, with no time or temperament for elaborate theories, rushing forward into the fray, ill prepared for the tricks that would eventually overwhelm them.

So, to understand what happened, we must examine some of the main “tricks” used to slow down, misdirect, control and defeat them. And without a point, a spear loses all of its advantages.
STRATEGIC TRICKS USED AGAINST THEM

Understanding these tricks, their various guises and refinements is the key to everything. You will never really understand what happened to get us to this point, or be able to really move forward, until you master recognition of these tricks and devise ways to defeat them.

They were and remain:

- Co-optation
- Glamorization of Gangsterism
- Separation from the Most Advanced (political revolutionary) Elements
- Indoctrination In Reliance on Passive Approaches
- Raw Fear

Co-optation was used extensively to trick just about all of the First Wave youth into believing that they had won the war. Strategically, for every named segment of youth—university students to lower class communities—billions of dollars and resources were made available. This was supposedly for these youth to determine what should be done to carry out far-reaching changes, while all along being expertly monitored and subtly coaxed further and further away from their most radical and advanced elements. This was done mainly through control of the largess, which ultimately was part of the ruling classes’ foundations and government and corporate strategies for defeating the youth with sugar-coated bullets.

In time, consequently, substantial segments of these previously rebellious youth found themselves fully absorbed and neutralized by either directly joining or accepting the foundations, sub-groups, corporations, university facilities, “approved” community groups’ poisonous assistance—or by becoming full-fledged junior partners after winning control of thousands of previously out of reach political offices and appointments.

And for all intents and purposes, that same trick is still being used today.

Glamorization of gangsterism, however, was then and continues to be the most harmful trick played against the lower class segments. The males, in particular, were then and continue to be the most susceptible to this gambit, especially when used opposite prolonged exposure to raw fear!
Let me illustrate by way of two historic groups that presently enjoy nothing less than “icon” status amongst just about everyone aware of them. Yet, these two groups’ “documented histories” clearly show how that trick was played, and continues to be played, throughout this country. The following is a brief, but clear, history of how the original Black Panther Party was bludgeoned and intimidated to the point where its key leader(s) “consciously” steered the group into accepting the “Glamorization of Gangsterism”. Because it became less of a threat to the ruling classes’ interests, it won them a temporary respite from the “Raw Fear” those circles were leveling against them. In the process, the organization was totally destroyed. The Nation of Islam “connected” Black Mafia had a different background, but against whom the same two tricks were played. It also left in their wake a sordid tale of Black young men who were—again—turned from seeking to be Liberators, into ruthless oppressors of their own communities. They never once engaged their real enemies and oppressors: the ruling classes.

Hands down, the original Black Panther Party (BPP) won more attention, acclaim, respect, support and sympathy than any other youth group of its time. At the same time, nevertheless, they provoked more fear and worry in ruling class circles than any other domestic group since President Roosevelt, Truman and Eisenhower presided over the neutralizing of the working class and the U.S. wing of the Communist Party. They were even more feared than the much larger Civil Rights Movement. According to the head of the FBI, J. Edgar Hoover, the Panthers were the "greatest threat to the internal security of the country". That threat came from their (BPP) ability to inspire other youth—both in the U.S. and globally—to act in similar grassroots political revolutionary ways.

Thus, there were separate BPP “style” formations amongst the Native Amerikans—American Indian Movement); Puerto Ricans—the Young Lords; the Chicano Mexican Indigenous—the Brown Berets; Asians—the I Wor Kuen; Euro-Amerikan—Young Patriot Party and White Panther Party; even the elderly—Gray Panthers. Also, there were literally hundreds of other similar, lesser known groups! In addition, internationally, the BPP had an arm in Algeria that had the only official “Embassy” established amongst all of the other Afrikan, Asian and South Amerikan revolutionary groups seeking refuge in that—then—revolutionary country. Astonishingly, they even spawned separate Black Panther Parties in India, the Bahamas and Nova Scotia, Australia and Occupied Palestine/the State of Israel!
On the other hand, the Nation of Islam (NOI) had been active since 1930. Yet, they also experienced a huge upsurge in membership in the same period, mainly due to the charismatic personality of Malcolm X and his aggressive recruitment techniques. His influence carried on after his assassination, fueled by the overall rebellious spirit of the youth looking for some group who would lead them to fight against the system.

There is a mountain of documents that clearly show that the highest powers in this country classified both groups as Class A Threats. These powers wanted to either neutralize or destroy these groups, even musing that if that could be achieved, similar methods could be used to defeat youth in the rest of the country.

So, how did they do it? Against the BPP they used a combination of co-optation, glamorization of gangsterism, separation from the most advanced elements, indoctrination in reliance on passive approaches, and raw fear—every trick in the book.

The ruling class’s governmental, intelligence, legal and academic sources, alarmed by the growth and boldness of the BPP and related groups, as well as their ability to win a level of global support, devised a strategy to split the BPP and co-opt its more compliant elements. At the same time, they moved to totally annihilate its more radical and revolutionary remainders. Plus, they knew that they had the upper hand, due to the youth and inexperience of the BPP. They had their own deep well of resources and experience in using counter-insurgency techniques against:

- Marcus Garvey’s UNIA (United Negro Improvement Association),
- The Palmer Raids against Euro-Amerikans of an Anarchist and/or left Socialist bent,
- The crushing of the I.W.W. (International Workers of the World) and neutralizing of the other Socialists,
- Their underground work that led to the defeat of Germany and Italy,
- Their subsequent destruction of any real Communist power in Western Europe,
- Their total domination and subjugation of the Caribbean (except Cuba), Central and South Amerika—except for the fledging guerrilla movements, and,
- Everything they had learned in their wars to replace the European colonial powers in Africa and Asia.
Still, the BPP had highly a motivated cadre, imbued with a fearlessness little known amongst domestic groups. The ruling class and their henchmen were stretched thin, especially since the Vietnamese, Laotians and Kampucheans were kicking their ass in South East Asia, and also the freedom fighters in Guinea-Bissau and Angola had the United States’ European allies—whom the U.S. supplied with the latest military hardware—on the run. So, although inexperienced, it still was a mixed bag. They still had a fighting chance. The co-optation depended on them neutralizing the BPP co-founder, and by then an icon, Huey P. Newton. Afterwards, they used him—along with other methods—to split the BPP and lead his wing along reformist lines. In the process, this forced the still revolutionary wing into an all-out armed fight before they were ready, hoping to either kill, jail, exile or break their will to resist and send them into ineffective hiding-out. Plus, even with their (BPP) extraordinary stature globally, no country seemed to want to risk U.S. wrath by “openly” allowing the BPP to train guerrilla units—something they could have circumvented in time.

So, surprisingly, Huey was allowed to leave jail with a still-to-be-tried-murder-of-a-policeman charge pending. The government and courts had him on a short leash, and with it hopes to control his actions, although probably not through any direct agreements. Sadly, the still politically naive BPP cadre and the other youth who looked up to Newton could imagine “nothing” but that “they”—the people—had forced his release. Veterans from those times still insist on clinging to such tripe!

Yet it seems Newton thought otherwise, and since he was not prepared to go underground and join his fledging Black Liberation Army (BLA), he almost immediately began following a reformist script. This was completely at odds with his earlier theories and writings, as well as with basic principles that were being practised to good effect by oppressed people throughout the world. Even further, he used his almost complete control of the BPP Central Committee to expel many, many veteran and combat tested BPP cadre in an imitation of the Stalinist and Euro-gangster posture for which he would later become famous. This included an all-out shooting war to repress any BPP members who would not accept his independently derived reformist policies.

At the same time, on a parallel track, U.S. and local police and intelligence agencies were using their, now, infamous COINTELPRO operations to provoke the split between Huey’s dominated wing and other less compliant
BPP members. This finally reached a head in 1971, after Huey’s shooting war and purge forced scores of the most loyal, fearless and dedicated above ground BPP cadre to go underground and join those other BPP members who were already functioning there as the offensive armed wing. Panther Wolves, Afro-American Liberation Army and Black Liberation Army were all names by which they were known, but the latter is the only one that would stick. Yet, the Black Liberation Army (BLA) had already become a confederation of clandestine guerrilla units, of mostly Black Revolutionary Nationalists from any number of formations who were willing to accept the BPP’s leadership, and who also accepted Huey Newton as their Minister of Defense. But, obviously Newton didn’t see it that way.

Even more telling, it was later learned that Newton’s expensive penthouse apartment—where he and other Central Committee members handled any number of sensitive BPP issues, was under on-going surveillance by intelligence agents who had another apartment down the hall. Thus, Newton and his faction were encapsulated, leaving them unable to follow anything but government sanctioned scripts, unless he/they went underground. This only occurred when Newton fled to Cuba after his gangster antics threatened the revoking of his release on the pending legal matters the government held over his head.

Add to that, the glamorization of gangsterism was something that various ruling class elements had begun to champion and direct towards the Black lower classes in particular. This was especially the case after they saw how much attention the Black Arts Movement was able to generate. Indeed, they recognized it could be used to misdirect youthful militancy while still being hugely profitably. They had, in fact, already misdirected Euro-Amerikan and other youth with the James Bond (Sean Connery, 1962-67; 1971) “I Spy” (1965-68), “Secret Agent Man” (1964-66) and other replacements for the “Old West/Cowboy and Indians” racist crap, so why not a “Black” counterpart? Thus was born the enormously successful counter-insurgency genre collectively know as the Blacksploitation movies: “Shaft” (1971), “Superfly” (1972), “Black Caesar” (1973), “Foxxxy Brown” (1974), and the like, accompanied by the wannabe crossovers like “Starsky and Hutch” (1975), with the notorious Black snitch “Huggie Bear”. Psychological warfare!

Follow the psychology: you can be “Black,” cool, rebellious, dangerous, and rich; have respect, women, cars, fine clothes, jewelry, and an expensive
home; and even stay high, as long as you don’t fight the system—or the cops! But, if you don’t go along with that script, then get ready to go back to the early days—with its shoot-outs with the cops, going to the graveyard, prison, on the run and exile! But you can still be cool, even as a “Huggie Bear” style snitch, or, interestingly, even like his buddy, the post-modern day/futuristic rat Cipher of “The Matrix”, who tried to betray ZION in return for a fake life as a rich, steak-eating, movie star. And most importantly, no more fighting with the Agents! Get it?

To bolster the government’s assault—and to saddle the oppressed with a Trojan Horse that would strategically handicap them for decades to come—they began to flood our neighborhoods with heroin, cocaine, marijuana, and “meth”. Yes, all of those drugs had earlier been introduced to these areas by organized criminals—under local police and political protection. Now the intelligence agencies were using them in the same manner that alcohol had long ago been introduced to the Native Amerikans—and with the same intentions—and that the later “foreign” trafficking in opium by the ruling classes of Europe and this country had been done—to counter their propensities to rebel against outside control while profiting from their misery.

So, Newton began to indulge in drugs as a way to try to relieve the stress of all that he was facing. He became a drug addict, plain and simple. That, however, didn’t upset the newly constructed gangster/cool that Hollywood, the ruling class and the government were pushing. Although many BPP cadre and other outsiders were very nervous about it, Newton’s control was by then too firmly fixed for anyone to challenge it, except the BLA, who by then were in a full blown urban guerrilla war with the government.

At the same time, the reformist wing of the BPP did manage to make some noteworthy strides under its only female head, Elaine Brown. Newton’s drug addiction/gangster lifestyle provoked exile caused him (on his own, and without any consultation with the body) to “appoint” Elaine to head the Party in his absence. An exceptionally gifted woman, she relied on an inner circle of female BPP cadre, backed by male enforcers, to introduce some clear and consistent projects that helped the BPP become a real power locally. It was a reformist paradigm, though, that could not hope to achieve any of the radical/revolutionary changes called for earlier. In fact, in Newton’s earlier writings, he had put the cadre on notice that there would be a point in time when the aboveground would have to be supported by
an underground, in order to keep moving forward. Yet, it was Newton who completely rejected that paradigm upon being released from jail, although he still organized and controlled a heavily armed extortion arm called “The Squad,” which consisted of BPP cadre who terrorized Oakland’s underworld with a belt-operated machine gun, mounted on a truck bed, accompanied by cadre who were ready for war! In classic Euro-gangster fashion, Newton had turned to preying on segments of the community that he had earlier vowed to liberate. But, of course, the police and government were safe from his forces. With no connection to a true underground—the BLA—there was no rational way to ratchet up the pressure on the police, government and the still fully operational system of ruling class control and oppression. They had been reduced to completely sanctioned methods.

Consequently, we can see all of the government’s props bearing fruit. Newton’s faction of the BPP had limited itself to both legal and underworld sanctioned methods: “Co-optation” and “Indoctrination in Reliance on Passive Approaches”—passive towards the status quo. They fell for the trick of severing all relations with their armed underground—the BLA—who would lead the BPP if they got to the next level of struggle—open armed resistance to the oppressors. In terms of “Separation From The Most Advanced Elements”, through Newton’s control, his faction was immersed in the “Glamorization of Gangsterism”. Finally, Newton, his faction and activists from all of the other Amerikan radical and revolutionary groups succumbed to the terror and “Raw Fear” that was being leveled at them, at least all but those who waged armed struggle, were killed, jailed, exiled, forced into hiding, or forced to continue continuing their activism under the radar.

**EPILOGUE ON HUEY P. NEWTON AND HIS BPP FACTION**

Elaine Brown guided their faction to support Newton and his family in exile, while orchestrating the building up of enough political muscle in Oakland to assure Newton’s return on favorable terms. Thus, he did return and eventually the charges were dropped. Nevertheless, Newton continued to use his iconic stature and renewed direct control of his faction to again play the cool-political-gangster role, and like any drug addict who refuses to reform, he kept sliding downhill, even turning on old comrades and his main champion, Elaine Brown, who had to flee in fear.
Sadly, for all practical purposes, that was the end of the original Black Panther Party.

Check-mate!

Later, as is well known, Newton’s continued drug addiction caused him his life—a sorry ending for a once great man.

THE “ORIGINAL” BLACK MAFIA

When you grow up in situations like me and Cliff … there is a lot of respect for brothers like (drug lord) Alpo and Nicky Barnes, those major hustler-player cats. Cause they made it. They made it against society’s laws. They were the Kings of their own domain.3

Albeit a touchy matter to many, it’s an irrefutable fact that the original Black Mafia (BM) was first established in Philadelphia, PA in the late 1960s, and has seen its cancerous ideas duplicated, imitated and lionized by Black youth ever since.

Moreover, although it’s unclear how much the national Nation of Islam (NOI) leadership knew or learned about the BM, there’s no question of the eventual absorption of the BM by the local NOI under Minister Jeremiah X Pugh. In fact, although the BM was originally just local “stick-up kids” culled from neighborhood gangs, their being swallowed by the NOI would eventually turn them into a truly powerful and terrifying criminal enterprise, completely divorced from everything that the NOI had stood for since its founding in 1930.

Sadly, most of the high level tricks used by the government and intelligence agencies were also used against the BM; namely, Co-optation, the Glamorization of Gangsterism, Separation from the Most Advanced Elements and Raw Fear.

Thus, it must be understood that although the NOI and BPP had different ideologies and styles, to most Black youth, both still held the promise of helping them to obtain what they most desired—self-respect, dignity and freedom.

Interestingly, the puritanical NOI’s dealings with the founders of the BM were similar to the Catholic Church’s historical relationship with the Italian Mafia. Meaning, the BM members who attended NOI religious services did so strictly on that basis, while still coming to the attention of the local NOI
leadership as unusually good financial contributors. And within the lower class Black community being served, everybody knew that that meant that they were hustlers, stick-up kids, or both. So, in the same way that the Italian Mafia would contribute huge sums to the Catholic church, the BM would eventually make large contributions to Philadelphia’s Temple No. 12. The national NOI, however, had been under close scrutiny and surveillance by intelligence agencies for decades. In fact, there were in excess of one million pages of files in the archives of the FBI alone on the NOI’s founder, The Honorable Elijah Muhammad, by the time of his death! Therefore, anyone who still believes that the assassination of Malcolm X did not have a hidden US government hand behind it has no clear idea of the threat that the NOI presented to this country at that time.

Consequently, the BM’s financial contributors would come to the attention of the intelligence agencies through their monitoring. Overshadowing all of that, nevertheless, was the bloody assaults that the FBI and local police were leveling against other Black radical and revolutionary groups, like the local and national BPP Chapters and Branches, the Revolutionary Action Movement (RAM), and scores of other smaller formations.

Indeed, FBI agents first tried to recruit Minister Pugh as a snitch against the local BPP, by telling him that the BPP was out to get him and supplant the local NOI as competition for the black youth’s loyalties. Pugh, to his credit, didn’t take the bait and also avoided getting his Temple No. 12 involved in a war with the BPP. However, he had to suspect that his taking of the blood money from the BM had also come to the attention of the FBI, and thus he was vulnerable. Yet, miraculously around the same time, Pugh’s name was removed from the FBI’s Security Index, which contained all of the country’s top level threats. After Pugh being on this list for years, and right after they filed a report of his refusal to be a snitch, why would they relax the pressure? Co-optation! How did they think it would unfold? By giving Pugh and his Temple, and their BM followers, enough rope to hang themselves, or to become addicted to a game that was ultimately controlled by their professed enemies—the US government and its underlings. This would turn the table on Pugh and force him to be less radical, more compliant and no longer a threat on the same level as the BPP, RAM and company.

For the BM members, the glamorization of gangsterism fit right in. After all, why would a group of Black stick-up kids and gang members call themselves The Black Mafia? This was in the era of Black is beautiful,
when millions of Blacks began wearing Afros/Bushes and African clothing and adopting African names—completely at odds with aping Italians! Why not name themselves the Zulus, Watusis or the Mau Mau—as even younger street gangs were doing? No—Hollywood’s projection of gangsterism was getting through.

Consequently, within a couple of years, the BM would uniformly be recognized as expensively dressed, big hat wearing, Cadillac driving imitations of the Italian Mafia. And sadly, they turned countless numbers of street gang members, former RAM cadre and militants from dozens of other Philly groups, who were fighting oppression, into pawns who were used to further destroy their own communities.

Another way to separate them from the more advanced elements operated under cover of Pugh and other insiders who continued to preach Black Nationalist doctrines amongst the youth in the street gangs and within the prisons, never missing an opportunity to hold out the illusion that they could gain pride and respect. Also, the youth believed they were joining a rebel group that was only awaiting the right time to throw their lot in with the masses of Blacks who were waging non-violent or bloody battles from coast to coast, and on the Afrikan continent.

Yet, by tricking them into diverting their energies into gangsterism, Pugh and company were effectively separating them from the more advanced elements. Albeit many, if not most, bought into the rationale that their extortion and drug dealing proceeds were a tax that would be used to build The Nation. A few years later that would be dubbed drinking the kool-aid, after Jim Jones and his CIA handlers tricked and forced hundreds of others Blacks to “drink” their death. And undoubtedly, Huey had also tricked his people with a similar game, although decades later that was all shown to be completely false! Yes, that money “did” build and/or buy some expensive homes, cars, clothing, women and drugs—as well as a few schools and businesses—but to fight oppression? Please!

Then, the raw fear being leveled on the entire society had the most devastating effect on them (BM) also. Otherwise, how can one explain or account for hundreds—if not thousands—of BM street soldiers being fearless enough to cow Philadelphia’s long established and ruthless Italian Mafia and its other mobs, and most of its warring street gangs and independents? Or that the same BM that fielded headhunters who terrorized the city by decapitations would in turn produce such a lackluster showing whenever it came to confronting anyone in uniform?
I’ll tell you how: their leadership had completely disarmed their fighting spirits by always telling them not to resist the police until they gave the order—which never came. Comically, after the police and FBI had succeeded in suppressing, jailing, exiling and co-opting most of the BPP, BLA, RAM and others, they then discovered the BM and in turn attacked them with a vengeance, while none of the BM put up anything resembling real resistance, except to go on the lam. Minister Jeremiah also made a 180 degree turn by even turning snitch, after getting caught in a drug sting.

Thus, their legacy is one of a ruthless group of Black thugs, who have spawned similarly ruthless crews—notably Philadelphia’s Junior Black Mafia (JBM) and the latest clone, Atlanta’s Black Mafia Family.

Their most harmful effect comes from their deeds and mystique that has returned a huge segment of Black youth to believing that the only way to gain any respect and dignity is through being the best and most heartless hustler around: full circle from 1955.

Finally, I used the BPP/BLA and NOI/BM because they present the most well “documented” examples. Although both are surrounded by so much mythology, a true raw analysis is almost never attempted, except by government and intelligence sources. The latter use their findings to refine, update and revise older tricks in order to continue checking and controlling this country’s rebellious youth, while simultaneously persisting in oppressing the communities they occupy—in line with the ruling class’s agenda.

Concurrently, amongst the middle and upper class idealistic youth (from all segments of the First Wave), they allowed themselves willy-nilly to be co-opted (fully) as the new managers of the system they had vowed to radically change, with few exceptions. They, moreover, championed and made a doctrine out of the necessity of always using and relying on passive and legal methods, epitomized by their new saint, Martin Luther King, Junior.

**THE SECOND WAVE: 1980 TO CIRCA 2005**

Thus, by 1980, for all practical purposes, the youth from the First Wave had been defeated. Following this they collectively descended into a debilitating, agonizing, escapist long period characterized by partying. This is not to discount the fringe elements who had been so adversely affected until they
had their hands full trying to rebuild their sanity, families, go back to school, or survive in prison or exile, while everybody else seemed to be dancing on the ceiling. This was similar to shell-shocked vets of WWI and WWII and the post-traumatic stress syndrome sufferers of the Viet Nam war.

The most misunderstood victims, however, were that generation’s children: the Second Wave, from 1980 to 2005. Albeit, those are the years when they either reached puberty or became young adults and who, paradoxically, were left in the dark about most of what had occurred. Instead, they were left to the tender mercies of the reformed but still rotten-to-the-core and ruling class dominated schools, social institutions and propaganda machinery.

So, amongst all lower and working class segments of the youth, Coolio’s “Gangster’s Paradise” fit the bill. They were raised by the state, in the uncaring schools, juvenile detention centers, and group homes; in front of the TV sets, movies, video arcades; or in the streets. Within the greatly expanded middle classes—most notably amongst the people of color—the youth were back to the gospel of relying on getting a good education and a good job as their highest calling. This was intermixed with an originally more conscientious element who tackled politics and academia as a continuation of the First Wave’s struggle. The upper class youth, however, were doomed to follow in the footsteps of their ruling class parents, since the radical and revolutionary changes that had been sought had failed to alter the country much.

Like a recurring nightmare, the Second Wave youth also fell victim to co-optation, glamorization of gangsterism, separation from the most advanced elements, relying on passive methods, and the raw fear of an upgraded police state. Left to their own devices, the lower class youth began a search for respect and dignity by devising their own institutions and culture, which came to be dominated by the gangs and Hip Hop. These, on their own, could be used for either good or bad. But lacking any knowledge of the First Wave experiences, they were tricked like their parents.

**THE GANG AND HIP HOP CULTURE**

Gangs are working and lower class phenomena that date from the beginnings of this country, having also been in evidence overseas. In fact, many of those who first joined the First Wave were themselves gang members, most
notably Alprentice Bunchy Carter, head of the notorious Slausons (the forerunners of today’s Crips) and the martyred founder of the Los Angeles Panthers. As little as it’s understood, moreover, they are in fact the lower class counterparts to the middle and upper classes youth clubs, associations, Boy Scouts/Girl Guides, fraternities and sororities. The key difference is the level of positive adult input in the middle and upper class groups.

Hip Hop is just the latest manifestation of artistic genius bursting forth from these lower class youth seeking respect and dignity.

“Orthodox” hip hoppers speak of a holy trinity of hip hop fathers: Herc, Afrika Bambaata, and Grandmaster Flash. But like moisture in the air before it rains, the conditions were ripe for hip hop before the holy trinity began spinning. Hip hop’s pre-fathers or grandfathers are James Brown, Huey Newton, Muhammad Ali, Richard Pryor, Malcolm X, Bob Marley, Bruce Lee, certain celebrity drug dealers and pimps whose names won’t be mentioned here.6

Alas, Hip Hop culture is a daily co-optation in ways so obvious it needs no explanation. But woe be to us if we don’t come to grips with how the Second Wave’s gangs have been co-opted. It is an on-going tragedy, moreover, that if not turned around will ultimately make the shortcomings of the First Wave pale in comparison!

Ronald Reagan and crack were hip hop’s 80’s anti-fathers: both helped foster the intense poverty and the teenage drug-dealing millionaires as well as the urge to rebel against the system that appeared to be moving in for the kill, to finally crush Black America.7

Certainly, the gangs have comprised a sub-culture that historically has been a thorn in the side of the ruling class. It had to be either controlled and used or eradicated. Usually that was accomplished by co-optation and attrition, with older elements moving on, or being jailed long enough to destroy the group. The First Wave, as noted, was able to—somewhat—outflank the ruling class by absorbing some key elements which led to their prestige among the rank and file and encouraged its acceptance of radical and revolutionary ideas, which was pimped by BM style groups.
It’s fascinatingly simple to understand how the Second Wave was tricked and continues to be bamboozled into destroying itself. Just about all of the pillars upholding this giant confidence game are familiar to everyone through movies, TV, street culture and/or our own experiences with friends, family, associates, cops, courts, jails, prisons, death and through our own unfulfilled yearnings for respect and dignity.

**GANGSTA, WANKSTAS AND WANNABES**

All of the above—more than anything—crave respect and dignity! Forget all of the unformed ideas about the homies wanting the families, fathers and love that they never had. That plays a part, but if you think that the homies only need some more hugs, then you’ve drank the kool-aid! Actually, even if you did have a good father and a loving family/extended family, when everything in society is geared towards lessening your self-worth because of your youth, race, taste in dress or music, speech, lack of material trappings, etc., then you will still hunger for some respect—which will lead to you knowing dignity within yourself. Even suburban, middle and upper class youth confront this, to a lesser degree. No! All of the beefin’, flossin’, frontin’, set-trippin’, violence and bodies piling up around them come from the pursuit of respect and dignity.

This is how 50 Cent put it:

Niggas out there sellin’ drugs is after what I got from rappin’….
When you walk into a club and the bouncers stop doin’ whatever the fuck they doing to let you in and say everybody else wait. He special. That’s the same shit they do when you start killin’ niggas in your hood. This is what we been after the whole time. Just the wrong route.

Admittedly, at times that simple—but raw—truth is so intertwined with so many other things that it’s hard to grasp. Namely, nowadays, the drug game and other git-money games, and most sets do provide a sort of alternative family. They also provide a strong cohesion that is mistakenly called love. Hence, to cut through the distractions, I’ll illustrate my point as follows.

When the Second Wave was left hanging by the defeated and demoralized First Wave, they unknowingly reverted to methods of seeking dignity and respect that the First Wave had elevated themselves above during their
struggle for radical and revolutionary change. This was a period when gang wars/gang banging was an anathema! The revolutionary psychiatrist, Frantz Fanon, in *The Wretched of the Earth* (1968) notes that the colonized and oppressed are quick to grab their knives against a neighbor or stranger, thereby in a subconscious way ducking their fear of directing their pent up rage at those responsible for their suffering—their colonial oppressors.

So, the primary activity of the notable early sets like the Bloods, Crips and Gangster Disciples was banging, or gang warring over “turf” (neighborhoods, schools, etc.), as well as over real or imagined slights. But the real underlying motivation was their desire to build their reputations and earn stripes, meaning gain prestige in the eyes of fellow bangers. This translated into respect amongst their peers. It also caused these youth to bond with each other like soldiers do in combat; a bonding like a family, even more so. Not surprisingly, many outsiders decreed that that bonding was love. This also caused some youth to parrot that thought. To exchange love, though, you have to first love yourself, and the gang banger by definition has no love for his or her self. They, in fact, are desperately seeking respect, without which anyone’s ideal of love being present is fooling themselves. Example: If you “respect” your body, you can also “love” your body, and you would not dare destroy it with drugs or alcohol. But if you don’t respect your body and you go on to destroy it in that fashion, then it follows that you have no love for it either.

So the bangin’ raged on for years, piling up as many deaths and injuries as the US suffered during the Viet Nam War—each elevating either the attacker’s or victim’s stature in the eyes of their peers. As usual, during those early years, the overseers of the oppressive system bemoaned the carnage, while locking up untold numbers of bangers for a few years, but overall they did absolutely nothing to try to arrest the problem.

Now, here’s where it gets really interesting. Drugs, as noted, had been flooding into these communities since the 1960s. Back then, however, it was mainly heroin, with marijuana and meth playing relatively minor roles. Remember, the movies “Serpico” (1973) and “The French Connection” (1971) exposing that? But the early gangs, to their credit, never got deeply involved in drugs. They saw dope fiends as weak, and although they would blow some sherm or chronic, it was just a pastime activity for them. They were serious about bangin’!

The bangers were all co-opted, wedded as they were to their form of fratricidal gangsterism and totally separated from the remnants from the
First Wave—about whom they knew next to nothing. And the “good kids” were being indoctrinated in passive, legal get-a-good-education approaches. All the while, both groups were scared to death of the police! Despite the bangers’ hate and contempt, any two cops could lay a dozen of them out on all fours—at will.

Hence, Tupac’s later iconic stature amongst them, since he could walk his talk:

… the fact that while everyone else talks about it, Tupac is the only known rapper who has actually shot a police officer; the walking away from being shot five times with no permanent damage and walking away from the hospital the next day and the rolling into court for a brief but dramatic wheelchair-bound courtroom appearance—it’s been dangerously compelling and ecstatically brilliant.9

But something was on the horizon that was about to cause a seismic shift in this already sorry state of affairs. It was to alter things in ways that most still cannot or will not believe.

Apparently, since this madness was contained in the lower class communities, the ruling class’s henchmen had no desire to do anything but keep their Gestapo-like police heavily armed and fully supported, since technology had made what they dubbed the underclass obsolete anyway. (See the movie, “Colors” (1988), with Sean Penn and Robert Duval.)

**Peep the Game**

The South Amerikan cocaine trade replaced the French Connection and CIA controlled US distribution of South East Asian/Golden Triangle grown and processed heroin as the drug of choice in the early 1980s. Remember “Miami Vice” (1984)? Well, as usual, this country’s government, intelligence agencies and large banks immediately began a struggle to control this new cocaine trade. Control—not get rid of, like the hype of their lying propaganda projects (i.e., the War on Drugs)! Thus, they were contending mainly with South Amerikan governments, militaries and large land owners who controlled the raising, processing and shipping of the cocaine, although for a few years the latter also had to do battle with a few independent local drug
lords, most notably the notorious Pablo Escobar, Ochoa family dominated Medellin Cartel.

Within this country, nevertheless, the youth gangs had next to nothing to do with the early cocaine trade, which was then primarily servicing a middle and upper class—white clientele. It had a few old school big time hustlers along with some Spanish speaking wholesalers, who also had their own crews, to handle matters. Although after the fact, the Hip Hop cult movie favorites “Scarface” (1983) and “New Jack City” (1991) are good descriptions of that period. Both movies purposely left out the dominant role that the US government and intelligence agencies played in controlling things.

Alright, I know you’re down with all of that—and love it! So let’s move on.

In the middle 1980s, the US began backing a secret war designed to overthrow the revolutionary Sandinista government that had fought a long and bloody civil war to rid Nicaragua of its US sponsored dictator (Samoza). But after being exposed to the world, the US congress forbid the then President Ronald Reagan from continuing his secret war. Like a lot of US presidents, however, he just ignored congress and had the CIA raise millions, recruit mercenaries, buy or steal military equipment and continue the war.

Consequently, that’s how and why crack and the mayhem it’s caused came upon us. Here, however, you won’t see Hollywood and TV giving that up the raw. With few exceptions, like Black director Bill Dukes’ “Deep Cover” (1992) starring Laurence Fishburn or “Above the Law” (1988) with Steven Segal, you have to search hard to see it portrayed so clearly. Later I’ll explain why.

Most people have heard that crack was dumped into South Central Los Angeles in the mid-1980s along with an arsenal of military style assault rifles that would make a First Wave BPP member ashamed of how poorly equipped she or he was. Needless to say, the huge profits from the crack sales, coupled with everyone being strapped, magnified the body count! And, since crack was also so easy to manufacture locally and so dirt cheap, just about anybody in the hood could get into the business. Gone were the old days of a few big-time hustlers, except on the wholesale level.

But, make no mistake about it, the wholesale cocaine sold for the production of crack was fully controlled and distributed by selected CIA controlled operatives.
So, to all of you around the way dawgs who have been bragging about how big you were/are, an organization chart would look something like this:

- At the top would be the President, Ronald Reagan
- CIA Director George Bush, Sr.
- National Security Advisor
- Secretary of State
- Major banking executives
- Colonel Oliver North
- General Secord
- Arms dealers
- Mercenary pilots
- South and Central Amerikan government and military leaders, including Escobar and the Medellin Cartel originally
- U.S. Navy and Coast Guard officers, Customs and Border Patrol officers
- Justice Department attorneys
- State and local police and county sheriffs and deputies—and their successors in office—

And, at the bottom of the barrel: you dawg!

Now, I know you already knew in your hearts that there were some big dawgs over you, but I bet you never imagined the game came straight out of the White House, or that you were straight up pawns on the board. If that sounds too wild, then tell me why it’s harder to find any government, CIA, military, or bankers—like George Bush, Sr. and his crew—in prison, than it is to win the lottery? Yeah, they double-crossed Noriega, Escobar and the Medellin Cartel and made Oliver North do some community service, but that’s all. The real crime lords—the government, military, CIA and banking dons all got away. Albeit, after Congresswoman Maxine Waters made a stink about it, the CIA was forced to do two investigations, and posted on their official website their findings and admission of being drug dealers.

Naw dawg, yall were all played! Face it.

That’s what happened to you OGs (Original Gangsters) from the 1980s. But like Morpheus said in “The Matrix”, let me “show you how deep the rabbit hole goes”.
The US Government gradually was forced to crack down on the cocaine coming through Florida, but by then the South American Cartels and their government and military allies had found new routes through Mexico. At first, the Mexican underworld were just middlemen. However, quickly recognizing a golden opportunity, they essentially seized control of most of the cocaine trade between South America and the United States, forcing the South Americans into becoming junior partners, responsible for the cheaper growing and processing, after which the Mexicans would purchase mountains of cocaine for the shipment overland and smuggling into the US and its wholesale markets. This produced oil and automotive industry scale profits.

One would wonder how and why the South Americans—powerful players—would go for a deal like that? As ever, the answer can be found in the Machiavellian and serpentine maneuverings of the United States government and their lesser Mexican counterparts. You see, in the 1980s, the Mexican government was overseeing an economy that was so bad, that for all practical purposes, they were going belly up—bankrupt. Indeed, the US and their underlings within the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank (WB) were forced to periodically give Mexico millions of dollars in loans, in return for further unfair trading concessions, in order to save them. The United States was then and remains today extremely vulnerable to Mexico. Common sense and past experience told them that the worse things became in Mexico and the more destitute their already dirt poor majority became, the more Mexican people would be forced to find a way to get into the US in order to find means to feed themselves and their families. And the US could not keep prevailing upon the IMF and WB to lend Mexico money, especially since they saw another way to temporarily plug up the hole in their control of matters in the international financial world.

Thus, another unholy alliance was formed. This one was between the US government, CIA, State Department, banks and the other usual suspects on one side; and their Mexican counter-parts, including their first fledging cartels, on the other, with the South Americans now in a junior partnership role. I, however, don’t want to give the impression that it was arranged diplomatically, all neat and tidy. Far from that!

No, it evolved through visionaries amongst the usual suspects, putting their ideas before other select insiders and working to craft an unwritten
consensus. It was the same way that they, along with Cuban exiles in Florida, had used the earlier cocaine trade to fuel the growth around Miami. Only this time it would be Mexico—a much more pressing and unstable situation.

It was recognized by all parties that Mexico’s underworld would eventually land in the driver’s seat, due to their ability to take high risks, their proximity to the US border, and most importantly, their strong desire to avoid confronting the US and Mexican governments, as Pablo Escobar had done. Thus, they were more than willing to guarantee that most of their drug profits would be pumped back into the moribund Mexican economy through large building projects, upgrading of the tourist industry, and support for farming and other clearly national ventures. And, on the messy side, their gunmen were becoming experts at making reluctant parties fall into line by offering them a stark choice between gold and lead.

Nevertheless, avoid thinking that the Mexican and South American underworld ever became anything but hired hands of the big dawgs in the United States government and their partners in the banking industry, who always remained in a position to destroy their smuggling and money laundering operations through a much tighter control of the US borders, or by making it extremely difficult to launder the mountains of small denomination bills with which they had to deal. In fact, then President George Bush, Sr. ordered the invasion of Panama—which was/is a major offshore bank laundering hub—after their hired hand, General Manuel Noriega, had become unruly in 1989.

Plus, these hired hands would ensure that the chosen corrupt politicians would always garner more votes in Mexico’s elections, by bringing in plane loads of money made available by the South American gangsters and government/military partners as their overhead. But more important for the United States, a major part of the proceeds would be pumped into the Mexican economy in order to forestall the looming bankruptcy.

Consequently, by the middle 1990s the Mexican underworld had established the super-powerful Gulf, Juarez, Guadalajara, Sinola and Tijuana Cartels. Moreover, they had consolidated their power by controlling who was elected to key political posts in Mexico, and bribing key local, state and regional police heads, as well as strategic generals in Mexico’s armed forces. Check out the movies “Traffic” (2000), the Anthony Bandera/Selma Hayek “Bandolero” (1995) and “Once Upon A Time In Mexico” (2003).
Again, after the fact, you’ll see Hollywood making money by spilling the beans. But you should not let the stunt work lull you into thinking there’s no substance to the plots!

Remember that Mexico’s Cartels would not be able to function without the collaboration and protection from the highest levels within the US establishment. Just as the CIA had openly admitted it was a drug merchant during an earlier period, you can believe nothing had changed, except the partners!

The hilarious part is that none of the wannabe real gangstas in the US know that in reality they’re low level CIA flunkies, or they can’t wait until they get out of prison to become undercover government agents … slingin’ crack.

Alas, most think it’s crazy to believe that the government of the US would allow its cities and small towns to be flooded with cocaine from South Amerika. Even the wannabe gangstas don’t really believe that. They prefer to think that such ideas are good for conspiracy junkies and cling to the illusion that they are more than just pawns on the chess board.

Furthermore, if one does not get beyond the idea that this whole thing was just a plot to destroy the Black and Brown peoples—a favorite, though shortsighted theory—there’s no way to see just how deep the drug game really is. I repeat: the main objective was to pump billions of dollars into the Mexican economy in order to avoid a complete meltdown and the subsequent fleeing to the US of millions more Mexicans—a crisis that would have dwarfed the numbers of Mexicans who are just beginning to make their presence known!

Actually, the big dawgs in the US probably didn’t know just how they were gonna control the fallout that would inevitably accompany their cocaine/crack tax. They routinely tax alcohol, gambling (from the lotteries to the casinos) and even prostitution in certain areas, don’t they? So yeah, it was a clandestine operation to use cocaine to rescue Mexico and stave off an economically induced invasion of the US by its destitute populous. The Mexican people, especially its Indigenous populations, had been made poverty-stricken by five hundred years of colonialism, slavery, peonage, neo-colonialism and the theft of one third of their country by the United States in the 19th century.

Sadly, though, our First Wave’s degeneration into the glamorization of gangsterism, the Second Wave’s hunger for respect and recognition that was
fueling the senseless gang carnage, and the Hip Hop generation’s ability to provide the youth with vicarious fantasies to indulge their senses with the hypnotic allure of the temporary power that the drug game could bring them led the youth in United States back to emulating the First Wave’s “Superfly” and “Scarface” days. Others also see that:

My theory is that nine times out of ten, if there’s a depression, more a social depression than anything, it brings out the best art in Black people. The best example is Reagan and Bush gave us the best years of hip hop…. ‘Hip hop is created thanks to the conditions that crack set: easy money but a lot of work, the violence involved, the stories it produced—crack helped birth hip hop. Now, I’m part conspiracy theorist because you can’t develop something that dangerous and it not be planned. I don’t think crack happened by accident.’ Crack offered a lot of money to the inner-city youth who didn’t have to go to college. Which enabled them to become businessmen. It also turned us into marksmen. It also turned us comatose.10

With the depth moves of a conjurer, the big dawgs in the US seized upon all of this and began to nudge these elements around on the international chess board within their giant con game. Moreover, these big dawgs in the United States had very little choice where to start their triage in order to gain some relief from their manufactured domestic crisis. I’ll tell you why.

Cocaine in its powder and crack forms is so addictive, and the (addictive) ambience of the cultures that use them regularly—the rich and famous, the Hollywood Set, corporate executives, lawyers, doctors, weekenders, entertainers, athletes, college kids, suburbanites, hoodrats, hustlers, pipers, etc.—bring a guaranteed demand!

In most ways, it could be argued, it was the same as alcohol and tobacco (in the Prohibition days), which have never been suppressed in the US for long.

It follows, then, despite all of their propaganda about “Just Say No” and the bogus War on Drugs, the big dawgs never had any intention of even trying to eradicate the use of cocaine. At the same time, however, on the lower end of the US distribution and consumption rungs of the ladder, the Black and Brown communities were becoming major headaches, ones that if left unchecked could eventually evolve into a real strategic threat! Yes, crack had
turned their lower class neighborhoods into lucrative mainstays of the big dawgs’ alternative taxing scheme. The urgency, however, was graphically driven home in comparison with the non-Black/Brown communities’ consumption of more, mostly powder, cocaine. The trade in the Black and Brown hoods and barrios was accompanied by an exponentially unforeseen rate of ever more sophisticated drug related violence, especially since the gangs got seriously involved.

Now, as I’ve pointed out, the gangs were mainly just pursuing respect prior to getting involved with hustling drugs. And the carnage connected to that was not a real concern to the big dawgs. But this is different from the earlier dumping of heroin in those communities, which was accompanied by the comparatively isolated violence of the Black Mafia style groups. That violence, though terrifying, was also more selective. The more widespread availability of crack and assault weapons led the big dawgs to understand that if they did not aggressively deal with the ultra-violent inner city drug gangs, these gangs would eventually move to consolidate their gains by forming south Amerikan and Mexican style Cartels. Afterwards, they, like their Mexican forerunners, could gradually take over inner city politics, threatening to become less predictable once they realized that money and power would not in and of themselves provide the kind of respect and dignity they sought. To understand why not, just observe the rich and famous hip hop artists who continue to wild-out because they still lack the respect and dignity that comes with struggling for something other than money or power—in short, some type of (political or higher) cause.

Anyway, the Hip Hop generational favorite TV drama, “The Wire” (2002) lays out the entire phenomenon pretty much as it had earlier played itself out in Baltimore and other urban areas. In fact, the TV fictional series derives its realness from an earlier long-running expose featured in a Baltimore newspaper—another after the fact but still useful piece of work to study. Indeed, that show depicting earlier years of the Black gangs getting deep into the crack trade clearly illustrates my points about evolving into proto-cartels and alternately being triaged before maturing into real strategic threats, leaving the crack trade intact.

That’s why “The Prison Industrial Complex” was formed! It was formed as a tool to neutralize the Second Wave before they woke up to the fact that, despite their money and power, they were being used and played like suckers—a rub that the more astute big dawgs feared that money would not
soothe. Thus, all of your draconian gun-related and mandatory sentencing laws were first formulated on the federal level where most of the big dawgs exercise their power and then forced upon most of the states. This was to ensure that the Second Wave would never be able to consolidate any real power. Since they were proving themselves to be ruthless gangstas, in imitation of their Hollywood idols, and had potential power derived from their share of the undercover tax being extracted from their communities, the strategy was to triage them every time they got too big (which averaged from one to three years in a run). Then, everything they had acquired was taken. The Hip Hop martyred icon, The Notorious B.I.G., put it all together in his classic song, rightly entitled “Respect”:

Put the drugs on the shelf / Nah, I couldn’t see it / Scarface, King of New York / I wanna be it … Until I got incarcerated / kinda scary … Not able to move behind the steel gate / Time to contemplate / Damn, where did I fail? / All the money I stacked was all the money for bail.11

Let’s get another thing straight! Take the angle that continues to have shortsighted individuals chasing ghosts about why powder cocaine and crack are treated so differently. Within the big dawgs’ calculations, there was no reason to harshly punish the powder cocaine dealers and users in the same manner as they were doing with the crack crowd. And, racism was not the driving motive. It was the armed threat within these proto-cartels! The big dawgs witnessed a clear example of what was to come by way of the Jamaican Posses that cropped up in the Black communities at this time. These young men from the Jamaican and Caribbean Diaspora were also a consequence of the degeneration of its lower class’s attempts to throw off the economic and social effects of its former slavery and colonial oppression. With the Jamaican socialist president Michael Manley and inspired by the revolutionary music of Bob Nester Marley the Jamaican Posses were to become the Black Mafia on steroids! Moreover, their quasi-religious/nationalism, their ability to operate nationally and in the Caribbean, their heavily armed soldiers (10,000 or so were nothing compared to the hundreds of thousands in the wings in the Black and Brown communities!) underlined the potential of this threat.
The cry from the big dawgs’ mouthpieces in congress was about the gunplay, not so much the drugs. What was not expressed, however, was the big dawgs’ anxieties about stopping these gunslingers before they got over their mental block about using their weapons against the police or the system. Stop them while they’re hung up on imitating their Hollywood and Euro-Mafia icons, who made a mantra out of instructing their gunmen not to use their weapons against the police. Indeed, with a few exceptions, the Second Wave allowed themselves to be disarmed and carted off to prison like pussycats!

Add to that the unforeseen windfall of thousands of new jobs for the rural communities (hence, the Prison Industrial Complex and its neo-slavery) that were being destroyed economically by Capitalism’s globalization drive, and conservative segments of the US that the big dawgs needed to appease in order to continue enjoying their fanatical support.

Therefore, we must struggle against the shortsighted ideas about racism alone being the driving motive that fueled the construction of the Prison Industrial Complex. Instead, if you do a follow up and add your own research, you’ll be able to document the who, when, where and how the big dawgs set everything in motion as well as how they continue to use us as pawns in their giant international con game.

**CONCLUSION**

Ask yourself the following questions:

- How can we salvage anything from knowing how the First and Second Waves allowed their search for respect and dignity to degenerate into gangsterism?
- In what ways can we help the Next Wave avoid our mistakes?
- What can we do to contribute to documenting who the real big dawgs behind the drug trade are?
- Why have they never been held accountable?
- How can we overcome our brainwashing?
- How can we truly gain respect and dignity?
- In what ways can we atone for our wrongs and redeem ourselves, families and communities?
• What are some ways to fight for restitution and reparations for all of those harmed by the government imposed undercover drug tax?
• How can we overturn the “13th Amendment” of the US Constitution and finally abolish legal slavery in the US?

Once you answer these questions and begin to move to materialize your conclusions, then you will have made the choice between Liberation and Gangsterism; Freedom and Slavery.

ENDNOTES

3 Evans, Cliff in “Rolling Stone” in Never Drank the Kool-aid: The Life of a Hunted Man, Toure, Picador, February, 2006. Toure is a critic and pop-culture analyst.
5 James “Jim” Jones (May 13, 1931—November 18, 1978) was the American founder of the “Peoples’ Temple” group, which became synonymous with group suicide after the November 18, 1978 mass suicide by poison in their isolated agricultural community called “Jonestown”, located in the country of Guyana. Jones was found dead from a gunshot wound to the head amongst the 914 corpses.
6 Toure, op. cit.
7 Ibid.

Russell Maroon Shoatz is a Black (New Afrikan) POW. Maroon is imprisoned for his activities on behalf of Black Liberation. In 1967, Maroon was a founding member of Philadelphia’s Black Unity Council (BUC). The BUC eventually merged with the Black Panther Party, and Maroon became a member of the Philadelphia’s BPP chapter. In 1970, Maroon and five other comrades were accused of attacking a Philadelphia Police station, resulting in the death and wounding of several police officers. This attack was carried out in response to the unjustified deaths in the Black community committed by these officers.
After being accused of this attack, he joined the BLA and participated in the revolutionary underground movement. He was eventually arrested in January 1972. Maroon is serving multiple life sentences. Most of his time in prison has been spent in control units in which he is locked in his cell for 22 to 24 hours a day.

**Follow-Up on Russell Shoatz**

Russell Shoatz was visited by the New York Police Department on October 10, 2005. The following letter documents what happened:

This is a special alert going out to you from the family of Russell Maroon Shoatz. This information is from his daughter, Sister Theresa Shoatz.

Brother Shoatz was interviewed on Tuesday, October 6th, 2005 by 2 New York City detectives. This was in regards to a murder of 2 police officers occurring in 1972. He did NOT discuss anything with them at all. The only information he gave to them was his name and his inmate number. The interview went on for 2 hours and Russell said nothing. The detectives even tried to conclude that he was the mastermind behind the entire scenario.

Russell is encouraging everyone to refrain from speaking to anyone who discusses this matter. Should something go down, Brother Russell wants to ensure that he has full support of the people and the masses at-large. He says he has no idea of any retribution occurring in the future nor does he know of any future “events” that will come out of this.

Most of you already know what’s been going on in California. Well, it has made its way to the east coast. This is just a heads up and an FYI for everyone.

http://www.mxgm.org/politicaled.htm
The Ethics of Black Atonement in Racist America:  
The Execution of Stanley Tookie Williams*

*Dhoruba al-Mujahid Bin-Wahad

As one of the individuals Stanley Tookie Williams dedicated his book to, I thought it important to comment on his execution and the sad state of affairs that now determines the parameters of debate around the death penalty.

First of all, Tookie Williams was a product of the African experience in racist America. Let’s not get it twisted. Nuns can lament his execution, preachers can pontificate about how valuable he could be to Black youth, and law enforcement can talk about legal and judicial rulings, but the bottom line is that Tookie Williams was a consequence of his community’s racist marginalization—of America’s internal Black colony and its occupation by racist and brutal police armies. This being the case, his execution was by the enemies of African-America, and I know there are scores of born again Negros out there who don’t believe that the nation-state of America is their enemy (a faith they must have if they are to attach any meaning to their life). History and recent events emphatically substantiate the racist character and morality of America.

Tookie Williams is a product of social and political forces we have permitted to take control of our collective destiny. African-America should have judged and punished Tookie Williams itself. But it didn’t. It was incapable of holding its denizens accountable. Street gangs that started out as expressions of our community’s inability to control our own streets and in opposition to police terror, were led down a certain path by the likes of Tookie. These gangs became predatory, apolitical, and reactionary. Our communities suffered as a consequence. Those who followed in Tookie’s footsteps did so because not one Black institution existed that embraced and channeled their warrior spirit in a positive direction. Black nationalists were too busy “getting the right political line”; the Black Clergy was too busy mobilizing themselves to influence a body politic that considered them nothing more than mouth-pieces for the Black middle class; Black professors and militant academics were hollering at white educational institutions for inclusion and relevancy—none spoke the language nor harnessed the energies of our street soldiers. The only organization that did so was the

* This article was previously published in Anti-Imperialist News: News@freedomarchives.org.
Black Panther Party—and that was destroyed by a potent combination of forces over three decades ago. Nothing ever replaced it.

As a Muslim, and even in the Panthers, I never opposed the execution of criminals and butchers of people. There can be no true justice without retribution—without balance. Having said that, I must point out that the European nation-state, and America in particular, given the racist nature of its evolution, has absolutely no right whatsoever to act as a surrogate executor of justice for people of color. But because the African-American community and its ersatz leaders have no temporal power, no institutions for social justice or to exact a political consequence on those who make war on our community, we are left to debate the merits of the “death penalty” as a deterrent to crime or as state murder. The state says it executed Tookie Williams because he killed four people—three of them Asians and people of color. But the State of California has never executed one white man for killing Blacks, Latinos, or Asians during the course of armed robberies. And if they did, would that justify executing one Black man? If guilt or innocence were the real issue rather than a pretext, I would still say no. Why? Because the death penalty in America has always operated as a legal instrument of racial terror. The death penalty evolved from, and assumed the psychological role of Lynching. Least we forget, every Black man lynched was “guilty of a crime”. Tookie Williams could have murdered Black folks in droves and would have never faced the death penalty. It was law enforcement’s role in the politics of drugs and urban gang warfare that made his case extraordinary.

If I were to say the present regime in Washington qualifies for judicial prosecution and probable execution for crimes against humanity, not one newspaper or major media outlet would treat that statement with respect, rather incredulity. But if law enforcement officials were to say that to embrace the likes of George Jackson meant that one was “criminal-minded”, there is not one media outlet that would question that proposition. Which brings me to my major point: Tookie William’s execution by the State of California is not just about the efficacy of the death penalty in America, or punishment for a heinous crime, but about the ethics of atonement and redemption in a racist culture and society. Indeed, the Governor of California, in his Hollywood portrayal as the “terminator” and other violent monosyllabic killers, is himself a role model for countless thugs, bandits, and murderers around the globe, some of whom I’ve met personally. Liberia’s murderous...
rebels, Sierra Leonean butchers of children, and scores of other misguided youth have adopted the violent persona of the Sylvester Stallone’s “Rambo” and Arnold Schwarzenegger, the “Terminator”!

Although Schwarzenegger notes that Williams dedicated his 1998 book to a group that includes myself, Assata Shakur, Nelson Mandela, Malcolm X and Mumia Abu-Jamal, he is particularly upset by praise for George Jackson. Schwarzenegger said the inclusion of a dedication to George Jackson, who was charged with the murder of a California prison guard, “defies reason and is a significant indicator that Williams is not reformed”. Defies whose reason?

Apparently Schwarzenegger, or the Experts on African sub-culture in America find it absolutely abhorrent that Black redemption can or should embrace a radical political paradigm. They find it absolutely repugnant that the heroes and sheroes for an entire generation of Black youth don’t look or behave like Hop-Along Cassidy, Arnold Schwarzenegger’s “Last Action Hero”, or GI Joe.

To many Black people (with an iota of consciousness), George Jackson is a hero. Why? Because Comrade George represented uncompromising resistance to a racist system and its political institutions, a system that incarcerated him his entire adult life for a crime for which a white boy from suburbia would have done community service. Schwarzenegger never considered this. He never asked himself why should one black man or woman who has been savaged and brutalized by police and prison guards, agents of a state that has historically exhibited utter contempt for them, their community, and their lives, mourn the death of any prison guard? That would be like a survivor of Dachau mourning the death of a concentration camp guard. Were the murders of countless men and women behind prison walls by sadistic guards ever a subject of public outrage except when the state under John D. Rockefeller murdered both prisoners and guards at Attica in September of 1971? Lest the Governor of California forget, in regions like New York and New Jersey fully 85% of prison inmates come from only certain communities in the area—all Black, Latino and poor. What that means is that almost every black person has a relative either behind bars, on parole, or under pre-trial detention. So who cares about the prison guards? Their union, the state, and a racist society that has always viewed Black people as criminals or potential criminals, that is who. But thanks to “The Patriot Act” even white citizens are potential criminals before they are law-abiding citizens.
What wonderful icons Tookie chose to offer his respect to: Nelson Mandela, Malcolm X, Mumia, all respected and revered freedom fighters—except to those who have spent half of their lives living off of the misery and disenfranchisement of Black folks. The utter absurdity of a Jamie Foxx begging a fellow actor to exercise progressive politics is a sickening commentary on the state of African-American leadership.

“Governor Schwarzenegger, we’re not trying to push you into a corner. We realize that you have a tough job to do and you’re very busy, but in being very busy, you may not get a chance to hear everything with the case”, Foxx is reported to have moaned. Like Richard Pryor once joked about praying to God for help, “I know you’re busy, cause I checked your schedule”. Whether they are busy or not, there is not one legal or “constitutional” right African People have in America that white folks don’t have the veto over, or is not subject to judicial review—including the right to life. A Black man’s life is subject to termination by a cop or agent of the state at any given moment—without recourse to appeal.

Indeed for many of today’s so-called leaders from Jessie and Sharpton to national “talk show hosts” (who in the age of instant communication substitute for ideological movements), the issue of African-America’s right to self-defense has been a taboo subject, yet it was the destruction of militant groups such as the Black Panthers that left a social, political, and ideological void in African-America to be filled by street gangs and the distorted politics of individuals like Tookie Williams. Although law enforcement experts are anxious to dispel and distort the social and political roots of street gangs such as the Crips, the fact of the matter is that gangs like the Crips were, in part, a consequence of the success of COINTELPRO’s devastation of the militant Black liberation movement in America.

COINTELPRO was a government campaign directed at the African-American community that Black leaders to this day have failed to fully investigate or even wish to investigate. It was the selective repression of COINTELPRO and its spinoffs that has conferred credibility on some of today’s Black leaders. That lynching, an historical instrument of anti-Black terror, evolved into the modern death penalty system only further highlight the illegitimacy of Tookie Williams’ execution by the state. Indeed California’s governor alludes to this when he says, “there is little mention of atonement in his writings and his plea for clemency of the countless murders
committed by the Crips following the lifestyle Williams once espoused. The senseless killing that has ruined many families, particularly in African-American communities, in the name of the Crips and gang warfare is a tragedy of our modern culture.” A tragedy of “our modern culture”, the body builder says? The Austrian Oak never lived one minute in the South Bronx or Watts, never ducked bullets in the Projects or watched helplessly as cops gunned down a teenager on “suspicion of having a gun”.

Yes, Black families have been ruined by gang warfare. Black communities have also been occupied by police armies—cops who also believe they are the biggest and baddest gang in the ‘hood and act accordingly. The rise of street gangs directly coincides with the destruction of grass root militant movements that would have otherwise occupied the energies of several generations of African-American youth. What the Governor of California fails to mention is that the “tragedy of our modern culture” was contrived and created by a society and a nation of people who have absolutely no shame, little sense of history, and absolutely no sense of themselves as “pigs” rather than saints. What’s a tragedy is that the people of California failed to make a distinction between the plastic imagery of Hollywood and the reality of American politics when they elected Schwarzenegger Governor!

Robert Martin, Tookie’s prosecutor, questioned whether there was any moral equivalence “between co-authoring some children’s books and the senseless murder of four people in cold blood”. I have always asked similar questions—was there any moral equivalence between starting a bloody war by lying to the world and thereby causing the deaths of thousands and justifying the lies with the rhetoric of decency and humanity? Or was there a moral redemptive equivalent between security agents of apartheid who brutally tortured and murdered Steven Biko, and their apologies thirty years later before a “truth and reconciliation commission” as Winnie Mandela would have us believe, while descendants of white settlers still control the land in South Africa even though Blacks are in political power and racists Europeans still dominate the gold and diamond industries and call the shots? Or should the apologies of the Belgian, French, and American murderers of Patrice Lumumba, who now enjoy their old age and write self-justifying memoirs while the Congo wallows in chaos and bloodshed because of their imperial machinations, be accepted as true atonement? Or even closer to home, is there a moral equivalence between a government’s collusion with
organized crime and right wing Asian cartels and paramilitaries to flood the African-American communities with drugs and then declare a war on drugs thereby incarcerating and killing thousands of Black youth?

Let’s not talk about moral and ethical atonement for heinous crimes—there is so much America needs to atone for that “clemency” is out of the question. Why should Africans debate a non-issue as if it were relevant to the real deal? If the African community in America hadn’t turned its back on its youth by failing to seize control of their own community, its institutions, its economics, and its cultural instruments of self-verification, Tookie Williams could have been another freedom fighter, rather than a redeemed thug who died at the hands of our enemy and their hypocritical system of democratic fascism.

Al Sharpton is dead wrong when he says Tookie Williams has shown a lot of young Americans, particularly in urban areas, the folly of being involved in gang life. It would be far more positive for him to live behind bars and continue that work. There’s nothing gained by executing him.

By “Young Americans”, I am assuming Sharpton is referring to an audience not enthralled by the war on drugs, the war on terrorism, and war on us, because if he is—ain’t none of them took Tookie’s books as a guide down the yellow brick road to mainstream success.

Nor is there such a quality as “life behind bars”. Everyone in prison is socially dead and politically mummified. Ask Sharpton and the rest of our national Black leaders how alive to him are the Bashir Hameeds, Herman Bells, Russel Shoatz and countless other Black Political Prisoners?

Indeed, if anything, young Blacks realize that the biggest “gang” is the US government and its law enforcement agencies. And if nothing is gained by executing Tookie Williams, then surely nothing is lost with his demise. But something is lost and something is achieved. In the age in which we live information is intelligence and manipulation of public perception is key in the manufacture of public opinions. Tookie Williams was executed to send a clarion signal to African youth that redemptive militancy is unacceptable—only rejection of your social history and complete surrender to the myths of white America could possibly save your life. In this sense, his execution was a commentary on the cowardice of many of today’s Black leaders—who want to be both patriots and champions of Africans in America. This is the age of American empire; you can’t be both.
As for America’s African-American youth—don’t believe the hype, stay strapped, stay alert, and stay Black. But most of all, don’t mourn—organize!

Dhoruba al-Mujahid Bin-Wahad, age 63, is a former Black Panther Party leader from New York. Once a Black Political Prisoner in the USA for nineteen years, Bin Wahad is a long time Pan-African activist, writer, and lecturer. Born to parents from the Caribbean and Southern United States, Bin-Wahad was raised in the Southeast Bronx and Harlem as “Richard Earl Moore”. Once a South Bronx gang leader (Torch) and a fledgling artist, Bin-Wahad’s social and political consciousness developed during the cold war era in an America deeply polarized by institutional racism. Characterizing himself as a “victim of public school education”, Bin-Wahad is mostly self-taught, with only two years of college under his belt. He has always viewed academic pursuit as tool enabling social activism—not as an end in itself. For Bin-Wahad, to pursue education is to train for the struggle—but social practice is the criterion of a valid education. Refusing to be sucked into the standard western educational system, which he defines as an “elitist system of mental engineering which teaches people what to think rather how to be better people”, Bin-Wahad has engaged scholars internationally for over two decades on issues of racism, the role of European history and culture in global under-development, and the politics of modern nation-states. His radical and often controversial analyses and essays have received widespread acceptance amongst Black and Non-Western students and critical acclaim from progressive intellectuals ranging from Professors Noam Chomsky to Dr. Cornel West. Civil rights and moral activists Rev. Al Sharpton and Louis Farrakhan respect and acknowledge the depths of Bin-Wahad’s “no holds barred” Pan-African analysis.

Currently, Bin-Wahad resides in West Africa where he is the resident “Director of the Institute for Development of Pan-African Policy (IDPAP), and BlackStar Consults Limited”. IDPAP is a West African Based NGO, which attempts to co-ordinate expatriate expertise to evaluate and study policies from a grass-root Pan-African perspective and perform advisory and liaison work for the African Diaspora.
The 13th Amendment of the US Constitution reads: “Section 1. Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, except as a punishment for a crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted, shall exist within the United States, or any place subject to their jurisdiction.”

The 14th Amendment of the US Constitution reads in part: “Section 1. All persons born or naturalized in the United States, and subject to the jurisdiction thereof, are citizens of the United States and of the State wherein they reside. No State shall make or enforce any law which shall abridge the privileges or immunities of citizens of the United States; nor shall any State deprive any person of life, liberty, or property, without due process of law; nor deny to any person within its jurisdiction the equal protection of the law.”

What does the exemption clause in the 13th Amendment mean? What does the naturalization clause in the 14th Amendment mean? Ultimately, it means slavery in the U.S. was never abolished, rather it was institutionalized in the prison system. The government ended chattel and instituted penal slavery. Today, in the US prison system, 47 per cent of all prisoners are of Afrikan descent. Do you believe this is by accident? Do you believe that 47 per cent of all prisoners, or 12.3 per cent of the entire American population are consciously and deliberately criminal? When considering the naturalization laws of the 14th Amendment in light of its history, the question must be raised: did Afrikans at the end of chattel slavery vote upon or agree to become U.S. citizens? Were they provided an opportunity to return back to Afrika, to establish their own independence and nation, or to have dual citizenship between the U.S. and Afrikan countries? If not, why not?

When we look at the socio-economic and political state of Afrikans in the Diaspora it is important to consider to what extent the peculiar institution of slavery continues to influence behavior and relationships between and among people of Afrikan descent and between nation-states. Obviously, there exists an extreme problem of assimilation and acculturation, where the dominant culture has denied or severely undermined the indigenous culture and ethos of Afrikan peoples. In my book, We Are Our Own Liberators,¹ it is stated that a need exists to commence a struggle to rectify the ill-effects of assimilation and acculturation. Until people of Afrikan descent resolve this issue of an identity subject to the misfortune of slavery, they will continue to suffer the ills of the experience of slavery.
For example, many identify themselves as Afrikan-American, recently acquiescing to the ideals promulgated by Black assimilationists of the integrationist movement. However, the acceptance of this identity, I dare say, creates a form of schizophrenia as described by Franz Fanon in *Black Skin, White Mask.* For the question must be asked, when has America been in support of Afrika? These assimilationists’ identification with the “American” part of “Afrikan-American” is with a system of government whose interest is in direct opposition to their very existence—the “Afrikan” part of “Afrikan-American”. The conflict is real. The psychological dynamic surfaces in thinking and behavior, with actions that are not in the best interest of Afrika. Obviously, the American side of their identity overwhelms and dominates their Afrikan side to the overall detriment of all Afrikan descendants.

Unfortunately, this reality is not isolated to North America, rather it is an identity crisis of Afrikans in the Diaspora that hinders the advent of a Pan Afrikanist Movement. Afrikans in the Diaspora have been divided into a myriad of nationalities throughout the Caribbean and North and South America as the slave experience continues to adversely influence our existence, denying our common reality of national oppression regardless of our geographical location. This reality should scream out from the very pores, demanding you claim an Afrikan heritage and reality. However, this does not require a negation of the horrendous Afrikan experience in the Americas. What is required is to rectify the assimilationist/integrationist philosophy, and forge a socio-economic, political and cultural determinant that coalesces in a New Afrikan reality. Hence, not only should this reality internalize the slavery history in the Diaspora, but also further incorporate the Afrikan history from the onset of the Atlantic slave trade.

Who, then, are these descendants? In essence, we are the aggregation of all those who were a part of the Atlantic slave trade (Hausa, Fulani, Mandingo, Mandika, Ibo, Dutch, Portuguese, English, Spanish, Taino, Arawak, etc.), a forced composition of a genetic mix resulting in a New Afrikan.

It is here argued and postulated, we are not Afrikan-Americans, but rather need to identify ourselves as New Afrikans. But, even more, we need to embrace this reality with our common histories and mix of languages to speak to the rest of the world from that reality. The Dutch speaking Afrikans of Surinam, the Portuguese speaking Afrikans of Brazil, the Spanish speaking Afrikans of Cuba and Puerto Rico, and the English speaking
Afrikans in other parts of the Americas have a unique historical voice that, when united in Pan-Afrikan unity, must demand recognition from the world. Here lies the true significance and demand for reparations, the need to repair what has been broken as a result of the experience of the Atlantic slave trade, colonialism, assimilation and acculturation. It is when we announce ourselves to the world as being New Afrikans that we will have divorced ourselves psychologically from the schizophrenia that ultimately denied our heritage and struggle for true liberation and independence.

So, when we look in the mirror, I hope we all will see the prison that continues to enslave; the prison without the bars, gun towers, and steel cages; the prison of the mind imposed by a perverse slave mentality adjusted and in conformity with the denial we are a New Afrikan people. Know that our salvation will be when we break the shackles that bind our minds to identify with those who never had our best interest at heart, and who continue to deny reparations for their crimes against our collective Afrikan humanity.

I urge all to free ourselves of the prison in our minds, and in doing so, liberate ourselves from a perverse slave mentality that denies our New Afrikaness in its totality. For America has never abolished slavery, only institutionalized it in the subtlety of making you believe yourself to be an American!

WE ARE OWN LIBERATORS!

ENDNOTES

1 Muntaqim, Jalil, We Are Our Own Liberators (Abraham Guillen Press/Arm The Spirit/Anarchist Black Cross, 2002).

2 Fanon, Franz, Black Skin, White Mask (USA: Grove Press, 1967)

Jalil Muntaqim: What’s up out there! My name is Jalil Muntaqim, born Anthony Bottom. I am currently in prison where I have been for the last 35 years! I am a former member of the Black Panther Party (BPP). The U.S. government desperately wanted to eradicate the BPP and did so by a program called COINTELPRO which was short for counter-intelligence. Through this program many of us were assassinated and imprisoned. I was
framed for murder of two New York police officers. One of them’s son has actually come forward in support of my co-defendant Herman Bell, saying he thinks we are innocent and should be released. I am committed to a better life for my people and for all people. I am still active from behind bars and am working for my release. I have obtained two degrees, and am an author, poet, and educator. I have established programs in prison including a Men’s group for Therapeutic Training, African/Black studies programs, a Sociology class, computer literacy class, poetry class, earned a certificate in architectural drafting, and have worked as a teacher’s aide. I am a proud father and grandfather. I want to be reunited with my family and community. I love music, letters, books, and stories from people on the outside. I have a great sense of humor! Unfortunately, I can’t operate this site from prison, so my friend is running it for me. Check out www.freejalil.com
On reading his first book, a 1970 bestseller, *Soledad Brother: The Prison Letters of George Jackson*, I felt a kindred spirit with George’s rage and resistance, but thought he contradicted himself regarding women. So I began a correspondence with him from New Haven, Connecticut, where I was a member of the Black Panther Party, working for the Panthers’ lawyers defending Chairman Bobby Seale, et al., and organizing community and national support for their freedom.

I remember sitting in the courtroom, where I had easy access through the same door the judge entered, and fantasizing that, since I was never searched, I could come through that door, climb up behind the judge, put a gun to his head and demand the release of Bobby and Ericka Huggins, who was being tried jointly with Bobby.

Then came the newspaper headlines that reverberated throughout the world of George’s teenaged brother commandeering a Marin court, liberating three prisoners and attempting to free the Soledad Brothers! Wow! I thought. He did it! He actually did it!

It was August 7, 1970, when Jonathan Jackson’s bravery taught us all that these “pigs” had no regard whatsoever for human life. They shot up the crowded van, instantly killing three brothers—Jonathan, William Christmas and James McClain—and a judge, and critically wounding Ruchell Magee and a prosecutor. One of three jurors suffered a minor wound. Magee remains in prison still fighting for release after 41 years in California gulags.

Shortly after Jonathan’s death, George wrote: “I loved Jonathan, but his death only sharpens my fighting spirit.” When I returned to San Francisco in June 1971, George asked me to obtain a press pass so I could visit him. Panther attorney Charles Garry connected me with Carlton Goodlett, publisher of the Sun Reporter newspaper, and I wound up with a job, as a reporter covering the pre-trial hearings for Angela Davis and Ruchell Cinque Magee that resulted from the events of August 7, 1970, and the Soledad Brothers—Fleeta Drumgo, John Clutchette and George Jackson—accused of killing a guard at Soledad State Prison in retaliation for the massacre of three Black militants—W.L. Nolen, Sweet Jugs Miller and Cleveland Edwards—by a tower guard in January 1970.

Seeing George for the first time in the San Francisco courtroom, I was stunned. I’d never seen an egghead martial artist before. I managed to visit...
him in San Quentin’s holding cell in July, an unforgettable experience, when I tried to convince him that there was no “People’s Army” out here. A month later, I was devastated by the news of his assassination at San Quentin on August 21, 1971, in what we believe was a set-up escape attempt. Three guards and two inmate trustees were also killed. According to attorney Steve Bingham, “It seems the armory was just over the outside wall ... and the guards would lift handguns over the wall in little baskets. There were handguns all over the place”. Hindsight being 20/20, George’s mistake was in trusting the wrong folks.

As news editor for the Sun Reporter—I was known then as Pat Gallyot—I produced the spread on our beloved warrior and the grizzly aftermath of August 21, when 26 prisoners were tortured, brutalized, and even shot. These were life-changing experiences for me. George was/is my mentor, my inspiration, my heart. His love for people was boundless; his political knowledge and analyses brilliant, prophetic. For example, George makes clear the social science that the most oppressed targets of fascism will lead our struggle, (i.e., Black people, not the relatively comfortable, privileged “White Left”).

In Soledad Brother (1970), George wrote:

International capitalism cannot be destroyed without the extremes of struggle. The entire colonial world is watching the blacks inside the U.S., wondering and waiting for us to come to our senses. Their problems and struggles with the Amerikan monster are much more difficult than they would be if we actively aided them. We are on the inside. We are the only ones (besides the very small white minority left) who can get at the monster’s heart without subjecting the world to nuclear fire. We have a momentous historical role to act out if we will. The whole world for all time in the future will love us and remember us as the righteous people who made it possible for the world to live on. If we fail through fear and lack of aggressive imagination, then the slave of the future will curse us, as we sometimes curse those of yesterday.

The black bourgeoisie (pseudo-bourgeoisie), the right reverends, the militant opportunists, have left us in a quandary, rendered us impotent…. The blanket indictment of the white race ... is silly and indicative of a lazy mind (to be generous, since it could
be a fascist plot). It doesn’t explain the black pig; there were six on the Hampton-Clark kill. It doesn’t explain ... the pseudo-bourgeois who can be found almost everywhere in the halls of government working for white supremacy, fascism, and capitalism.

In letters to me, George had written:

My life is moving myself and other people into action.... And ‘Action makes the front’. I am a Marxist-Fanonist, i.e., a realist. There is no such thing as a spontaneous revolution. History has been one long authoritarian process, the result has been the accretion of a very pronounced leader-follower syndrome.... The throwing off of the need for leadership and the creation of communist man (woman) is a goal, it isn’t the situation of today, and must not be confused as such.... In the throws of combat, unitarian conduct will almost flow naturally; it will not have to be contrived or strained; the pressure from without, from the enemy of all will force us to tolerate each other’s humanity.

In Blood in My Eye (1972), completed just before his death and published posthumously, George wrote:

The men who placed themselves above the rest of society through guile ... and sheer brutality have developed two principal institutions to deal with any and all serious disobedience—the prison and institutionalized racism. Most people realize that crime is simply the result of a grossly disproportionate distribution of wealth and privilege ... an aspect of class struggle from the outset.... Throughout its history, the United States has used its prisons to suppress any organized efforts to challenge its legitimacy.... The hypocrisy of Amerikan fascism forces it to conceal its attack on political offenders by the legal fiction of conspiracy laws and highly sophisticated frame-ups.

We must educate the people ... to realize that even crimes of passion are the psycho-social effects of an economic order that was decadent a hundred years ago.
San Quentin was built in 1852 to house 50 convicts. Today, it has over 6,000 prisoners jammed together in the same space, and on death row, over 600! Nationwide, there are well over two million captives and climbing. As the war on terror (read war on freedom fighters) escalates, and human rights are trampled—witness Guantanomo—George’s declaration becomes crystal clear:

The police state isn’t coming—it’s here, glaring and threatening. Settle your quarrels, come together, understand the reality of our situation, understand that fascism is already here, that people are already dying who could be saved, that generations more will live poor butchered half-lives if you fail to act. Do what must be done; discover your humanity and your love in revolution. Pass on the torch. Join us; give up your life for the people.

I wonder if we would be in the same mess today had we heeded George’s call 30 plus years ago. I ask you, how many tens of thousands must die in Darfur, in Haiti, in Palestine, before we call genocide GENOCIDE? How many millions more have to be hungry, homeless, locked up, tortured, executed and slaughtered? How many elections bought and/or stolen before we call fascism FASCISM?

Jonathan Jackson, only 17 when he was martyred, noted:

The picture of the U.S. as a Paper Tiger is quite accurate, but there is a great deal of work to be done on its destruction, and I’m of the opinion that if there is a big job of growing to do, the sooner begun the sooner done.

George and Jonathan Jackson’s revolutionary revolts painted the month of August Black forever—Black meaning Revolutionary. As Mumia Abu-Jamal noted, “a month of meaning ... of righteous rebellion; of individual and collective efforts to free the slaves and break the chains that bind us.”.

For more information on George and Jonathan Jackson, Hugo L.A. Pinell and Ruchell Cinque Magee—still locked up more than 40 years later, do an internet search for “Kiilu Nyasha” and “Black August”, or e-mail Kiilu at: kiilul@mindspring.
Kiilu Nyasha (formerly known as Pat Gallyot) was a former member of the Black Panthers’ Chapter in New Haven, Connecticut and of the legal defense team of Party Chairman Bobby Seale’s trial for murder and conspiracy. She is an international egalitarian. The mother of two adults, she has been in the struggle to free political prisoners, abolish the death penalty and the prison system; and an actionist in global liberation movements. Kiilu is currently a producer/programmer for KPOO, a Black listener-sponsored public radio station in San Francisco. She is one of the strongest and loudest voices demanding and working for the release of Hugo Pinell, Ruchell Magee and Romaine Chip Fitzgerald, three of the longest held political prisoners from the Panther era.
Long before the words “Guantanamo” and “Abu Ghraib” entered common American usage as reference points for government torture, there were several young Black men who knew something about the subject.

The year was 1973, and among 13 “Black militants” arrested in a New Orleans sweep were three men: Harold Taylor, John Bowman and Ruben Scott. The three were beaten, tortured and interrogated by New Orleans cops, acting on tips supplied by San Francisco police.

The men were stripped, beaten with blunt objects, blindfolded, shocked on their private parts by electric cattle prods, punched and kicked and had wool blankets soaked in boiling water thrown over them. Under such torture, the three gave false confessions concerning the shooting of a San Francisco cop in 1971. The charges were eventually thrown out after a judge in California found that the prosecution had failed to tell a grand jury that the confessions were exacted under torture. Today, over 30 years later, Taylor, Bowman and Scott have again been called before a grand jury in an effort to resurrect what was dismissed in 1976.

Imagine what these men thought when they heard about the US government torture chambers in Guantanamo Bay and Abu Ghraib in Iraq. The names may have been different, but the grim reality was the same. Today, these men have formed the “Committee for the Defense of Human Rights” to try to teach folks about what happened so many years ago and what is happening now. Their living example teaches us that history repeats itself but in worse, more repressive forms.

That’s because their first conflicts with the State took place under the aegis of the since discredited COINTELPRO (Counterintelligence Program). That program, after the famous Church Committee hearings in the Senate (1976), was declared illegal and a violation of the Constitution.

Today, thanks to a Congress weakened by corporate largesse and frightened by September 11, the same things that were illegal in the 1970s have been all but resurrected and legalized under the notorious Patriot Act. What we are seeing all across the nation is the emergence of what the late Black Panther Minister of Information, Eldridge Cleaver, called “Yankee Doodle fascism”: the rise of corporate and state power to attack dissidents and destroy even the pretension of civil rights.
I say pretension because the events I discussed earlier happened in 1973, yet none of the torturers, the violators, the criminals in blue ever were sanctioned for their violations of state, federal and, indeed, international law. Not one.

Think of this: The murderers of Fred Hampton Sr., those malevolent minions of the state who crept into his home and shot him dead—as he slept!—have never served a day, a minute, a second in jail for this most premeditated of murders, planned at the highest levels of government.

The roots of Guantanamo, of Abu Ghraib, of Bagram Air Force Base, of US secret torture chambers operating all around the world are deep in American life and its long war against Black life and liberation. Is it mere coincidence that the most notorious guard at Abu Ghraib worked right here in the US, here in Pennsylvania, here in SCI-Greene for over six years before exporting his brand of “corrections” to the poor slobs who met him in Iraq?

Back in the 1960s and 1970s, Panthers and others spoke about fascism, but it had an edge of hyperbole, of radical speech, to move people beyond their complacency. Several years ago, a political scientist who studied fascism on three continents came to some pretty sobering conclusions. According to Dr. Lawrence Britt, fascist states have 14 characteristics in common. They are, briefly: 1) powerful nationalism; 2) disdain for human rights; 3) scapegoating to unify against “enemies”; 4) military supremacy; 5) rampant sexism; 6) controlled mass media; 7) national security obsession; 8) government religiosity; 9) rise of corporate power; 10) suppression of labor; 11) anti-intellectualism; 12) obsession with punishment; 13) deep corruption and cronyism; and 14) fraudulent elections. How many of these features are reflected daily in the national life of the United States?

What happens abroad is a grim reflection of what has happened here, albeit quietly. The tortures of Taylor, Bowman and Scott won’t be featured stories on Nightline nor on the (supposedly “liberal”) NPR. (Remember the characteristic of a “controlled mass media”?)

What happens overseas has its genesis in the monstrous history of what happened here: genocide, mass terrorism and racist exploitation (also known as “slavery”), land theft and carnage. All of these horrors have been echoed abroad, shadows of hatred, xenophobia and fear projected from the heart of the empire outwards.
If we really want to change the dangerous trend of global repression, we must change it here first. For only then can the world breathe a deep sigh of relief.
Legal Update and Latest Brief on Mumia  
Attorney Robert Bryan

On July 20, 2006 we filed the Brief of Appellee and Cross Appellant, Mumia Abu-Jamal, in the US Court of Appeals for the Third Circuit, Philadelphia (Abu-Jamal v. Horn, U.S. Ct. of Appeals Nos. 01-9014, 02-9001). This brief is of great significance concerning my client’s right to a fair trial, due process of law, not to be subjected to cruel and unusual punishment, and equal protection of the law, guaranteed by the Fifth, Sixth, Eighth and Fourteenth Amendments to the U.S. Constitution. The issues the court is hearing are:

Claim 14 Whether Mr. Abu-Jamal was denied the right to due process of law and a fair trial because of the prosecutor’s “appeal-after-appeal” argument which encouraged the jury to disregard the presumption of innocence and reasonable doubt, and err on the side of guilt.


Claim 25 Whether the verdict form and jury instructions that resulted in the death penalty deprived Mr. Abu-Jamal of the right to due process of law, equal protection of the law, and not to be subjected to cruel and unusual punishment, and violated Mills v. Maryland, 486 U.S. 367 (1988), since the judge precluded the jurors from considering any mitigating evidence unless they all agreed on the existence of a particular circumstance.

Claim 29 Whether Mr. Abu-Jamal was denied due process and equal protection of the law during post-conviction hearings as the result of the bias and racism of Judge Albert F. Sabo which included the comment that he was “going to help ‘em fry the nigger”.

The National Lawyers Guild, and, the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, Inc., will be filing separate amicus curiae (friend of the court) briefs in the near future. This should strengthen our quest to see justice done.

It is a remarkable accomplishment that the court is hearing issues that go to the very essence of Mr. Abu-Jamal’s right to a fair trial. This is
the first time that any court has made a ruling that could lead to a new trial and freedom. Nevertheless, he remains on Pennsylvania’s death row and in great danger.

Mr. Abu-Jamal, the “voice of the voiceless,” is a powerful symbol in the international campaign against the death penalty and for human rights. The goal of Professor Judith L. Ritter, associate counsel, and I is to see that the many wrongs which have occurred in this case are righted and that this brave man is freed.
How the US Destroyed the Black Panther Party and Continues to Persecute its Veterans

John Bowman

The following statement was recorded in 2005 by:
Claude Marks
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San Francisco
CA 94110
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It was clear to me that the federal government tried to destroy and did destroy the Black Panther Party and tried to destroy me as a member of the Black Panther Party. They used deceit, they used false information and they participated in overt assaults on people’s lives.

I was assaulted, and two other people were assaulted and shot and imprisoned in Los Angeles. I was imprisoned for six years for assault with intent to commit murder on police officers, when in fact it was the police who initiated the assault—and eventually charges was [sic] dropped. It was clear to me then that this was an attack to destroy us, and I survived. And in 2003, it became clear to me that they wanted to continue their campaign to destroy me by visiting me, accusing me and wanting to talk to me about things that happened in 1971.

From 1968 to 1973, I experienced false arrests, I experienced assassination attempts, I experienced being railroaded through the courts, I experienced police brutality, experienced torture—because of my association with this organization called the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense. So how does it make me feel in 2005? I feel like it’s something that’s never gonna [sic] end, that my commitment is being challenged again by the United States government.

Because of the commitment that I made in 1967, I’m still being persecuted and punished for that commitment and believing in the 10-point program of the Black Panther Party and implementing some of the programs of the Black Panther Party in some of the social programs that myself and my colleagues are doing. So, I’m very concerned. I’m angry. I don’t feel like it’s right, and I don’t feel like it’s something that should go unnoticed, and I don’t feel like the government should be able to get away with this continuous harassment.
The same people who tried to kill me in 1973 are the same people who are here today, in 2005, trying to destroy me. I mean it literally. I mean there were people from the forces of the San Francisco Police Department who participated in harassment, torture and my interrogation in 1973. And these same people I have to come in contact with, I have to go before courts in front of, who are asking me the same questions that they interrogated and tortured me for (sic).

I have to be confronted with these people, and none of these people have ever been brought to trial. None of these people have ever been charged with anything. None of these people have (sic) ever been questioned about that. So I think if they have to put me in court, I think they should be brought to court and questioned about their behavior as it related to John Bowman, Harold Taylor and Ruben Scott and dozens of other people in New Orleans in 1973.

So if I have to be brought before a grand jury and questioned in secret, where no one is there but the grand jurors, John Bowman, the US Attorney and the state’s Attorney (General)—no lawyer for me. Why can’t there be some forum where some questions are put to the police department from San Francisco about their behavior in 1973, which is the basis of this grand jury investigation today. That’s what I’m asking for is some justice (sic).

What makes John Bowman tick? Well, one of the things that makes me tick is that I have two children. I have 28 nephews and nieces who (sic) I care quite a bit about. I’m a man (who thinks) that each one could teach one and that each person has an obligation to give something to the community in which he dwells. I learned (sic) that concept and principle through my parents. I learnt that by growing up in what is now called the Western Addition, but [which was then called] the Fillmore district of San Francisco, where I went to school and where I was raised.

It took awhile for me to understand who I was. In fact, I had dropped out of high school. There was a program in the community called the Neighborhood Youth Corps program, and I had a job counselor who gave me books, Malcolm X’s autobiography, and James Baldwin’s book, Go Tell It on the Mountain. So I read the books, and that excited me quite a bit. And then I heard about Huey P. Newton and the Black Panther Party. So I was beginning to be socially conscious [when I was] 17 years old.

So who am I right now? I’m 57 years old and still feel like I need to contribute to my community and contribute to my family. That’s what I
try to do on a daily basis. One of the things that I was able to do is [sic] to appreciate the programs that would give things to the people, and one of the things that attracted me to the Black Panther Party was their 10-point platform and program, which spoke to the issues of housing, education and employment, spoke to issues of social justice and justice in the criminal justice system.

And in my community, in the Fillmore district, there was lots of social injustice, there were lots of businesses that didn’t contribute anything, there was dilapidated housing and absent landlords and all of that was just pressing me. I felt like it was time for me to do something besides just talk about it. And that’s when I decided to pay attention to the 10-point program of the Black Panther Party. So I joined their organization, and I began to work with their programs—the breakfast programs, collecting medical supplies, having a clinic and programs inside the housing projects, working with tenants and families, organizing rent strikes. Those are the kind of things that shaped and molded me to be a contributor to the community.

The Black Panther Party was educating people to some of the realities, some of the criminal realities of the system that was governing them. In the local communities and nationally, the Black Panther Party was, through its newspaper, educating people to what is wrong about the structure and the policies of housing, what is wrong about the prison system and about the criminal justice system. And people began to listen to the Black Panther Party, and they began to support the Black Panther Party.

The environment was very oppressive. The Tac Squad that was created by Joseph Alioto [former San Francisco mayor], their task was to disrupt our function. And we would get pulled over if we were driving, if we were walking. We would get held up on the streets, we’d be laid down in the streets. We would have AR-15s or machine guns pointed at us. That’s when I first learned got introduced to AR-15 automatic weapons through watching the Tac Squad put them in my face and other members of the party.

Wherever we would go, they would come and disrupt. They would kick in our doors. Or they would sit outside our houses waiting for us to come home. And when we got home, before we got into our house, they would search us. So it became very clear to me that not only was this a social service program that they were attacking, they were attacking me as a person because of my beliefs.
This is when I began to feel that my life was in danger, always. Because everywhere I went, I had to be confronted with [sic] police. Organized harassment is what we came to realize was taking place against us. And as a means to protect ourselves, we had to go out in groups of threes and fours, even if just to sell newspapers or to go to community meetings and set up community meetings.

It was clear that things had changed and that, on a national level, the Black Panther Party was the focus of an organized attack against the leadership. In Chicago and in New York, in San Diego and in Los Angeles, there was [sic] people dying, people being assassinated in their cars. Fred Hampton himself, who was a member and a leader in Chicago, he was assassinated [as was Mark Clark]. And there was [sic] people assassinated in New York City and people arrested by the dozens in New York City.

So it was clear to us here in San Francisco that something like that was gonna [sic] happen to us. And eventually it did happen, where our office got raided on Fillmore Street. And they shot tear gas in our office. And they didn’t shoot anybody, but they destroyed thousands of dollars of materials and food and medical supplies. And then simultaneously they raided different homes that people were living in.

So it was clear to us that this is what it was gonna [sic] be about. It was gonna [sic] be about us being violently attacked and unjustly shot and put in jail. We knew it was the local police, but we didn’t know [at that time] it was coordinated by the FBI and the CIA and the United States government. So what we were going to do about it, we had no idea.

The Black Panther Party built coalitions with people who were against the Vietnam War, who were against the murders of citizens in El Salvador, Honduras and Guatemala, with people who were against apartheid in South Africa, people who were on college campuses who wanted to protest the war and protest exploitation of people of color all across the world. The Black Panther Party even went as far as to communicate with other governments—the Vietnamese government, the North Korean government, the ANC government [sic], the organization that Nelson Mandela was a part of which is called the African National Congress.

We all had one thing in common. We all were being oppressed. And there was a need to stop war and a need to stop oppressing and exploiting people. And the Black Panther Party was a very vocal part of this movement on a world-wide basis. This is why the Black Panther Party took the brunt
of all the murder of its membership and the jailing of all its membership, because we were an organization that was very vocal.

People embraced the Black Panther Party, and that’s why the federal government created a program called the COINTELPRO program. And that’s why they had a Senate committee hearing, and people admitted that J. Edgar Hoover orchestrated and created mass hysteria and mass murder, because of our relationships with people all over the world. Eldridge Cleaver and Don Cox and Kathleen Cleaver and other members of the organization who went into exile traveled all over the globe internationally and were telling people what this government was doing and giving them documented evidence, just like Malcolm X did when he went to Africa—he talked to people all over the African continent about this government and its treatment of people.

Well, the Black Panther Party did the same thing. They [opponents of the party] never talk about the relationships between people all over the world and the Black Panther Party. They only create criminal images of Black Panthers. So it’s important that people take a broader look as to what it is when they speak today of the Patriot Act and Homeland Security and what does it do to affect us today, us ordinary citizens. I think I’m a victim of the Patriot Act. We all became victims of the COINTELPRO program.

In fact, it was the Black Panther Party that enabled me to grow as a man and as a person, because it taught principles, it taught integrity. And I’ve been doing this for—I can’t even count the years—35, 40 years. And I continue to give this example to my son, who is 19 years old, and to my daughter who is 26.

I am a community activist. I’m a social program developer. I don’t consider myself a member of the Black Panther Party today. But I do consider myself someone who have [sic] learnt from the principles, the basic principles and ideology of the Black Panther Party, which was to reform and revolutionize the social system so Black people and all people could benefit more from it.

John H. Bowman, Black Panther veteran, called to appear before a grand jury in San Francisco, was in jail with four other BPP veterans.
In late 2006, John H. Bowman passed away. Tribute was paid to him on January 11, 2007 in Spencer, Oklahoma and on January 28, 2007 in San Francisco, California. Donations in his memory can be made to “The Committee of Defense of Human Rights” at P.O. Box 90221, Pasadena, California 91109. E-mail: cdhrright@hotmail.com.
Generation’s murmur…

In the beginning we were strong, young and vibrant. But flawed. Our limitations lay in our mortality and the frailty of bone and flesh—but even our flesh was cause for celebration. How could we succumb to the enemies of the Sun? The Sun that toned us dark brown and the hue of ancient Odum trees?

At the start our minds were unfettered and our hearts full of song. The Blues was unborn though we knew both pain and suffering. Who from among us could imagine it? A middle passage through hell—the horrid moans of disemboweled souls or defiant screams cut short by the roar of the sea as another spirit plunged beneath its churning waves?

Surely it must have been that—The unimaginable. The unspeakable. The Unforgettable. The intolerable fashioned us—from black delta mud & sounding clay into the most endurable of human molds.

We were swallowed in our millions like fragile spirits sucked into a Satanic vortex—To a haunting cacophony of backbreaking groans and snapping bullwhips—western empires arose. The lucrative Triangle of Cane Sugar n Rum—cotton n tobacco, slaves n gold from which the fortunes of empires and nations were amassed have become the sinews of modern commerce.

We were truly children of the dark—blinded by the enlightenment of western civilization we groped for our lost originality.

Children of the veil between life and death and the freedom of chains

Some soul’s affidavit…

When we arrived up-south to urban versions of cat-fish row, No matter how hard we tried, we couldn’t prove life “ain’t nuthin but a party”.

New Jack Griots came along, wine bottles in hand or perhaps a song in their hearts with that ‘baby makin’’ voice that lifted the spirit and transformed being Black into an emotional affair. A sublime adolescent masturbatory experience we get to keep all to ourselves!

Afterall, You can’t get bitter-sweet from a “take-out Chinese joint”. Only from a sack of special woe does bitter-sweet truly flow.
This composition of excerpts is from Dhuruba Bin-Wahad’s forthcoming book, *The Future Past: Journey of a Pan-African Revolutionary in Racist America*.

But that didn’t stop many a “playah” from living fast and dying young.

It wouldn’t take long. Soon Generations of urban gang bangers would emerge and recognize the game—the universal script: We learned [sic] between the lash and the whip the distinction between overseers and sanctimonious cops;

Between freedom fighters and political pretenders to the “Public Trust”.

We understood from invisible quotas and criteria we could never meet that we were the world and the ‘world was a ghetto’.

We were the majority.

We didn’t lose our way after all, just sidetracked into rice paddies, prisons, and urine saturated shooting-galleries. America was a side-show and the main feature was yet to play itself out….

Amadou Diallo was just a figment of our paranoia, like Rodney King, like Fred Hampton, like overweight African refugees clinging to Walmart Plastic Storage containers as they floated down Bourbon Street, is it the Future or the Past that gets twisted?

**HARLEM**

Bronx bound Uptown D train: “next stop, one-hundred-twenty-fifth Street, Harlem … stand clear of the closing door”.

For some of us who survived, a subway ride uptown is a journey back in time. Indifferent faces pass before you like a video montage of ethnic New York. Worker drones heading for the modern version of the corporate plantation, pedestrian and patrician alike, all circulate like blood corpuscles through the underground arteries of the city, each pursued by their ambitions and chasing their own dream of success, and survival. The subway car I entered was almost empty. I took a corner seat as the train sped up, its rhythmic swaying and mechanistic beat, hypnotic…

Virginia to New York in seven hours by car made me feel moldy and dehydrated. We used secondary roads, and not the turnpike reaching the city
an hour or two before dawn. The driver dropped me off below Central Park, and I hopped on the Iron Horse and headed uptown to Harlem.

I guess I am a morning person. My senses seem at their peak in the wee hours before and after dawn. Hazy Harlem pre-dawn, when only garbage collectors and winos were about, can play tricks on your reverie. Tenements become testaments to tranquility rather than grimy symbols of poverty and urban decay. Yes, Harlem’s first light is beguiling: Harlem’s lackluster boulevards lined by shadowy rundown brownstone houses with wrought-iron fences strangely energized me. Often, and especially in the early spring, when the fading winter chilled the edges of warm spring mornings, and old lamp posts glowed in futile resistance to the encroaching dawn, I would emerge from the subway like Jonah from the bowels of the Whale and take a deep breath—inhaling memories of my future past.

On this particular morning as I exited the subway I braced myself in anticipation of the gusting wind I knew awaited the unwary straphanger. The spring air nipped at my exposed neck as I hurried home through almost deserted streets. Pausing at the corner before turning into 137th Street I contemplated a once magnificent apartment building opposite St. Nicholas Park. It was empty and boarded up—awaiting the wrecking ball and a white landlord’s ambitious plan. ‘What we could do with that building’ I thought almost aloud.

The sun had rose [sic] high enough to distinguish between piles of garbage and the dilapidated squalor of half-abandoned buildings when I returned home from my two day trip. Driving non-stop to Baltimore, and then continuing on to Virginia, I supervised the purchase and transfer of Panther weaponry to those locations that the Harlem’s Security Section supervised. You see, this is no ordinary story of a “New Negro’s” rise from poverty to become white America’s poster daddy for illegitimate capitalism. Nor the saga of wasted athletic potential gone Hollywood or conspicuous ghetto consumption gone gangsta video. If you thought this is a Hip Hop literary spin-off complete with groupies, Chronic and guns—think again, minus the groupies.

For Panther Captains and field lieutenants responsible for a Chapter’s security, weapons procurement, or “TE” trips were hardly “革命ary” ego-boosting tasks. Not like spitting the mass-line at anti-racist peace rallies before throngs of anti-establishment student activists, or standing akimbo before Dashiki clad Black nationalists, defending the Party’s positions
at “media events”—all Black Shaded and Panthered Down—quite the opposite. Armed like National Liberation Front sappers (who fought back during the Viet Nam war) just “beyond the wire” at Pleiku and four deep in a Police-spec Fury III, we traveled like shadows trapped behind enemy lines intent on making it to the nearest border and sanctuary before the light of false dawn. That was the script; the way we flowed. There was a distinct difference between “revolutionary theatre” and theatres of revolutionary operations. Ever since Plymouth Rock, Africans in White America were behind enemy lines. Any Black person who has traveled across America by road knows exactly what that means.

Check it out. America’s racial divide always meant that road travel, especially by Black males, was best attempted in as unobtrusive a manner as possible, preferably in the wee hours of morning or at the height of a local rush hour—but never during periods when DWB (Driving While Black) meant racial profiling was “routine procedure”. After 21 hours on the road, I arrived back home exhausted from non-stop stress; stress alleviated only by “Brother Roogies” vaporous rap and the sweet soul music on the car stereo. If ever there were a soundtrack to “Dancing with Pigs” (ducking state police, eluding sundry racist posses of white American citizenry), it was the funk music of the sixties and early seventies.

Most “Black folks” in America know that on long road trips finding good music on the radio could be calculated accurately by how many corn and potato fields lay between you and the nearest Black ghetto. There’s one thing that can be said about “radio free” White America, no matter where you drive, or how far you motor across the length and breadth of America, you can tell where Black folks are located by keeping your FM radio tuned to the right side of your radio dial. As you make your way from city to city, the local soul stations would hiss on to the radio like beacons to the leery and weary Black traveler—“yo there’s some Oxtails, or Smothered Wings on the horizon”, and some respite from endless bland roadside diners featuring plastic eggs and synthetic tasting pancakes without a buckwheat soul, served by Norman Rockwell’s family prototypes, while sipping coffee that tastes like recycled dishwater with a dash of Nestle creamer.

Turning into my block I glimpsed three men sitting in a dark colored sedan parked half way up the street. ‘Pigs’ I thought. I ignored the twinge of anticipation their presence triggered, but I couldn’t ignore the sense of déjà vu that gripped me at that precise moment. I climbed the several flights of
stairs to my apartment and entered. Not only was the trip down south tiring and tense, but unusual.

Maybe it was me, my paranoia. The new driver that Lumumba had replaced, Ali-Bey, made me feel uneasy. There was something disjointed about his behavior. That and the cops up the block—déjà vu mixed with the anomalies of this last trip gave me a bad feeling. They came like slave catchers in the pre-dawn hours of April 2nd, 1969—a day after April Fools Day. Stealthily, they moved into position, crouching ten deep along the dimly lit stairway leading to my apartment—they waited. Armed to the teeth with pump shotguns, M1 Carbines, and pistols, they prepared to rush forward and pounce on their prey should their Trojan horse ruse prove successful.

Detective Colonel Abraham, was an eight year veteran of the New York City Police Department. “Colonel” was Abraham’s given name courtesy of his grandmother on his mother’s side. Earlier at the briefing, he was designated the “Trojan Horse” for purposes of serving an arrest warrant. Abraham was neither Trojan nor a hollowed-out wooden horse. He was a Black man or, as he would refer to himself, a “Negro American”—one of only two of his race assigned to New York’s elite Bureau of Special Services, or BOSS. Although Abraham had more time on the “Force” than all other BOSS Detectives assigned to the Manhattan District Attorney’s Office, he was relegated to third in command of his current assignment—an unusual investigation that was about to climax in this badly lit hallway leading to the Harlem lair of a wanted Black Panther.

Abraham detested Harlem. But the Panthers? The Panthers embarrassed him—they made him feel “neither here nor there” and nothing confused Abraham more than irrelevancy. Detective Abraham may have hated Harlem but he was repulsed by the Panther’s pride and “self-righteousness”. Despite the Afro-centric fashion and militant rhetoric of the day, Abraham still thought of himself as a “Negro”. “Negro” sounded more respectable, Responsible, Trustworthy, Relevant. How could a bunch of ghetto thugs and would-be criminals consider themselves guardians of the Negro, he often asked himself.

Approaching apartment 5D Abraham recalled his first assignment after graduating from the academy. As one of only 14 Black and Latino Police cadets in his graduating class, he was immediately posted to central Harlem. It was Harlem’s 32nd Precinct. Abraham’s first precinct commander was a dedicated racist who thought minority police recruitment was a formula for
disaster. Yet Abraham’s precinct commander, for some odd reason, seemed to take an immediate liking to him. When the rookie Abraham’s newly discovered “Rabbi” was promoted and reassigned to Police Headquarters, and later to the NYPD’s Diplomatic Protection unit of BOSS, Abraham dutifully accompanied his boss as a “communications officer”. Abraham relished his new assignment. Throwing himself into his new assignment gave him a sense of importance. He felt empowered—he was doing something more important than pounding a ghetto beat. For Abraham, becoming BOSS’s in-house expert on Black militant organizations and the Head “Negro” running Negro political informants and undercover agents was an eye-opening experience. Though he wasn’t exactly “driving Miss Daisy” (he had begun his BOSS job as his old precinct commander’s driver), Abraham benefited enormously from the intimacy between himself and his boss. Soon, he was taken off driver detail and assigned to Diplomatic protection, and ultimately political and diplomatic surveillance.

Abraham’s wake-up call came with the assassination of Malcolm Little, or Malcolm X. He was running two undercover informants inside Malcolm X’s new organization—the Organization of African-American Unity or OAAU. Malcolm X formed this group after returning from Africa. According to the “suits” over at the FBI, Malcolm X had met with some “extremely dangerous people” during his Africa trips—people the State Department and CIA believed were “Soviet clients”. One of Abraham’s agents, cover name “Rocky”, was carefully being positioned closer and closer to Malcolm X. Abraham’s first black undercover operative was recruited straight from the Academy, while the other, an undercover police officer, had volunteered for racial undercover work and transferred over from Narcotics. Both were assigned to Abraham. Neither one knew of the other’s existence or true identity. Abraham had learned the ins and outs of police intelligence work during BOSS’s surveillance and infiltration operations directed at the CPUSA [Communist Party] and Nation of Islam (NOI). He had helped plan and execute “black bag jobs” (unauthorized break-ins for the purpose of placing listening or video devices in a premises or for gathering information). For several weeks prior to the assassination of Malcolm X, Abraham’s unit received information that Malcolm X was the subject of considerable “sister agency” or government surveillance. Abraham was worried about this because his undercover agents could be compromised.
Abraham’s worse fears nearly became reality when a BOSS memo crossed his desk heavily quoting the FBI’s highly secret “Racial Matters Task Force” as its source. In the memo, the FBI identified one of two undercover agents as a possible “co-conspirator” in a plot to kill the ailing Nation of Islam leader, Elijah Muhammad, should Malcolm X come to an untimely demise. Abraham was appalled. He had only a few weeks prior to reading the memo managed to infiltrate Malcolm’s personal security entourage, a valuable intelligence coup. What disturbed Abraham was not that the most outspoken and militant Black spokesmen in America at that time was under law enforcement surveillance by a variety of agencies, or that Malcolm X was actually being stalked and targeted for murder—and not by the Nation of Islam alone, but by a professional intelligence agency. What concerned Abraham was that the FBI had a highly placed informant reporting on BOSS undercover operatives! Abraham reported his concerns to his superiors, but his concerns were met with indulgent disregard. Abraham had attended coordinating meetings with the Mayor’s people over at City Hall, and he knew the Commissioner’s Office’s major concern was Malcolm X’s mesmerizing influence over “ordinary Negroes” and his ability to bridge perceptions that kept Negroes divided. Consequently, Malcolm X’s suspension from the NOI after his comments on the Kennedy assassination, coupled with his formation of the secular OAAU, caused considerable anxiety among BOSS intelligence officers and New York’s Jewish leaders. It was inter-police agency mantra that said as long as Malcolm X was under the discipline of Elijah Muhammad’s NOI, he could never effectively mobilize ordinary Blacks—but outside the NOI, Malcolm X could become a serious threat. Malcolm X’s days were numbered. And so was the viability of his agent’s cover.

But Malcolm X’s imminent fate was never Abraham’s professional concern. Should BOSS undercover agents be injured or killed, or their cover “blown”, BOSS would become the “rogue agency” scapegoat or “fall guy” for another agency’s dirty tricks or even more embarrassingly, for NOI assassins! His career would be finished. But before Abraham could change his agent’s modus operandi, Malcolm X was gunned down in Harlem’s Audubon Ballroom. Newspapers across the nation ran cover photos of his undercover agent, Detective Gene Roberts, administering mouth-to-mouth resuscitation to a dying Malcolm X. Abraham realized at that moment that he had been in charge of Malcolm X’s security and thereby aided in his murder. Yes, an eye-opening experience indeed! But all that was years ago…
Hovering now over the peephole, his service revolver out of sight, Detective Abraham knocked forcefully on the door, loudly declaring “welfare agency, is Iris Moore home?!”. At first I didn’t realize someone was banging on the door. I thought the banging was part of my dreams. My head cleared of sleep. Welfare agency at 4:30 in the morning? I don’t think so.

At first I didn’t answer, realizing that to do so might invite a fusillade of gunfire through the front door. But the pounding grew louder, more insistent. Between the pounding on my front door, and the adrenaline rush of anticipation, anxiety, fear, and impending combat I got dressed quickly. Standing to the side of the door I boomed back “who is it?”. There was a pregnant silence, then a Black voice responded: “Police. Open the door.”. I knew the disembodied voice was that of a Blackman. I eased around to the peephole and sure ‘nuff, hovering over the peephole was a sweaty Black face. “How I know you’re the Police and what you want anyway?” I shouted back. “Police! Open the door, or we’ll break it down… Police open the…”. As I unlocked the door I couldn’t help but think that should I live through the next few minutes, my life will never be the same.

The disembodied Black voice first through the door was transformed into the human form of a heavy-set, handgun-wielding Black man bellowing commands as he charged into my living room followed by what seemed like an armed Rugby team of white boys shouting, cursing, and pointing guns. The onrush of body armor and a phalanx of cops shoved me against a wall while rough hands handcuffed my wrists behind my back—of course the cuffs were too tight, but what did that matter? Iris, disheveled in her underwear, was manhandled and forced to sit on the sofa while the “Pigs” proceeded to tear the house apart. After finding only a pistol the searchers seemed somewhat crestfallen.

Half shoved and half dragged down four flights of stairs I was thrown into the backseat of an unmarked police cruiser. The street outside was
teaming with uniformed cops but the ones escorting me wore mufti. Sirens
blaring, I was sped away, squeezed between two large Detectives reeking
of Old Spice. The ride downtown was pregnant with tension, the silence
broken only by the sporadic crackle of chatter over the police car radio.
Apparently my captors were hyped-up in anticipation of the raid. But
something didn’t quite meet their expectations and I didn’t know what that
something could be until my arrival at the DA’s office. I was led past a large
“operations” room. In the middle of the room, laid out on a long conference
room table, as if in anticipation of a press conference, was the accumulated
“Seized evidence” of BOSS’s “terrorist” Bomb plot. The Police raiders
were so desperate for material proof of a Panther conspiracy they gleaned
ornamental African wall ornaments, spears, shields, and a medieval musket
as proof of our malevolent intentions.

I was seated and handcuffed to a chair that was bolted to the floor along
one wall of a large room furnished with a half-dozen metal desks, chairs
and small tables. Despite the clear spring morning, all the windows were
nailed shut and shrouded with heavy drapes. Air Conditioners hummed
like the power system of the Star Ship Enterprise and recessed fluorescent
ceiling lights gave the illusion of a skylight illuminated space. Peering
between the door jam, I could look down a long corridor lined with offices
and every ten minutes or so, one of my comrades was hustled in and put
into one room or the other, until Harlem’s leadership and security section
were almost all accounted for. The cops had missed a few key Panthers
in their pre-dawn raids, but they didn’t do too badly—they had captured
thirteen out of the twenty-one on their hit list. But just as I had suspected,
they failed to find much material evidence to justify their early morning
raids and substantiate the secret indictment handed down 24 hours earlier.
Everybody knew Panthers had guns, after all, we did believe in self-
defense. Later at arraignment I realized that, given the allegations in the
conspiracy indictment charging dozens of counts of possession of arms,
explosives, and bomb-making materials supposedly ready for imminent
use, the paltry number of weapons seized from us was an embarrassment
to District Attorney Frank S. Hogan. To supplement the seeming lack of
material evidence, the DA’s investigators scraped together every piece of
household material and decorative ornament that could arguably justify a
charge that we were about to unleash a reign of terror on New York over the
Easter weekend. And to think that all of this began with a Brooklyn press conference.

It would be an understatement to say that the first time I visited a Black Panther Party office my life changed forever. When counter-culture America’s “summer of luv” hung like a psychedelic backdrop to the drama of America’s race politics, as city after city seethed and boiled over with Black discontent, and Johnny refused to go off to war, I surrendered to the bitterness of my idealism. So on a scorching hot August day, I drastically altered my mundane post-prison routine and jumped the iron horse headed toward Brooklyn. My life was heading in an entirely different direction until that day in 1967. I had just become involved in a serious relationship, and moved to the East Village of New York from the Southeast Bronx. I harbored visions of life as a creative artist, a soul in pursuit of self-satisfaction, not the hardened and lonely path of an urban activist-soldier.

My first attraction to the Black Panther Party began immediately after I was released from prison in the spring of 1967. Earlier, in October of 1966, the Panthers had exploded onto the scene in a number of high profile confrontations with the Oakland Police. As the Party expanded and its influence grew, I followed its development and the challenge its very existence presented to racist law enforcement. Having recently spent five straight years in the clutches of New York’s racist prison system, I completely related to the principle of armed self-defense. But it wasn’t until after I had moved to the East Village, and read in Ramparts Magazine a series of articles written by ex-prisoner Eldridge Cleaver, that my political interests in the Panthers increased. However, it was white anti-war demonstrators, and the murder of Martin Luther King Jr., that drove my conscience to consider a revolutionary approach to my life as a Black man in a racist society. King’s murder meant, in simple terms, that if white America could not relate to the non-violent dreamer and integrationist, then America would have to deal with the harbingers of the “dream they deferred”. The rebellions that swept urban centers across America in the wake of King’s assassination had little or nothing to do with Black popular support for King’s philosophy of “non-violence” or his strategy of non-violent protest. No, the rebellions had everything to do with the perception on the streets, amongst African-America’s youth and dormant warrior class of street thugs, the unemployed,
and denizens of marginalized communities that we were all being “punked”. King’s murder was a signal that the street wars had begun in earnest.

That “Dog Day” August afternoon in Brooklyn’s “Do or Die Bed-Sty” was a sizzler. Nonetheless, Dashiki-down, and braids gleaming I set out from my East Village apartment to join the Black Panther Party rather than go to Jones Beach. I had finally made up my mind. Ever since leaving Green Haven the year before, something gnawed away at my conscience and spirit. “Something” like what? I couldn’t really say then. At first I thought my displeasure with living in a city and state, or under conditions where everyone my age was either locked up, strung out on smack, or dead, was something I could escape if I particularized my attitude. If I ignored the real world for my own fantasy world, living the good life, losing myself in love-making, getting high and reveling in an illusive state of ill-grace we sometimes call “manhood”, I could find some superficial sense of “self-value”—but not much.

Having spent considerable time entrapped by cement and steel, with guts held, expecting a homemade shank during some inane melee between inmates made social irresponsibility attractive. It had taken me so long to feel fed up—to realize nothing lay ahead if here and now was so fragile an existence for a Black man looking for space in white supremacy’s fantasy of freedom. It was weird when I thought about it. When MLK was gunned down on a Memphis hotel balcony while seeking a breath of fresh air, his slaying didn’t cause the type of incomprehension that first washed over me when Malcolm was murdered. Martin’s death meant that once more, like decades earlier during the “Red Summers” of the early twentieth century, when Africans in America were slaughtered by white vigilantes and armed thugs employed to run “Coloreds” out of businesses and from property coveted by whites, some Black men and women would come forward to defend the entire community and form self-defense groups. What America doesn’t want to understand is that African-America has always had a “warrior” class and between the ambivalence of wanting to “belong” and wanting “to be gone”, the idea of Black self-defense—the use of violence to fend off violent racist attack—has always divided the African-American community, especially African-American leaders. Yes, King’s murder propelled street warriors to the forefront of the tumultuous sixties and seventies.

The Black Panther’s storefront was at Fulton and Nostrand Avenues—in the heart of “do-or-die” Bed-Sty. It was a typical storefront façade with a
plate glass window the Panthers had backed with plywood, reinforced with sandbags stacked to the ceiling. Panther posters covered the entire façade, and the painted Black Panther above the entrance, claws extended, seemed to leap out from its powder blue background onto the heads of sweaty shoppers, hawkers, African street vendors, and crowd hustlers. A dark-skinned, goateed man, apparently a Black Panther, stood out front talking through a bullhorn to passersby. Standing on a soapbox, his black beret canted rakishly atop his Afro, leather jacket festooned with dozens of buttons, dark glasses and Black fatigue pants bloused into Black jungle boots, he Cajoled, urged, and at times yelled at bustling shoppers while two other young Panthers, one a female, handed out leaflets to the stream of pedestrians filing past the office.

I entered the Panther office. Compared to the bright sunlight and humid heat outside, its interior was dark and cool. Tables placed around the reception area were laden with literature, leaflets, flyers and varieties of buttons and posters. There were only two other people in the office, both brothers. The taller of two, who seemed to be the spitting image of the guy outside on the soapbox, greeted me: “Power to the people, brother” he said. Extending his hand, he clasped mine and offered me a seat.

“So my brother, are you interested in the Black Panther Party’s programs and platform?” “Right on” I responded, “but there’s no Panther office in Manhattan, so I had to come out here.” Gathering some papers together, he handed me a stack of literature and a BPP application form. “The party has just started, and we haven’t opened a chapter outside of Brooklyn yet, but we will … where you live Blood?” “Lower Eastside” I answered as I perused the application he handed me. “Near the East Village on Third street,” “Yo Bro, it doesn’t matter where you live. The Panther Party is a people’s party and wherever Black people are that’s where the party is. Oh, by the way, my name is Cain, what’s yours?”

“Dhoruba.” Glancing around I asked “so is this the only spot you got—the only Panther office in the city?” Cain replied by describing how the Party first came to New York after a visit by Eldridge Cleaver. According to him, Cleaver had visited the city a few months earlier at the invitation of some “honky allies”. Cleaver spoke at Filmore East to a Sold Right Out crowd and at a Black Student conference in Queens. Apparently Cleaver was impressive. The Panthers were all in the news. Almost everyday there was an article, an op-ed piece or political diatribe aimed at either condemning
or praising the Panthers—depending on what side of the “color line” and poverty line you were on. By the time Eldridge came to New York there were scores of young Bloods waiting to join the Party.

By early afternoon of April 2, 1969 we were finally brought together for a frenetic and bellicose arraignment. We were being charged with over 200 counts of conspiracy. Our arraignment had been scheduled before a special judge. That judge was Judge Martinez. That District Attorney Frank S. Hogan would move our arraignment away from the sitting arraignment judge to Judge Martinez’s courtroom was no surprise and a portent of things to come. Judge Martinez was in DA Frank Hogan’s hip pocket (as were several other Manhattan County Judges). Right after I received a “Youthful Offender” five year ‘reformatory sentence in 1962, Judge Martinez’s son was the driver in a particularly deadly car accident—his son was drunk and arrested for DUI and the charge of Vehicular Homicide went before a Manhattan Grand Jury. DA Hogan avoided the awkwardness of prosecuting a sitting Judge’s son by having the vehicular homicide charge reduced to a misdemeanor, and Martinez’s son walked. After all, Martinez was one of the first Latinos picked by the City’s WASP-dominated political machine for a Judgeship.

The courtroom was packed with reporters, cops, and officials in the front four rows and Panther supporters packed in everywhere else. Outside on Centre Street, dozens of hastily gathered uniformed Panthers chanted into the arrayed ranks of stern face helmeted police “Free the Panther 21—power to the people!” My comrades were in good spirits and we alternately made fun of the cops and exchanged notes on the morning’s tumultuous events.

At the first Panther 21 arraignment I was represented by an old movement stalwart and friend, William “Bill” Kunstler. At the Party’s behest Bill had hurriedly gathered together a team of lawyers to prepare bail motions and other legal documents on our behalf. The DA and Court were in close synergy with each other (a feature of the Panther 21 case which would continue throughout the duration of our trial). With his reading glasses pushed back onto disheveled hair, and sardonic courtroom style, Bill’s presence on our case gave DA Hogan some pause for thought. Obviously Hogan thought pre-trial prejudicial publicity would all but seal our fate in the eyes of the public. Hogan took out all the stops. He personally held a press conference
to announce our arrest and indictment, his white haired patrician demeanor lending the odor of dignity to the lies he told the press. As New York’s senior esteemed prosecutor, Hogan could easily manipulate court administrative procedures. We fully realized that he would use such powers to ensure our conviction. Hogan presided over all of our initial hearings and secured court orders to keep us separated in five different pre-trial detention centers in an effort to thwart an effective joint defense strategy. It was little surprise to us that at our first arraignment, DA Hogan declared the state ready for trial!

But Bill and a “law commune” of young white radical lawyers were up to the task. It took several months to bring us all together in one prison for joint consultation with our legal defense team. It took a few more months to have a reasonable trial date set that would allow for an effective defense campaign. We would take the fight to the opposition—our trial wasn’t going to be a railroad. We would tear up the courtroom before we would silently permit racist ‘just-us’ to have its way.

Bail at our first arraignment was set at $100,000 each and we were remanded to the tender mercies of the New York City Corrections Department. I was taken to the notorious lock-up known as the “Tombs” in lower Manhattan and placed in 23 hour lockdown. I was not allowed any reading material or contact with other pre-trial detainees. I was held incommunicado for several days. Unlike other pre-trial detainees, I had to
submit a visitors “list of family and friends” to the prison authorities for approval. After the list was submitted, each person on the list was visited and harassed by the police and FBI—so much for the legal concept of “innocent until proven guilty”. Bill and the other lawyers moved swiftly to thwart such exceptional treatment, but it would be months before they could bring us all together and begin mounting a legal defense. Thanks to the efforts of “people’s attorneys” like Bill Kunstler, Hogan’s planned speedy show trial of Panthers was slowed down, and the people’s trial of racist law enforcement began to take shape.

Until we were all brought together in one prison, we could only meet collectively with our attorneys on the days of scheduled court hearings. Bill Kunstler left the case to represent the Panther Chairman, Bobby Seal in the infamous Chicago Conspiracy trial a few months after our indictment. But before he left, he had helped assemble a team of young, if somewhat inexperienced lawyers who would prove themselves worthy of the title “people’s lawyer”.

Gerald Leftcourt took over as our lead attorney and my personal lawyer. Jerry, along with Robert Bloom, Charles McKinney, and the New York ‘law commune’ comprised of New Left attorneys and legal assistants, most of whom would make names for themselves through these high profile cases, were the team. They methodically began to prepare our legal defense. It would not be easy. The legal strategy of the Panther 21 defendants was simple: we would conduct a political defense and put racist America on trial. We would neither accept nor rationalize “law enforcement’s” repression and racist treatment of Africans in America. As Black Panthers we would uphold our right to self-defense and to bear arms. Finally, as descendants of Africans kidnapped and sold into bondage we would not co-operate with our legal lynching or in any way perpetuate the illusion of white American justice. This seemingly suicidal legal strategy required attorneys of unusual courage and outstanding commitment to the principles of anti-racism. For us, the Panther 21 defendants, the battle in the court room was a continuation of the battle raging in the streets. “Up against the Wall Mutherfucka—we come for what’s ours” also applied to the rule of law! We did plenty of pushups, drank mucho water and walked slow. It would be a long fight. We would either win or spend the rest of our lives in prison.

I had already spent ten months in pre-trial detention. When Jerry Leftcourt first told me that Abby Hoffman was going to front my bail
money, I laughed aloud at the irony. Hogan’s office and BOSS personnel over at ‘NYPD Doughnut Central’ (police intelligence headquarters) would love that one I thought. If Abby wanted everyone to “steal” his book, what did he care about me skipping bail? Hogan’s office demanded that my bail be put up in full, and that surety stipulated forfeiture of property.

But making bail was a political action as well. The image of the Party as terrorists was poisoning the waters and any potential jury pool. New York’s law enforcement establishment and their right wing political cronies had done everything imaginable to prejudice our case and scare off potential white liberal contributors to the Panther 21 Defense Fund. DA Hogan and the NYPD leaked false reports to the local media indicating that Black Panther terror attacks on crowded department stores and the public transportation systems were foiled by our arrest and indictment. Both local police and FBI intelligence units planted additional stories in the press claiming that Panthers were receiving terrorist funding from Cuba. Local Black clergy were approached by BOSS and FBI agents urging their leadership to publicly denounce the Party and close Black church facilities to the Panther’s free breakfast for children programs. To rebuild the party in New York would require promoting local leadership. We urged National to allow Joan and Afeni, my two female co-conspirators to be bailed out first: their “kinder and gentler” image along with their stories helped pave the way for the ultimate success of our public relations campaign around racially motivated political repression.

In 1969, no one outside of Hoover’s FBI specifically knew of the government’s Counter-Intelligence Program (acronym COINELPRO) directed at Black America. But, we, the programs targets, knew we were in the crosshairs and under fire. We felt the pressure everyday: the ever present potential for violent confrontation with racist cops, the constant surveillance of our movements, visits by plainclothes investigators to your landlord or estranged relatives; disinformation and smear campaigns by those who seldom saw a right Black people had that they were compelled to respect. Unknown to the general public at the time was the FBI’s ‘Dear Hymie’ poison letter campaign. Liberal Jews were the special targets of this disinformation campaign. They (FBI) would write letters to prominent Jewish liberals purportedly from an outraged Jew appalled at Jewish support for the Party. One such letter was sent to the celebrated Music Conductor, the late Leonard Bernstein, denouncing a high society fund raising soirée held
at his town house in support of the Panther 21. The Bernstein affair inspired
the author Tom Wolfe to write a piece for New Yorker Magazine entitled
“Radical Chic and Mau-Mauing the Flak Catchers” (1970) ridiculing rich
whites who found dangerous ghetto types fascinating rather than criminal.
Radical Chic soon became the buzz word for “bleeding heart liberals”
and Wolfe later parlayed his elitist insights into a novel and subsequent
cinematic flop, “Bonfire of the Vanities”.

Despite the best efforts of the Police, Prosecutors, main stream media,
and co-opted Black leaders to discredit our Panther membership, support for
us grew. Each court appearance brought larger and larger crowds. A week
didn’t go by that there wasn’t some major benefit or event for the Panthers.
Law enforcement’s media blitz, while having some effect on white liberal
Jewish support, was more successful with the Black bourgeoisie than the
white liberal establishment. The Black professional and middle classes,
ever noted for their bravery under fire, often sought to publicly distance
themselves from the Party and its “gun toting street savvy image” lest white
folks kick them from their jobs or out of their institutions.

This chapter in The Future Past: Journey of a Pan-African Revolutionary in
Racist America goes on to detail the year-long Panther 21 trial, at the time
the longest and most expensive trial in New York history. During the Panther
21 trial, Bin-Wahad, unknowingly targeted by the FBI’s COINTELPRO
operations was forced to “jump bail” and go “underground”. Also, toward
the end of the trial the Black Panther Party underwent a violent internal split,
caused in part by conflict between Huey P. Newton and the NY Panther 21
over the direction of the Party and support for East Coast political prisoners.
Details of the BPP split are recounted to document the role of police
informers and agent provocateurs in destabilizing the organization.
A Woman’s Journey in the BPP and BLA: 
Safiya Bukhari, 1950—2003

Safiya Bukhari

The following interview was conducted in New York City on September 27, 1992 for International Women’s Day 1995.

From: Assata Shakur Forum
ATS-L Archives.
Wednesday, March 1995: ats@etext.org

Q: The first question I have is, how did you get involved with the Black Panther Party (BPP)?

I was going to college to be a doctor. The first year in college I was just into my studies. But it was right here in Brooklyn, actually, in New York City College, and the people on campus thought that I was stuck up because I didn’t associate—I was studying a lot. And so the second year, in order to break that mode, I pledged for a sorority called Hamilton House. That same year the sorority became integrated. We elected the first Black president. And one of the projects of the sorority was to adopt under-privileged children in foreign countries. Our President that year said we didn’t have to go any further than the United States to find under-privileged children. A lot of people didn’t believe that there were hungry children that needed to be fed right here in the US, even in New York.

So three of us were assigned to go investigate the situation and we ended up going to Harlem to see if there really were hungry children. It was Yvonne Smallwood, Wanda Davis and myself. And the first people we ran into when we got there were the Panthers. Wanda got totally involved from the beginning; she fell in love with a Panther and joined the Party and everything. I didn’t go that route. I simply didn’t believe the things that the Panthers were saying.

About the hungry children: we went back and reported that the result was that there were a lot of people who were eating out of garbage cans, that there were indecent conditions that they were living in, etc. The next question was what to do about it? Should we start our own program or should we get involved in the things that already went on—because the Panthers already had the Free Breakfast Program. So, in essence we elected to just assign various members of our sorority to work with the free Breakfast Program. We would collect the food, we cooked the food, we would help the children with their homework, things like that, but I still didn’t believe in what the
Panthers were saying. I didn’t think that the violence was happening. I didn’t think that the conspiracies were going on. I didn’t believe that the police were doing what they said they were doing, etc.

Two incidents happened that made me start to think seriously about what the ideology of the Party was and take the rhetoric of the Party seriously. With the Breakfast Program, the police started putting our rumours. The children stopped coming to the breakfast program. And I wondered why—so I found out from talking to some of the parents that the police kept telling them that we were feeding the children poisoned food—so they were stopped from bringing their children to the program and that made me angry. I mean, we were getting up at outrageous hours in the morning to take care of this before going to school—I was still going to school full-time—I was cooking the food and we were eating it right along with the children. They didn’t have a breakfast program in the schools themselves, they were not making an effort to feed the children, but they didn’t want us to feed the children. And I was incensed about that.

Then, myself and my friend Wanda were walking on 42nd Street—I still hadn’t joined the Party, that still didn’t make me angry enough to join the Party—well, there we were on 42nd Street one day and going to Times Square we saw this big crowd on the corner and so we went rushing to see what was going on. A Panther was on the corner selling papers and the police were harassing him. So, believing whole-heartedly in the Constitution, I asked him what he was doing. And the police said if I didn’t stop that they were going to arrest me, too. I said he had a constitutional right to sell the papers; actually, I said he had a constitutional right to disseminate political literature, and he didn’t take that too kindly. He asked me for my ID and told me to get up against the car and that he was going to arrest me for obstructing governmental process and inciting a riot. He handcuffed me, handcuffed the Panther, handcuffed Wanda and threw us into the police car and took us down to the 14th Precinct. In the back of the car they told my friend Wanda that if she didn’t shut up—she was just running off at the mouth, calling them a bunch of names—they were going to ram the night-stick right up her. That was their behavior and when we got to the Precinct itself they talked about holding court in the Precinct. They did a search, threw us in a holding cell and kept talking ... then they had a female guard come and strip-search us and they told her she should wear gloves and make sure she washes her hands afterwards because she could catch something from touching us. It was that experience that when they let me
out, I called my mother and father at home and told them I was going to join the BPP. Because of the police, I told them that the police convinced me of the legitimacy of the truth of what the Panthers were saying.

I didn’t get arrested for anything from that point on. I never got arrested for anything trivial. But my friend Wanda, she never learned not to get arrested for talking. I was with her when she got arrested for selling Wolves tickets and murdernouthing the police. But to me it was much more serious than that. It was more serious because they had this authority and they had the badges and they had the guns and they abused their power. And it’s what they say and what they do that carries more weight in a court of law than what the individual does. It was that kind of corruption that made me make the decision to join the BPP.

Q: When was that?
   1969.

Q: And then you worked with the Panthers in New York?
   I worked with the Panthers. I worked out of the Harlem office of the BPP, from then until I went underground in 1974.

Q: Why did you go underground?
   From 1969 until 1971, before the split in the BPP, I had a section. My responsibility was for organizing and politicizing that section, selling papers, organizing the various cell units and just politically educating that community. I did everything from selling papers and handing out leaflets to drug-detox work and everything else. By 1971 when the split came down, right after the split, I became in charge of Information and Communications for the East Coast Panthers. One of my responsibilities was to hold the press conferences and release communiqués from the Black Liberation Army.

   And so I became a direct threat to the establishment. They thought I had the information they needed to capture BLA members. So they subpoenaed me. But even prior to this they had done a number of articles on the fact that I was the only ranking member in the Party without a felony conviction. And since I had no felony conviction, I had a license to carry arms. And I carried arms openly in public because the law allowed you to. You could carry long arms or have a Paratrooper A-1. I had an 8mm Mauser and I had these long arms whenever we had a press conference. Or I kept it at home and walked with it, carried it back and forth to the office, in a holster on
the street. So the media played it up like “the Panthers with guns”, but they
didn’t bother to investigate that it was licensed. When they finally got to
the point that they realized I was legal, I was then the only ranking Party
member without a felony conviction.

I had done my work in the community so well that I had a lot of
community support and so on that level had organized my base area and
also had the political astuteness to play the media. They thought the fact
that I had the diplomacy to play the media made me a political threat. Then
in 1970/71 we started the “National Committee for the Defense of Political
Prisoners”, in response to all the arrests across the country of Panthers and
BLA members. I was working with the people in prison and they put the
letters that I was sending inside to the prisoners. Our political stance was
very clear, we were not about reformism or anything like that. It was about
revolutionary political power and how it comes to revolution, and means
a qualitative change in the living conditions of the people with us, and it
was not about the NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of
Coloured People—oldest liberal Black civil rights organization in the US)
style politics or anything like that.

The Senate Committee in the US held hearings on the kind of political
literature that was going into the prisons, so that part was a threat to them
also. It was basically a lot of the political work that I was doing—back and
forth to the prisons—myself and Yuri Kochiyama and many others like us.
And in November 1973, myself and three other people who were part of
the Harriet Tubman Brigade of the BLA were arrested for trying to break
some six members of the BLA out of the Tombs (pre-trial detention prison
in NYC). But the arrest was premature because even though they played it
up to the media like “Great Tombs Escape Fails at the Sewer”, they were
not able to hold us because we weren’t doing anything. The only thing
they could charge us with was third degree burglary on a sewer, which was
laughed out of court. And they were very angry.

Outside the legitimate system, the Police Department put a $10,000
contract on me that I wasn’t supposed to be captured. I had got into
the position to be killed on sight. That was outside the normal system. And
inside it, I got a subpoena by the Federal government to the Grand Jury—
about 11 other people and me. But the difference with my subpoena was
that if I showed up at the Grand Jury I couldn’t take the Fifth Amendment
and therefore for any question that I refused to answer I was facing felony
contempt which carried a prison sentence.
So we discussed it, myself and Nuh (Nuh Washington—now one of the New York Three) and some other people and we decided that I shouldn’t go before the Grand Jury in April 1974, that I should go underground. And at that point I went underground with the Amistad Collective of the Black Liberation Army.

Q: In order to end the chronology, when did you get captured?

I was the unit coordinator of the Amistad Collective. So, basically I was the only female co-ordinator in a BLA unit. We were captured in a shoot-out in Norfolk, Virginia, on January 25, 1975. One of my co-defendants, Komposi Amistad, was killed and another one was shot in the face. For the first 30 days we were facing the electric chair for felony murder. The only reason we got out from the electric chair is that the federal government and the Supreme Court abolished the death penalty in Virginia at that time, saying it was unconstitutional. So we didn’t have to go to trial facing the death penalty.

But the state of Virginia asked for 900 years on the paratrooper A-1 I told you about. They didn’t care that I had a federal license. It was a one day trial, my bail was set at one million dollars on each count—we had five counts, which came to five million dollars.

They told them not to touch the bail issue, they picked the jury, they had the trial and they sentenced us all in one day and took us off to prison in one day. When they had the trial they threw me out of court before they started the trial. So I understand well Mumia not being in court during his trial, because I was not in court either.

I was in a cell in the back and it was cold and it had a loud-speaker, but I didn’t hear a thing, because it was nothing but static. But they brought me back in court for the sentencing phase and I was given 40 years. The jury wanted to run the time concurrently—I got 10, 10, and 20—because it was the minimum on all the charges. And the judge told them they couldn’t do it, it was not up to them to determine how high it ran on the term on what I got and he ran it consecutive, and he told me I had to do every day of it. I told him, his momma was going to do it. (laughs) They sent us off to prison that night.

We both went together because they sent me to the penitentiary for men where my co-defendant was, and then I was taken by caravan to the women’s institution in Richmond, Virginia, and spent the next 21 days in
maximum security segregation, because they didn’t want me on the outside where the other population was.

Q: How did you get out of segregation?

According to their own rules the only reason why you are supposed to be on maximum security segregation is when you violate one of their rules. So, I hadn’t violated a rule, So, when they took me down there I asked them why I was down there and they said because they didn’t have an empty room in the quarantine hall. And I asked them for a manual of their rules. I read it all and I told them, if that’s the case, in 21 days then you don’t have to worry about the room in the quarantine. Just that either I’ll be out of maximum security segregation or you’ll be in court. And so on the 19th day they sent this correctional officer down there who said that she would accept me on her hall. She asked me what my intentions were while I was in prison and I told her that my intention was to do two years and leave. (laughs).

And she said they were concerned about me organizing in prison recruiting for the BLA, and I told them I had no intentions to recruit because I don’t really believe in recruiting. I believe if a person is going to do anything they need to make the decision based on their own conditions. If you have to recruit them, they haven’t made a decision on their own and if they don’t make it on their own they’re susceptible to back out and say somebody forced them to do things and stuff like that. But if they make a conscious decision on their own that they want to be involved in something then they have nobody to blame for anything that happens.

So, I told her I had no intention of recruiting. And she said then that she didn’t have any problems with me being in her hall. And so on the 21st day they moved me to the building where this correctional officer was, but I wasn’t allowed to go out into general population without handcuffs on and an armed guard with me. I wasn’t allowed to go to school. I wasn’t allowed to work in the kitchen or in the laundry or any other place where the women were working because they said I was a security risk. So, the only place I could be was in the hall, on the tier, in the cottage where I was housed. For everything you had to be right there at that complex.

After the first year I had to do a psychological evaluation, so that they could determine how they should handle you. The psychologist that I had to see decided that I didn’t have to do all those little stupid tests, putting blocks together, etc. He asked a bunch of questions and then he said that he understood my political “beliefs”; at least how determined I was and stuff
like that. And then he wrote this paper saying that I believed wholeheartedly in the movement and that I was adamant about that, but I would not be a disciplinary problem if they called me by my Islamic name and dealt with me in a respectful manner and then he called me “paranoid” (laughs)—that I believed that people were out to get me. But he did say that I had no need for rehabilitation—rehabilitate from what, anyway. So he told them that they had to call me by my Islamic name or Ms. Bukhari and there will be no problems. But if they tried to deal with me in any other manner, then they did have a problem with me. And that was the psychological evaluation.

Anyway, after almost two years exactly, I escaped. It was New Year’s Eve, 1976. And the escape was really for two reasons. First, I just believed as a prisoner of war that a prisoner of war’s responsibility is to escape. So, from the very beginning we took the position that we were prisoners of war, and at the time of our capture we were soldiers in the Black Liberation Army. We gave a name, rank and serial number only and invoked that the court had no jurisdiction to try us. Therefore, on that premise alone, the prisons had no jurisdiction over us and it is our responsibility as prisoners of war to escape—on that level I escaped. That was one of the reasons.

The other reason—one of the reasons why I was going South in the first place prior to the capture—was because I had medical problems and I needed surgery. At the time of the capture I made known to them that I needed to have surgery. They kept telling me that when I went over to the state custody it would be handled then. When I got to the prison they told me—after the examination—that I had fibroids the size of oranges or grapefruits in my uterus and asked me how much time I had. I told them I had 40 years. They then told me to come back in 10 years. I filed suit. The court said that it was just a difference of opinion between me and the doctor about how the medical treatment should be handled. I had asked to be able to pay for my own medical care, to have a doctor from the outside, etc. And they said no.

The month before my escape I started hemorrhaging so badly that at the time of my escape I was wearing three big sanitary napkins. And I would have to change them every two hours. I was having my menstrual cycle for two weeks at the time, every other week. I was just bleeding horrendously. That day, when I made the decision that I couldn’t wait any longer to get medical care I was standing up in the middle of the floor in the unit where I was housed and all of a sudden—I mean nothing special happened—I just started hemorrhaging from the vagina. And I went to the clinic hall in the
institution and they gave me Urgatrade, that was a medication to control
the bleeding and told me to go and put my feet up. That was the extent of
it—there was no recommendation to take me to a doctor, to the hospital or
anything. I just felt that they were not concerned about my health at all.

The doctor at the institution was not qualified to deal with women. And
he had been so bad that in once case, for example, he had diagnosed just
a sore throat when a woman had cancer. This other woman had one ovary
left and he told her she had tumors on her right ovary—she didn’t have any
right ovary. There was no way that you could have faith in the competency
of this doctor. So, when they told me about this Urgatrade for the control
of the bleeding and go and put my feet up, I decided that I had to make
arrangements to take care of my own medical care.

Those of us who were in the BLA and who were incarcerated, we had a
secure communication channel, so that we were still involved in what we
called consolidation, organizing, structuring and stuff like that. I was in
charge of Area 2 of the consolidation work in the unit and for the country.
And as being in charge of Area 2, I was responsible for all the consolidation
work in that area around BLA and BPP members and outside, building the
whole network in that area. My second was Mark Holder who was in prison
at Marion, and he was responsible for that area. So, between the two of us
we had the whole Southern regional area of the East Coast in terms of our
organizing efforts. Even while we were in prison, mind you...

Part of the CC, the Central Committee of the BLA, were on the streets.
There were also members of the CC who were in prison and some were
underground.

When I made the decision to escape I notified through secure channels
the Central Committee that I was making a move. I notified my area
coordinator and I notified the people in the area who needed to know that I
was not going to be where they thought I was going to be. The night of the
actual escape, we left and we made contact with the underground, and I was
out roughly two months. I was captured on February 27, 1977, and returned
to prison in Virginia and went to trial where I was my own attorney at this
point.

During the course of the trial I raised the issue of inadequate medical
care and I pleaded not guilty for reason of “duress and necessity”—that in
order to save my own life I had to escape because of the medical conditions.
That was also a way of raising the lack of adequate medical care for the
women in the prison itself. The jury was very sympathetic and in the town a
lot of the correctional officers and the head nurse for the correctional facility were very sympathetic because they knew this man was not qualified; that people in the town where the prison was located would not use him for anything. The only place he could practise was in the women’s institution, because nobody would allow him to practise on them. So during the course of the trial this was brought out.

By the time the trial was over, the judge had to threaten the jury with contempt charges if they didn’t find me guilty, because he said escape is like murder. And so they found me guilty of escape and they sentenced me to the minimum time which was one year. I was already doing 40 years, so one year didn’t make a difference. And the jury stood outside the courtroom and apologized when I was going out ... (laughs). The upshot of it was that I was given a choice at that point about doctors—they picked three doctors outside who were not part of the prison system. And they took me to a hospital in Richmond, Virginia, and I picked a woman doctor and we talked about it and they did the examination. By this time it was two years after going into prison, my condition had worsened to the point where they said there were strings all across that had pulled my uterus, the tubes and the ovaries all together. And Wanda said—my doctor’s name was Wanda too—that she would do everything possible to save something, but it would be a major piece of surgery. The upshot was that I ended up having a hysterectomy and that I have only one ovary left—and it’s because of the malpractice of that doctor.

I suffered severe post-partum [sic] depression. For whole year I was out of it. I was still in maximum security segregation for the escape. I spent three years and seven months in maximum security segregation—that was the longest time anyone ever did for escape; before that the maximum for escape was six months in maximum security segregation. I had to go to court to come out of it and the court ordered me out of it at the end of the three years and seven months. They had to phase me out. But during the course of the trial the Warden said that I was a threat to the security of the free world if they released me from maximum security segregation. For a minute there I thought I was Russian (laughs)...

Anyway, I came out of maximum security segregation in 1981. After I came out of maximum security segregation we founded a little organization in prisons called “Mothers Inside Loving Kids” for people with a long time, to try to bridge that gap between the children and so that they can keep their
family and that continuity with their children going. And then I made parole in 1983, and in August 1983 I was already free.

**Q: Did they give you conditions for parole?**

Yeah. I wasn’t supposed to associate with anybody—I wasn’t supposed to associate with folks. I wasn’t supposed to ever have a gun in my hands again. I wasn’t supposed to associate with any BLA or Panthers or anything like that. They asked me questions like: “Do you believe in violence or would you do what you did again?” And I told them that based on the conditions—no right-thinking person believes in violence for the sake of violence. But there are certain instances when you have no alternative, when you have exhausted everything else—then you have to resort to violence. And then they asked me: “Would I deal with things the same way again?” And I told them, no, I wouldn’t do it particularly that way, because one of the things that is very clear is that we haven’t done the necessary education and organizational work in the streets in order to deal with a movement in the ways that we moved then. We were young, we were idealistic and we were impatient.

We have to build a foundation. And we have to organize not just 30,000 people. This country has almost 300 million people in it. And a lot of people in the rural areas, and even in some of the major cities and in the suburbs, don’t even know anything is happening because they are not exposed to the conditions—they just don’t know about it. It’s like when we talk about Mumia’s situation—people have never even heard his name—and we are talking about a major situation.

So, the educational phase has to be so that when you move from one level to the next in the struggle, that it is understood that the people know what we are doing. And you lay the foundation to the point where you are not leading the people to a slaughter. And they talked about not being around people who were in the BLA and the BPP and convicted felons. And I told them that it isn’t possible to live in the Black community and not be around convicted felons. To say that I won’t do that I’d be lying to you.

And the other part is that these people of the BPP and the BLA are not just comrades, they are my family. And to tell me that I cannot associate with my family is something I will not accept. So I told them if you give me parole be clear about the fact that I am going to associate with my family. (laughs) And I did from day one when I was walking out of the prison. I was shocked—everyone was shocked—that I made parole. (laughs) The
consistence was that the state of Virginia just wanted to get rid of me because it was costing them too much money lately.

The only times I did a law suit against them was when they pushed me to the point where I had no other choice but to file a suit against them. At the last when I left the prison in Virginia they had just written the first infraction ticket that I had since my escape. I was on work release and they had written the ticket because I went outside on the ground of the place where I worked at to sit down to eat lunch on the bench. And the woman who was in charge of the house, the workpolice, wrote the ticket—she was already crazy about the fact that I was a Muslim and she was a Christian and she thought that everybody in the house should be Christian.

And I didn’t eat pork, and how could you be Black in the South without eating pork? She was really ridiculous with “this is my house” and this is a prison. But when she gave me the ticket, she confined me to the house, and the only thing I could come out for were meals. I didn’t mind because at this point I had already made parole, I was just waiting for the date. But at the same time I didn’t like that she had denied me religious freedom.

And I filed a law suit—I told her the next time she will talk to me, talk to my lawyer. I made parole and came home and the suit was still pending. Then I got a call from the lawyer to tell me that they had settled; they had fired her, they had settled the lawsuit and I hadn’t even asked for damages ... I just wanted them to tell her that this was not her house and she couldn’t run it as if it were her house and that she couldn’t dictate what religion people could be ... I just wanted to tell her that. Because other women were scared to say anything because she was threatening to take their rights and privileges and they were not ready to deal with that. And I just didn’t think that these people should get away with running their own little prisons.

Anyway, I didn’t mean for her to get fired, because she was the only Black woman in that position. But she got herself into a position that there was nothing to do but to deal with it. And anyway, they gave me money damages and fired her.

Q: Can you talk about how it was to be the only woman unit leader underground?

(laughs) Sexism is, regardless of how political you are—in the United States sexism is part of the culture of the US and this is a sexist society.

In the Black Liberation movement sexism is a strong factor not only because of the sexist society in America, but because of the African culture
itself, sexism is there. And it’s there in the black culture, because of the denial of their manhood in the deculturation and acculturation that came with slavery and everything else. When the Black Power movement came into being in the 1960s and even through the Garveyites (Marcus Garvey—Black nationalist leader in the 1920s and 1930s with a strong slogan “Back to Africa”), the Garvey movement and the Nation of Islam and all other movements prior to that, there was a search for their manhood. You know, “Rise up you mighty Black men”, Garvey said, or in the BPP the slogan was “Stand up to be Men” and so forth. So, in the Black Power movement and the cultural nationalist movement they were really blatant by saying that the place of women was in the kitchen or on their backs and having children for building the Nation and so on.

One of the things that had developed in the Panther Party and in the BLA—for us, the BLA came out of the BPP because no Party member was allowed to join any armed force other than the Black Liberation Army—was the whole machismo thing. But at the same time there was an organizational position that was anti-sexist. But the individuals themselves still had a lot of sexism within. The Party only existed for about seven years ... there was never time. You had a cultural thing that never did have time to be dealt with.

So all the “leaders” [were men], even though Kathleen Cleaver was on the Central Committee, she was just there, a figure-head mostly on the CC. She was Eldridge Cleaver’s wife. So her role was not as a Communications Secretary in the sense that she was viable and working ahead, having an independent voice. Her role was that of—since she was married to Eldridge Cleaver and he was Minister of Information, the Communication Secretary. And women were still viewed more or less as secretaries. There were a few of us on the political front and at political stands and doing the same work. We were basically doing the same work in the BPP. There were a few of us who not only would do the same work, but [also] would not accept the sexism.

And in the years when I joined the party in 1969, one of the things I tried to make clear was that I did not come into the Party to become somebody’s sexual toy. If I wanted to do that I could do it outside of the BPP. Also, I was in my second year at college when I joined the Party—I had already made determinations. I was raised in a family of six brothers and endless uncles ... and my mother was very strong. So there was always that leadership position.
And when I made the determination that I was going underground, it was a determination that was based on knowing that this was the next step, this is what I wanted to do. And I had the experience of the collectives that I worked with. First it was the “Harriet Tubman Brigade”—their sole responsibility was to liberate POWs, and then it was the “Wretched of the Earth”—and we still wanted the liberation of the POWs. We saw ourselves as a collective in the sense of a collective. There were no real unit coordinators in those years.

By the time the Amistad Collective came together we decided that we wanted to organize it. We wanted responsibilities and discipline whereas a lot of other units did not have that organization. We wanted to set a pattern. We had elections based on qualifications. Qualifications and not sexuality decided who got what position. We had political education classes and we had everything—we even had “r and r” (rest and relaxation) because we found it was necessary that you had time to rest and recuperate.

Having the responsibility of a unit coordinator was more like keeping it all together and trying to make sure that decisions were not made on an emotional basis, that we looked at everything objectively in making those decisions. And making sure that there was a distribution of the work that didn’t see the women in the cell doing the “female” work and being seen as sex objects in the cells. That didn’t develop so we were able to maintain a position in our cell that we were comrades. We were comrades, we respected each other’s individuality and each other’s capabilities and we had the discipline that we didn’t violate [the] “no drug” rule and not being intoxicated while carrying out our business and stuff like that. That was a very bad part of the movement, in the underground also, that developed in this country.

We had analyzed these things prior to us forming a cell. I think, that’s one of the things that came with being a female unit coordinator—it’s because women have a practical, a more practical approach to things than men do. (laughs). And that’s what I think made our cell different. Even though I was captured and my co-defendant was captured and the other unit member was killed—our unit was made up of 8 people—no one else ever got captured who was in our unit. And the person who talked, who allowed us to be captured, was eventually dealt with, so the person was incapable to put anybody else in the position to be captured. You know, my co-defendant was captured and a woman was killed and I was captured, but 5 other people survived it and were capable of moving.
And even though I didn’t particularly like being in prison, we were able to do work. And during the course of the trial, we were able to educate the community. The community was the support network that we had, and even when it came down to the escapes and everything else that happened in Virginia during that time, the people were there because the unit was able to continue to do the work and put the thing together.

_Q: What happened to your co-defendant?_

He’s out. He’s in Chicago. Yeah, after I got out first, the work to get him out was a thing that we continued. I carried it on, because one of the things I told people is that I was out, but as long as he was in, I really wasn’t out yet, you know. And that’s the kind of cohesiveness that we maintained. Because in a lot of other cases people who were co-defendants came out and they went on about their business and forgot about their co-defendants, the people that went in with them, and I think on that end our unit set a very good example, that we didn’t just walk away from the situation.

_Q: And how was it for you—you already had your child before you went underground?_

Yes, she was four years old when I went underground. Her father was killed during the split in the party. There were two casualties directly involved in the split. That was Robert Webb and Sam Napier on the East Coast, on the New York side of the split. Robert Webb, who is my daughter’s father, had been a bodyguard to Huey Newton. And when the split went down, because he surfaced—he had been underground—he was a liability for them. He was ordered assassinated by crews from that end.

In retaliation, people from the outside assassinated [Sam Napier]. The fratricide was the most ... the police just sat back and laughed; their thing was they didn’t have to get Panthers, the Panthers kill each other. That was a very crucial time for a lot of us. And when we look back at it—Sam was a loss to the movement itself because he was the circulation manager of the paper. And he lived and died for the paper. And Robert was a loss—just personally he was a loss, because of our relationship, but politically he was a loss, because he knew how to put together an apparatus. He had been in the armed forces of the US, he had come out and he was working for the liberation of our people. He had the information and the connections in order to do it; and he had the security mind—he was Deputy Field Marshal in the BPP. Anyway, at the time just before the split, my mother had taken custody
of my daughter. I let her go and stay with my mother. And when Robert came back, we had intentions at that point to go back from the underground to get Wanda, my daughter—I named her Wanda too (laughs)—and to bring her back to stay with us and then he got killed, so it was very appropriate that she stayed with my mother. So, she stayed there and I would go and see her.

Robert was dead and I was in a very insecure position. By the time 1974 came around I already had the $10,000 contract on me, I had the Grand Jury subpoena and I had been busted in November 1973 for the other things. So I called my mother up and I told her that I wanted her to keep my daughter. And I signed guardianship over to her. One of the things the state was trying to do was to take Panther children away from their parents because they were unfit parents, etc. I didn’t want to take a chance, so I signed legal guardianship over to my mother. And I made arrangements for her schooling and everything else, and I went underground.

When I got captured, I could still see her and I had a lot of dealings with her schooling, etc. But even at that point, when the state found out about her they tried to take her, at one point just tried to kidnap her and use her for leverage against me to make me talk while I was in prison. In a lot of cases I would just call and make sure that my mother didn’t let her go with strangers or someone. One time this woman came by the house and told my mother that she will bring toys for Wanda, she will come and visit and stuff like that, told my mother that she was one of my best friends, and I had told her that Wanda could come spend the weekend with her. And it just so happened that that particular weekend I called home and Momma told me about it, and I told her that I had never heard that woman’s name before in my life. It was incidents like these that made us decide that she could go nowhere by herself, that she had to be taken to school and be picked up from school, and she couldn’t be allowed to just have a normal life really, because they were at the point where they were using children to get information from the parents. So it was very hard to do time in prison knowing that my daughter was the target for a whole lot of things.

Q: Did she understand what was happening?

She never understood. On a lot of levels she was angry because she thought my being in prison was an abandonment of her. And then she never really understood why she had to be kept under such strict surveillance or control. And even now, I tell her now it hasn’t really changed. I mean, I will
get messages where someone has seen her here or doing this. There is no place that she can go that people don’t know that she is my daughter, and so she has to watch herself very carefully about what she does and where she is and stuff like that.

Q: When we first started learning about the Black Panther Party and the BLA, the only woman’s name that was mentioned was Assata and no one else. Why is that?

That’s because of the media stuff. (laughs) I think the reason why you hear so much about Assata is basically because in 1973 with the shoot-out and everything that happened, the publicity was very high. So the media when they were looking for her, they called her the “soul of the BLA” and stuff like that. It was a lot of media hype and people have a tendency to deal with the media....

You know, she has survived a lot, she has learned a lot and she has studied and she has developed. And I think on that end too, I have a real problem with the fact that people deal with Assata and there are a lot of other people out there in exile that no one ever mentions.

And then you have a bunch of them in various places that nobody knows their names. And that really works with me, because we have a tendency to build superstars and the superstars get the play. And the soldiers in the rank and file and the workhorses, whose names were never known, they languish on their own. That is not the way you build movements, if you don’t support the people in your movements who made the sacrifices then what incentive is there to anybody else to get involved. I have a real problem with that.

You know the names of Dhoruba Bin-Wahad, or Geronimo Ji-Jaga Pratt and the New York Three, but all the other ones who are languishing in the prisons sit there with no attorneys, no nothing and no one knows their names. You can mention their names, and it goes in one ear and out the other. A lot of times they have no commissary, they don’t get visits, not even from their families do they get visits. But the families that weren’t involved in the struggles that they’re in prison for, they didn’t make the commitments. But the people who were involved in those struggles with them, they don’t even remember the names anymore.

Do you see anyone out there right now who is trying to rebuild the contacts with those comrades? It seems there are so many who need to come out just on the case that they’ve been involved in the struggle.
Well, that’s one of the reasons why we do the “New York Three Freedom Campaign Newsletter”, we mention those people every time we get information about them, where they are and their cases, what’s happening with them, we try to bring it up and build networking for different struggles around different political prisoners. We try and educate the people to get involved, educate them about the rank and file. And we try not to get involved with the personality cult, and deal with the whole issue of support for political prisoners rather than support for an individual political prisoner.

And even dealing with the brothers inside right now—because it’s predominantly brothers who are inside, except for the MOVE prisoners and white anti-imperialists, there are more brothers; in the Black movement there are basically men who were involved at that time, especially Panthers and BLA members—to cross those boundaries and deal with the whole issue of political prisoners. They are pushing that now, too, that they went into prison as members of organizations and that they should be dealt with as members of organizations rather than as individuals.

There is a lot of work that has to be done—attorneys have to be found and our responsibility to ourselves is in building that foundation, because all of that is building foundations.

When you get involved in movements there should be a legal defense fund set up consistently and be there. So when a bust goes down, there is an attorney available for the incarcerated comrade. There should be no question about having to raise defense money. It should be there. By the same token there should be a mechanism to liberate political prisoners. So, that if there is nothing to be won through the courts, there is an alternative already in place.

And for those that have done their time, there should be a fund or something set up for them. I know after eight years and eight months there was a lot of psychological damage done to me personally in the time that I spent in prison. There has to be a mechanism set up so you have time to cool out and deprogram. Because that’s what time in prison is—it’s a time of programming. And so you have to be de-programmed. And after almost nine years, it happened to me then ... and those people who have done 15 and 17 and 20 or more years, they need it much more than I did—you know, to train them for things. And we don’t have those mechanisms in place.

So when I talk about the foundations that we need to build for the struggle in this country, we talk about the basic, elementary foundations to fill a
military apparatus and a political struggle. On the political level, we need to have our own communication centers, so we don’t have to keep worrying and wondering about how we get information printed or how we are going to get this done or that done. Right now we should have the people with the necessary skills to put information out from the radio and television. And we have not pulled that together.

Q: This foundation, do you see it coming from people like yourself and people with a history in the BPP, or do you think there is that whole new generation that starts that on their own, or does the Nation of Islam do it? Who does it right now?

I don’t see it coming from the Nation of Islam. I don’t see it coming from any organized formation that is in existence at this point. Because there is a whole new level of thinking, a kind of way of thinking, that has to be developed. I think there are people within all those structures who have the innovative ideas and who have the foresight and who are capable of putting things together that are necessary and do it. But the question is whether or not they really know what they want.

There are a lot of times when we get thrown back in our community. In the years between elections our people see how bad the situation is and they get disenchanted with the elections and there comes along somebody saying all you have to do is to change the administration and things will be better. So they fall back into the same thing. Or you start off with leaders who are strong and audacious and they’re revolutionary or they mouth revolutionary slogans and then they find that somebody offers them a piece of the pie and then they dilute their message. Like Sister Souljah recently, when she was busy talking about the need for a black army and so on, then Bill Clinton attacked her about her statement about white people, that she said black people should have a week of killing white people. And her first thing was that she never had a gun, that she never advocated violence. Her whole spiel watered down to the point that we should build our own independent political party and with a technological approach to the situation.

So, even though I am not equating her with the revolutionary leaders, I am saying at that point where you have a voice and once you get attacked or anything like that or you get offered an entree into areas where you maintain your position and you can make a difference in what’s happening, you find out it was all about “this is the best for me at this point” and the amount of dollars, and it becomes different. I think we have a history of that. We have
history of—when I made the door open for me, I am going through the door and then you forget about the persons on the other side.

So, I really think that this new movement is going to be a mixture of people from the old school whose minds are open enough to recognize that they are not the end, that people do not have to come to them before they can move forward. They don’t have the absolute answer. Because some people who were in the Party think that if it isn’t done the way the party was doing it, then it ain’t rational. But it ain’t true. The Party made a lot of mistakes too.

A lot of us inside talked about how there was a need to find new blood. And if we don’t find that new blood and learn from our mistakes and build on them and move forward, then there is no hope for the struggle in this country. And if we continue to try to hold on to it and say: this is my struggle and nobody else can determine how and in which direction it goes, and you can’t do this without permission from me or this is my territory and you can’t walk on my territory. With that game turf mentality we are defeating our own purpose. I think, one of the things we have to do is to consolidate a lot of these organizations and we haven’t done this because egos are in the way.

Egos are a very, very large part of why we have such fragmentation in this movement and we are now moving apart, not moving further. And if you look at the heads of these organizations—they are all men and they splinter off from each other and form little groups with about 30 people in them and they speak about the same constituency. We have to get past that.

What really gets me is that I hear the people saying that people are ready for this and people are ready for that and the same people who are ready for this and ready for that are the same people that they have been speaking to all the time and they haven’t educated anyone else. When you go outside a certain sector—you can’t even say all of Harlem knows what is going on. Just those people at that rally, or just those who listen to WLIB [NYC radio station] or just those people who call in might be ready. And they might be ready just to talk. And they are ready to do anything concrete. And then they assume just by listening to those few people that the masses are ready for armed struggle, which is not true. Because when you go out to the community, when I go to my mother’s house in Richmond Hill which is right here in Queens, I know they are not ready. But they travel in these little groups, call these little demonstrations and these people come and they think that they are ready for armed struggle—it’s not true.
A lot of these people would not even know—if armed struggle broke out today—where would they go, how should you deal with treating the wounded, how would you deal with keeping the police from busting down the doors.

So, what you need to do is make those people find a way to take victory from defeat. To turn it around and let people know that you don’t have to be a super-hero to be involved in the movement. But everyone wants people to believe that they’re such strong revolutionaries, that they never feel pain, they never cry, they never want to chuck it all and want to go up to the mountains and read a book or something. But it’s not true.

Jalil will tell you, with this New York Three case, I have been out of prison since 1983 and I have been on this case ever since, and on other cases and working on this and that. And sometimes I am going to say, I need a break, I am not going to do another day’s work on this. And I say that to them and I’m gone. And now, when I say that to them, they leave me alone for a couple of weeks and then they call back and say “are you OK now?”. (laughs) Because you are human, you need to do these things in order to continue to be strong enough to handle the struggle. But we want people to believe that we are superhuman. We are not like everyone else ... but we are. And we have to recognize that ourselves. And we need recharging. So, if I know that I am coming to the end of my rope, then I can take those precautions, so that I don’t fall a victim to the things that are out there.

Q: Is it really true that there has been no BLA since the 1980s?

Not actually since, I would say, 1977/78. And what makes it so bad is that the government knew that. The government knew at that point that there was no political BLA happening out there, whose reason for being there was strictly to wage political and armed struggle in this country, where it was basically the military apparatus of the BPP.

I think at some [time] when you are going to the point where you recognize that in order to build a new movement that you have to expose the mistakes of the prior one, so that you don’t make those same mistakes again, that when you get to that point then we will be ready to move forward again.

Q: What happened to the women, I mean the other women, who were not under so much repression. Did they go back?
A lot of them got involved in community programs, community-based work. A lot of us are in touch with each other when we do stuff around the different cases, etc. The women do the majority of that work from one end of the country to the other. Women are raising the children and making sure that they get the education, taking care of the families of the political prisoners, just surviving themselves, because they have been the victims of a lot of these conditions. And now they are educating the youth—in the schools, colleges, universities. So they are continuing the work through the community organizations, like homeless shelters, children’s programs, etc. And when we move from one point to the other we are in touch. And we talk about the women getting together and doing what needs to be done. (laughs) We are starting to write books, we are doing more political speaking.

Q: It reminds me of a visit by a women comrade from the Tupamaros who came to the FRG in April, who described a similar development in Uruguay where the women are doing the community work and the men are mostly involved in the strategy discussions.

Because the real work is done by the women on a lot of occasions. The whole theory thing and sitting back and doing the armchair theory end—that ain’t giving anything to the children, it’s not educating them, that ain’t keeping them out of prison, it’s not doing that. And we have to keep our feet on the ground and keep moving and keep them alive while we build the movement.

Q: You said that you are involved with Islam. Does it interfere with your work at all?

I became a Muslim before I went into prison. I became a Muslim in 1971. It is in the Quran that it is incumbent upon a Muslim to wage a struggle against tyranny and oppression wherever it may be found. That gave me the license to be a revolutionary and a Muslim at the same time.

And I take it to the extreme, to the extreme I think it is meant to be taken, that a true Muslim will not sit idly by and allow tyranny and oppression in whatever form to happen without waging struggle against it. So, I see no contradiction between being Muslim and a revolutionary. I see a contradiction in the way that Islam is practised in the world. I remember that when I was captured in Virginia, the Islamic community sent a representative to see me and told me that they would not support me as long as I did not veer my
case from my co-defendant’s case. There was something totally wrong with them taking a position like that.

I know I came in a lot of conflict with people who thought because I was a woman and a Muslim that I shouldn’t do this and shouldn’t do that. And when someone is asking about my political beliefs and affiliations and how it’s not according to the Quran, I refer right back to Sura 23.

Q: Well, I think in Europe we hear very little about the revolutionary writings in the Quran.

Well, that’s because they don’t want to do anything. The Muslims even here—for them it’s a way of separating themselves from society without taking on society. So they become different and say they are not governed by the laws, etc.

The worst thing that has ever happened is having four wives. It isn’t based on Islam, Islam is explained by men in the religion. And the women don’t read the Quran for themselves, so they are victimized by Islam. So, they don’t understand that the men cannot have four wives without the permission of the woman, you know. (laughs) So, if she doesn’t go along with it, it ain’t happening. That in order to have four wives, they have to be taken care of economically, psychologically, physically and spiritually. And I mean, I don’t know too many men who can deal with more than one woman and take care of her. (laughs) And that’s the case, and then there shouldn’t be four wives happening anyway. But these men get the women, put them on welfare and call themselves Muslims they have no understanding for themselves for they have never read the Quran.

Q: Do you want to add something to the interview?

Yes, I just want to reiterate the fact that everyone of us has weaknesses. So, the weakness that people fell into after the “leadership of the movement” went to prison or were wiped out—which you had left was a lot of people who could not function without organization. The organizations were destroyed, they were out there by themselves and then they got caught up in a lot of negative stuff.

Q: Actually, I have one more question. Do you feel you can work at all with what’s left of the white feminist movement or the white women’s movement? Is there any kind of working relationship or do you just say they don’t have a revolutionary program and so you can’t work with them?
It depends. I think in the beginning of the feminist movement in this country it was fairly progressive. Now the feminist movement in this country has just as many right wing elements as you have revolutionary elements. As a matter of fact, I would say the right wing elements outnumber the revolutionary elements in the feminist movement in the US.

And not just in the white feminist movement, but in the Black/Third World feminist movement also. Sometimes I think that they equate their individual issues with revolutionary struggle, which is not one and the same.

And even with the lesbian and gay community’s struggle in this country—a lot of them are just as conservative as their counterparts in the heterosexual community. And they don’t understand that the issue of sexuality itself is not a revolutionary issue. A lot of people don’t see the difference. They don’t see that that is not a revolutionary issue and that it is not an issue that you can impose and make it an issue of the Black Liberation movement.

When I address the issue of oppression based on sexuality, I make clear that oppression in and of itself, regardless of what reason you oppress people, is wrong. So, to oppress a person because of their sexuality, that in itself is something that we can’t contend … with.

Now, once you get past that, then it’s your personal choice. And I think that it doesn’t fall on the level of racism or class oppression.

And then dealing with the feminist movement they have the question of reproductive rights or pro-choice, choice, and no choice. That is a movement by itself. On the Left, we take the position that a person’s body is their own; that there is a choice that they should make about themselves.

But when you get to the big question, you got just as many cops, female cops, and female judges, and female prosecuting attorneys and oppressive forces who are pro-choice and anything else. So, being pro-choice is not a revolutionary position. And so you can’t continue to equate and allow ourselves to be put in a position that we get dictated to by people who are in one issue forces.

Safiya Bukhari (formerly known as Bernice Jones) was a dedicated community activist and former political prisoner. She joined the Black Panther Party in November, 1969. She and other activists formed the “National Committee to Defend Political Prisoners”. Even as a member
Safiya became a citizen of the Republic of New Afrika and took on Islam as her religion and found great strength in the spirituality it embodied.

In 1974, Safiya was subpoenaed to testify before a grand jury in a case against the Black Liberation Army. She refused to testify and went underground, joining the ranks of the BLA. In January 1975, she was captured, convicted and sentenced to 40 years. On December 21, 1976, Safiya escaped from the Virginia Correctional Centre for Women. She was re-captured on February 21, 1977 and returned to prison. On August 22, 1983, she made parole. Following her release, Safiya worked on the cases of political prisoners, including the New York Three and Mumia Abu-Jamal. By 1998, she along with others founded the “Jericho Amnesty Movement” to free all political prisoners. Safiya died on August 24, 2003 at age 53.

Safiya’s exemplary life and spirit will be a shining light for us for decades to come.

**Safiya’s work and related documents:**

- Safiya: Lioness for Liberation, by Mumia Abu-Jamal
- Tribute to Safiya on her passing, from the NYC Free Mumia Abu-Jamal Coalition
- Reminiscence of Safiya Bukhari from the Provisional Government, Republic of New Afrika
- Tributes from Assata Shakur, Nehanda Abiodun, Sally O’Brien, and Yuri Kochiyama
- Defending Kamau Sadiki, Safiya’s last project
- Safiya Bukhari, "Coming of Age: A Black Revolutionary," Notes from a New Afrikan
My Prison Experiences and What Keeps Me Struggling

Sundiata Acoli

I am a 70 year old PP/POW and counting jail time i’ve spent 35 years, over half my life, in prison. Most were the highest security prisons in the state, Trenton State Prison, New Jersey, or the highest security prison in the country at the time, the federal penitentiary, USP Marion, Illinois. Other prisons i’ve done stretches at are USP Leavenworth, Kansas, followed by USP Allenwood at White Deer, Pennsylvania, where i’m presently held and have been for the last 12 years.

So i’ve seen prisons and i’ve seen many years behind bars. During my long sojourn, i’ve seen prisons change for the better and the worse, seen prisoners stand tall and prisoners sell out, and i’ve seen prisoners struggling in solidarity and at other times seen them apathetic, divided and demoralized.

In fact, i’ve just about seen it all: prison rebellions; takeovers; hostage-taking; lockdowns; guard brutality and atrocities; racial wars and gang wars; escapes and attempts; guards killing prisoners and prisoners killing guards; prison rights struggles that won significant gains in the 1960s and 1970s, government retrenchment in the 1980s and 1990s, and the turn of the century that retook most of the earlier won benefits; the rise of AIDS; rats and confidential informants; prison overcrowding; prison building sprees and the prison industrial complex (PIC); parole boards and the abolishment of parole boards. In a word, there isn’t much about prison and prison struggles that i haven’t seen.

And what have i learned in all these years of prison and struggles seen? i’ve learned that prison struggle, like all struggle, is cyclic; it ebbs and flows and will rise again.

As it is outside, so it is inside. The source of the problem has not been resolved, so it’s only a matter of time, of rebuilding, regrouping and regrowing another generation until the struggle intensifies again, inside and out.

And now, what keeps me struggling after all these years? Well, i’m a revolutionary, and struggle is what i do. When i joined the Black Panther Party and stepped upon the path of revolution, i knew that the likely outcome would be prison or death, with freedom in my lifetime only a slim possibility. And i know that some of my comrades of the time were of a similar mindset.

We took Malcolm’s dictum to heart; hell, we didn’t care about odds. We knew our cause was right, and we wanted to fight! For our people, for
ourselves, for others oppressed, those long dead and the ones unborn—and we did!

It felt and feels good to fight! How could it not feel good to fight someone who’s had his foot on your neck, your momma’s neck, your people’s neck and other oppressed people’s neck for 500, 1,000, 2,000 years and more? And he still has his foot on our necks. I know he still has his foot on my neck, and I know the struggle is going to intensify, inside and out, and I know that one day we will win—so I keep struggling.

Sundiata Acoli, formerly known as Clark Squire, is a New Afrikan POW. He is imprisoned for actions carried out in the fight for Black Liberation. In 1968 Sundiata joined the Harlem branch of the Black Panther Party (BPP) and did work around the issues of education, housing, employment, child care, drugs and police brutality in the oppressed community. In 1969 he was imprisoned with 13 others in what was known as the Panther 21 case for charges motivated by community work. Held for two years without bail, the Panther 21 were acquitted and Sundiata was released in 1971. Upon being released, Sundiata was harassed, provoked and followed by the FBI until it was impossible to do effective community work. He then joined the Black underground with the Black Liberation Army (BLA). In May 1973 Sundiata, with Zayd Malik Shakur and Assata Shakur, were ambushed on the NJ Turnpike by state troopers. Zayd was murdered by the police, Assata critically wounded. In the shootout a trooper was killed. Sundiata escaped this incident but was captured shortly after and is now serving a life plus 30 year sentence for the killing of the state trooper.

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Neutralize and Destroy:  
The Continuing Vendetta Against the Panthers*  
Larry Pinkney and Gerald Sanders

INTRODUCTION

Perhaps no single political organization in modern US history still evokes more joy, pride, hope and debate in the hearts and minds of people than the Black Panther Party, a revolutionary, community-based, national Black political organization founded in October of 1966, which by the end of the 20th century had been physically decimated nation-wide. The Black Panthers had been “neutralized and destroyed”. Nevertheless, the ideas and programs of the Black Panther Party, for one breathless historical moment, actually shook the very foundations of the most powerful nation in the world: the United States of America. Indeed, although ultimately physically destroyed, many of the ideas and programs initiated by the Black Panther Party (BPP) survived its brutal physical decimation well into the 21st century.¹

Now, in the 21st century, the principles and goals of the Black Panther Party’s Ten Point Platform and Program² remain of enormous and increasing relevance. Thus, despite the fact that the BPP was ruthlessly destroyed, its activities callously “disrupted”, many of its members viciously framed, forced into exile, railroaded to prison and/or murdered, the United States government has been incapable of destroying the ideas, hopes and aspirations of the BPP. Like the phoenix that rose from the ashes, the ideas and hopes of the BPP for Black liberation and self-determination have refused to die and continue to take root. Therefore, former members of the BPP and its very legacy are today deemed by the United States government and its many repressive forces to be a threat that is to be totally eliminated.

Our message, we believe, is a timely one, and it is hoped that you, the reader, will find our perspectives informative, important and urgent, not merely because we are both former BPP members, but because our own individual experiences in the Party started separately, from different coasts, merging in the 21st century to take up the clarion call alerting our communities to the methodical and intensifying nation-wide vendetta by the US government and its repressive agencies against the BPP, its true legacy and the Black communities from which we sprang.

Today, the situation is both urgent and critical. The sustained government vendetta against former members of the BPP and its very legacy is in reality

* This article is part of a series.
an attack against Black people nation-wide and is intended to frighten Black people into submission. This must be understood precisely for what it is.

**HOW THE VENDETTA IS BEING CARRIED OUT**

The American Heritage Dictionary defines the “vendetta” as being act(s) or an attitude “motivated by vengeance [revenge]”. With the founding of the BPP in October of 1966, young Black people made a commitment to obtaining human rights that the US government deemed then, and deems now, to be “revolutionary”, including the right of Black people “to determine the destiny of our Black community” [self determination], the right to “an immediate end to police brutality”, the right to “full employment”, and the right to “land, bread, housing, education, clothing, justice and peace” (from the Ten-Point Program of the Black Panther Party, see back cover of this issue).

That the BPP demonstrated the audacity to demand these so-called “revolutionary” rights prompted then FBI Chief J. Edgar Hoover, in outlining the theme of the now infamous COINTELPRO (Counter-Intelligence Program) activities against the BPP, to declare that, “The Negro youth and moderate[s] must be made to understand that if they succumb to revolutionary teachings, they will be dead revolutionaries”.

Moreover, the BPP was scandalously labeled as “public enemy number one” and dubbed “the greatest threat to internal [US] security.” Thus began the ongoing vendetta against the BPP.

The very idea of Black people insisting upon economic, social and political justice was, in 1966 and remains today, unacceptable to the United States government and is therefore viewed as justification enough in America for taking revenge against Black people in general and former members of the BPP in particular.

The reality of extended and extensive racist vendettas against Black people is not a new phenomenon. Indeed, to this very day, the governments of the United States and Canada, in conjunction with certain European governments, harbor an active and bloody vendetta against the Black people of the island nation of Haiti, which dates back at least to the early 1800s when, during the Haitian Revolution, Black slaves under the leadership of former carriage driver and slave Toussaint L’Ouverture confounded and militarily defeated the European colonial nations of England, Spain and ultimately France and in so doing, inspired Black slaves to revolt in both North and South America.³
The active vendetta by the United States government against former members of the BPP and the concomitant distortion of its true legacy is a sustained campaign of officially sanctioned, government-sponsored terror to exact revenge and destroy every vestige of the will of Black people in America in their ongoing struggle to obtain full human rights.

Individual acts of police brutality or judicial tyranny are often ascribed to obsessive mad dog behavior of this cop or that bureaucrat. But a series of these oppressive acts, begun at a specific time and carried out relentlessly through every US presidential or administrative regime, be it Democratic or Republican, clearly proves a conscious, systematic vendetta against the BPP. Out of hundreds of reported murders of members of the BPP by the police or other agents of US government repression, of at least 295 FBI operations against Black organizations, a full 233 of them were directed against the BPP. Notwithstanding the physical decimation of the Party by the US government, this vendetta continues to the present against former BPP members.

One of the most common and on-going weapons in America’s vendetta against the Panthers is the use of wrongful imprisonment. Not satisfied with having physically decimated the BPP, having murdered or wrongfully railroaded its members to prison—some of whom are still imprisoned today—the US government and its many agents continue to harass former members of the BPP by attempting to have court indictments brought against them, seeking to discredit and intimidate them with bogus criminal allegations and/or threatening them or their family members with imprisonment.

**TORTURE THE AMERICAN WAY**

While demented politicians hypocritically claim that torture does not take place in America, it is clear that not only is torture routinely practised in the United States, but that “the use of sensory deprivation as a form of behavior modification” in fact “began as an experiment with political prisoners in this country”, including first and foremost with “members of the Black Panther Party”. Indeed, among other forms of physical and psychological torture, debilitating “sensory deprivation torture” is all too common in US prisons.4

Torture inside the United States itself has been, and continues to be, an integral part of the arsenal of weapons used by the government and its surrogates against the dissidents they repress. Torture is, in fact, as American as apple pie.
US state and federal authorities have no compunction whatsoever in viciously framing and using physical, psychological and emotional torture against its own citizens, especially Black people. Thus, it should come as no surprise that American authorities today are directly and indirectly using torture against persons around the world.

As will be discussed in more detail later in this series, some forms of torture routinely used by US authorities against US citizens and most particularly against Black people included and still include being stripped naked and beaten with blunt instruments, being blindfolded while having blankets of boiling water thrown onto their bodies, being slammed into walls while blindfolded, having electric probes placed on their genitals and other body parts, having an electric cattle prod and/or other objects forced into their anus and, of course, the more blatant favorite of police departments and other government agencies nation-wide, being repeatedly punched, kicked and in general viciously beaten.

These specific forms of torture and/or judicial harassment were in fact used against former BPP members as discussed at the February 26, 2006 collective presentation entitled “How the US destroyed the Black Panther Party and continues to persecute its veterans” by John Bowman, Ray Boudreaux, Hank Jones, Richard Brown and Harold Taylor in Oakland, California. Black people know that there is no real question about whether the US uses torture abroad, as we are the on-going victims of its torture against us right here “at home”.

In following segments, we shall delineate some specific examples of torture and on-going harassment in the vendetta against former members of the BPP today and the impact this has on Black people nation-wide. Also, we will delve into some methods to resist and possibly even reverse some of the effects of this continuing vendetta against former members of the BPP and the necessity on the part of Black women and men of all ages throughout the United States of America to stand firm against repression.

**NEUTRALIZE AND DESTROY: THE CONTINUING VENDETTA AGAINST THE PANTHERS**

Nothing had adequately prepared the BPP for the sustained, nation-wide, amoral, brutal onslaught unleashed against it by the US government and police. Despite the physical decimation of the BPP, these attacks upon Black Panther veterans and against the true legacy of the BPP continue in concert with corrupt and racist media.
NO BOUNDARIES, NO DECENCY, NO LIMITS

To really comprehend the extent to which the vendetta against BPP veterans continues today, it is important to realize that there are absolutely no boundaries, no decency and no limits to what tactics the US government and its surrogates have used and continue to use to crush—i.e., neutralize—Black political dissent in America.

For trying to better our conditions, Black organizations and their members are investigated, harassed, illegally railroaded to jail and many times beaten or killed.6

As politically active members of the BPP, young Black men and women were “instilled with discipline and determination” and “trained to think critically”; a fact which did not and has not escaped the insidious notice of the U.S. government.7 The racist, self-fulfilling fear on the part of US authorities that BPP veterans will serve to pass on “discipline”, “determination” and the art of “critical think(ing)” to yet another generation of young Black women and men is utterly terrifying to the white American establishment of today.

There can be no illusions as to the depths to which the US government and its surrogates have stooped and will continue to stoop in an effort to crush dissent and the legitimate political and economic aspirations of Black people collectively. Be clear about this: the vendetta against former members of the BPP is by no means limited to men. The BPP Party included many brilliant, determined, courageous, creative and utterly committed women. The fact is that the BPP could never have been viable without their integral and significant work, guidance and leadership. From Kathleen Cleaver to Assata Shakur, from Erica Huggins to Barbara Easley Cox, from Tarika Lewis to Safiya Bukhari to Elaine Brown, from Afeni Shakur (mother of the late rapper Tupac Shakur), the many “sisters” of the BPP Party nation-wide have incurred the spiteful ire of the US government and its surrogates for their service to Black people.

ASSATA SHAKUR

Former members of the BPP are today still held in US prisons or are under continuing judicial or police assault or are in forced exile outside of the
United States. Of those in exile, perhaps the most well-known is sister Assata Shakur. After having been critically wounded by New Jersey State Troopers and subsequently tortured in prison, former New York Black Panther Assata Shakur fled into exile in Cuba, where she was granted political asylum and remains to this day. She poignantly stated, concerning the media’s depiction of the BPP that “The press always reported that the police had ‘uncovered’ a large arsenal of weapons. Later, when the ‘arsenal’ turned out to be a few legally registered rifles and shotguns, the press never printed a word.”

The insidious complicity of the media with regard to disinformation, misinformation or no information was and remains self-evident.

Since April of 1995, when white supremacists committed the home-grown Oklahoma City terrorist bombing, killing 168 people and wounding and maiming numerous others, white supremacist home-grown terrorist organizations continue to run rampant in America and are coddled by a cynically racist US government and judicial system.

In stark contrast, on May 2, 2005, the US “Justice” Department, flaunting both international law and Cuban law, announced the posting of an outrageous one million dollar bounty on the head of Assata Shakur, who is living legally in Cuba. The bounty on Assata Shakur is reminiscent of the bounties on the heads of unco-operative escaped Black slaves. It is obvious that the US government intends to re-shackle or murder Assata Shakur as part of the continuing vendetta against the Panthers.

**MISSING THE FOREST FOR THE TREES**

What is often missed is the denial factor. The sustained viciousness of the US government towards Black people in general and former members of the BPP in particular may sometimes seem unfathomable. The insidious callousness of the counterintelligence program known as COINTELPRO, directed in large measure against the BPP, almost baffles the mind.

The response of J. Edgar Hoover’s Federal Bureau of Investigation, a ‘hard hitting’ national counterintelligence program (Cointelpro), was of surpassing ruthlessness in its contempt for law and the civil rights of citizens.

In coming segments pertaining to this continuing vendetta, we plan to delineate a number of cases including those of Mumia Abu-Jamal, The
Angola 3, Kamau Sadiki, Marshall “Eddie” Conway and others. The vendetta continues, but the resistance intensifies.

ENDNOTES


4 Kerness, Bonnie, “Prisons and Sensory Deprivation Torture” (American Friends Service Committee, 1997).

5 Bowman, John; Boudreaux, Ray; Jones, Hank; Brown, Richard; and Taylor, Harold, “How the US destroyed the Black Panther Party and continues to persecute its veterans” (San Francisco Bay View newspaper, December 21, 2005).

6 Black Panther Intercommunal News Service (October 21, 1972, p. 6.).

7 See http://www.itsabouttimebpp.com/Our_Stories/Chapter5/From_Larry_to_Brother_Billy_X.html.


10 See “The Fugitive, Why has the FBI placed a million dollar bounty on Assata Shakur?” by Kathleen Cleaver. http://www.itsabouttimebpp.com/Political_Prisoners/The_Fugitive_by_Sis_Kathleen_Cleaver.html.


Larry Pinkney is a veteran of the Black Panther Party, the former Minister of Interior of the Republic of New Africa, a former political prisoner and the only American to have successfully self-authored his civil/political rights case to the United Nations under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. E-mail him at Lecconsult@aol.com.

Gerald Sanders is also a Black Panther Party veteran, a member of the Labor Action Committee and a leader of the largest demonstration, thus far, in Oakland in support of Mumia Abu-Jamal. E-mail him at gsanders@jps.net.
Eda Levenson: I’m currently a freshman at UC Santa Cruz. For four years I have been in contact with a man who has spent the last thirty-two years of his life in prison. His name is Veronza Bowers, Jr. Before his incarceration, he was a member of the Black Panther Party during the Sixties. At twenty-six years old he was convicted of the murder of a Park Ranger—although the legitimacy of his trial is questionable, due to the lack of physical evidence and the reliability of the key witnesses. To this day, Veronza claims his innocence, and that the FBI framed him. He is currently being held in a federal penitentiary in Coleman, Florida. Last June, my family and I visited Veronza. This is the first time that any of us, including my father, who has known him for fifteen years, has seen Veronza in person. During our visit I brought up the idea of doing a telephone interview. After months of negotiation, and being denied once by the assistant warden of the prison, I was finally granted permission to interview Veronza over the phone. On September 11, 2002, I conducted the interview. Because of his circumstances we could only talk in fifteen minute segments, with fifteen minute breaks in between each one.

September 11, 2002: This call is from a federal prison. This is a pre-paid call. This call is from Veronza.

Veronza Bowers, Jr.: First, I want to thank you. Eda, and Dan, and everyone at the radio station KZYX and your listeners. This is such a great opportunity, because I recognize the fact that I don’t exist in a vacuum, and at the same time, I understand that it is a tremendous responsibility because people listen to what people say sometimes and our voices have been silent for a long, long time. So this is a great opportunity and I really do appreciate this opportunity, and I’ll try to let it flow.

Secondly, you might hear a lot of noise in the background. But it’s not really noise. It’s other human beings, just like I’m situated, and they are
Eda: I’m going to ask you to talk a bit about your personal background—where you grew up and went to school.

Veronza: I’ve given some thought about my childhood growing up. One thing about prison: it gives you an opportunity, if you take it, an opportunity to do a lot of reflecting upon your past.

I grew up in a little town in Oklahoma named McAlester—that’s where they have a big penitentiary—I grew up in a very, very small tight-knit community, at a time when things were a lot different. And reflecting on that, I grew up primarily with the influence of women, because my father was away in the army. My father, Veronza, he did twenty-five years in the U.S. Army. So my mother, Dorothy...

I’m glad you asked that question because in order to understand anything, you have to look at it in its totality, its connections—its historical connections, if you will. And growing up in this little town, surrounded by women as I was—because my grandmother had six children, five of them were women! and one son (we called him “Uncle Sonny”)—the little neighborhood that I grew up in, an all black neighborhood, we didn’t have any experience with racism directly. Or all the conflicts that result from that.

Looking back on it, you think about poverty and being poor and all of those things, but back then, it was just always a very, very good feeling. My great grandmother, Granny, was my first real teacher of our story (it’s called “history”). She was seven years old when slavery was abolished. She taught me a lot of things about that past. So my youth was very rich in tradition and stories. And I remember my grandmother (everybody called her “Bucker” but I called her “Grandma”), she was like the backbone of the Johnson/Larkins clan, and her word was law.

Growing up as a little boy like that, I learned [sic] to really listen to and appreciate the old people and what they had to say. Because they always were talking about “Life”—you know. That was a great joy for me to be able to sit around and listen to all those kinds of things.

And Mama was always “Mama”. With my father being away all the time, she gave so much strength and understanding of the world around me.
So, growing up in McAlester, Oklahoma—I was born in 1946 [the sound of many men in the background grows louder … Eda, listen to this: you hear them call chow? It will get quiet in a minute so I won’t have to speak so loud and so fast, maybe …] I’ve really come to the realization that when you start talking about the past, there’s so much that happened, so many memorable experiences that you could wander on and on and on.

**Eda:** Would you talk a little bit about what it was like to be segregated and discriminated against.

**Veronza:** Eda, I never understood what segregation meant and what racism meant, and I never heard the word “nigger” because, as I say, I grew up in a black community where there was a lot of love and concern about each other.

I went to a little school, named L’Ouverture High—but it was from the first to the twelfth grade. We had to catch a bus and cross a little canal to hop on the bus to go way, way across town. And there was a little school right up the street about two and a half blocks on a dirt road. It was a very nice red brick school. I came to find out later, it was a grade school to junior high. That’s where white people went to school. And I used to walk past it sometimes and look at it and wonder—what kind of teaching goes on in there that’s so much different?

Later on in life I found out L’Ouverture High was named after Toussaint L’Ouverture, the great liberator down there in Haiti. They’d never taught us anything about that.

But that little town, as small as it was, thought it was normal.

Like when we wanted to go to the movie theater. Back then you paid five or ten cents to go to the theater. They had three movie theaters in the whole town—the News, the Chief, and the Okla. The News was the one where we could go to. I always wondered why we couldn’t go to the other ones, but I didn’t ever question that. And when we did go, we had to sit up in the balcony, and it was only on Saturday or Sunday that we could go.

One time they had this movie called “The Ten Commandments”—I remember just like I’m looking at it. They closed the theater and let all the black communities in. Third ward, Fourth ward and Fifth ward (our communities were called “wards”). That was for two weeks. And once that was over and they figured everybody had seen “The Ten Commandments”
that were going to see it, they closed the movie theater down for another two weeks and fumigated the place, because we had been there.

Those experiences as a little boy—I would look at them then and wondering what all this was about. They still had the water fountains with signs: one water fountain said “Colored” and the other water fountain said “White”. I remember on a sunny day, my father picked me up (because I’m too small to step on the water pedal and drink at the same time) so he picked me up and the water is coming up, and I look over at the other water fountain—I could read too, by then—and at the other water fountain a little white boy’s father had him picked up. I’m looking at this water, and the water is sparkling because the sun is shining through the window, and when my father set me down I said, “Daddy, how come my water says ‘Colored’ and the other water says ‘White’ and they look both the same?” And I remember my father lifting me and he said “Boy, you’ll understand those things later on in life”. Those are the kind of little experiences, the accumulation of which, along with the lessons of my grandmother, that lead a little young mind like I had into questioning a lot of things that you see around you.

Eda: At what point did you became aware that because you were black you were being treated differently, and when did you realize you wanted to make a difference, and you wanted that to stop?

Veronza: You know, Eda, I don’t think it was a particular point. It was just an accumulation of my experiences growing up, particularly in McAlester, Oklahoma, and then later on in Omaha, Nebraska. I think it was just the accumulation, starting back from my real education by my great grandmother, and then watching the women with the welfare and all of that kind of stuff going on in the neighborhood.

Then one day they came up with the desegregation of schools (I think that was 1954, with the “Brown vs Board of Education” decision by the Supreme Court) and I starting gong to that little school two and a half blocks up the way, and that’s when I was called (to my knowledge) “nigger” for the first time.

Those kinds of things growing up. Becoming part of a wrestling team and going away to college. Being in the military, the US Navy for a short stint and going overseas in the Mediterranean. And along about that time
(by then I guess I’m about twenty years old or so), Brother Malcolm X came on the scene with the Nation of Islam and that whole movement towards recognizing what they called “Negroes” at that time, as black people, people of African descent—that we were actually somebody, that we were human beings and not just the doormat of the world.

And just listening—because I’ve always been a listener. I was raised that way—to listen to the old people, to listen to adults when they talk. And I took that listening and listened to a lot of things. And not just listened with my ears, but with my heart and feeling. And as I grew up and started looking around me, and I see what is considered poverty everywhere and that it is such a pervasive thing. Then going overseas and seeing how people live differently; coming back and seeing how we still are at the bottom of the pecking order, so to speak—the doormat of the world—and then hearing people like Malcolm (and even the Honorable Elijah Mohammed) talk about “do for self and pride in your own self”. And then the pride I was given by my grandmother, Bucker. You know Eda, if I could, I would like to just give you a little idea through a poem that I wrote to my grandmother.

She died in 1983. I used to write a lot of poetry and I wasn’t allowed to go to the funeral. So I wrote this poem and sent it to my sister and asked her to read the poem—“To Grandma,” that’s the name of it—and place it on her chest, place it over her heart. I haven’t written any poetry since. The poem goes like this:

Grandma, the silence of your heart brings pain to all who love you
Could I say goodbye to you in tears, I would
But somehow I know you would only smile and say
“Boy, Wipe your eyes. I’m free at last. I’m free at last.
Thank God, Almighty, I’m free at last.”
So, Grandma, I’ll remember you in your strength
You taught me to stand tall with pride and dignity
Although I live in shadow
At this moment in time
Grant me but the memory of you
Your face, your smile
In darkness then I live without fear
Lost though I may be for awhile
Wonderful memories of you sustain me
And I know the meaning of hope
Reflections of you spring from my heart
To liberate me from the chains of men
Grandma, could I say goodbye to you in tears I would
But never can I say goodbye to all that you were
To all that you gave me
Grandma, may you rest in peace

And you know. I wrote that not just for Grandma, but the people of the community. You’ve got to have a real appreciation for the strength of a people who were able to withstand the discrimination, the exploitation, the oppression—that life—and still be able to love each other and hope for a better day.

I learned listening to people like Malcolm, and to my own heart, that not only should you hope for a better day, but you also have to struggle for it. So at one point in my life when I heard about the Black Panther Party being formed out in Oakland, California, and I read their platform and program, I said to myself “Man, maybe here we can do something to better the condition of our people.” And then “Our People” expanded to be people who were [This call is from a federal prison.] living in a bad way.

And so I joined the Black Panther Party.

Eda: What did the Black Panther Party offer you? And what did you want to accomplish by getting involved?

Veronza: The Black Panther Party became a nation-wide organization and we established chapters for the state and branches in the cities all across the country where there were major (what people called) “ghettos”. We began to address some of the issues of our communities—the same ones that I’d seen growing up as a little boy.

Hunger. We established programs like free breakfast for school children—programs for any child that wanted to eat a healthy meal before they went to school. They could stop by at any of the places where we had that established, and have a good, healthy and wholesome breakfast because it’s a hard thing to sit in school, trying to learn, and your stomach is growling, and you hear more of your stomach than you do the teacher. So, those kinds of issues. Or, like the old ladies would be going to the store and a youngster
would come by and snatch her pocketbook. We addressed those kinds of issues. Even recruited some of those little youngsters to escort the ladies to the store and not be worried about being molested. Those types of positive programs in the community—doing for self—became like a vehicle. And I was just one of the many young men and women who were filled with a vision and a burning desire and a hope and a dream for a better future for our people. And so, we embarked upon that journey, not knowing where it would end. Or if it would end. But we knew we had to do something—not to mention the police brutality that was raging from coast to coast—and still is from coast to coast. We began to wrestle with a lot of those issues, and unfortunately (and history will bear it out) we were misaligned and attacked. And my incarceration is a direct result of that. Not because of something I have done, but because of my “political activity”.

So that makes me one of the long-held political prisoners in this country. And I’m just one of many. And it is hard for me to just speak about myself. But because of the nature of this interview, I know that’s necessary. But I can’t be understood apart from a people and a movement. Because in reality, as a political prisoner—and that’s known throughout the world—we were representatives of a people and we were accused of trying to overthrow the government and all kinds of foolishness. Because that was never the case. We were trying to make a better life for our own people. And for that—history will also absolve us on this—a war was declared against us, and many of us linger in prison now. For decades. I’m almost in my thirtieth year, and I’m still struggling.

**Eda:** Would you talk about what happened during your original case? What happened during that time and how old you were when you were convicted?

**Veronza:** I had never really been in trouble with the law, other than selling Black Panther newspapers and a lot of little miscellaneous charges they were using to try to disrupt the flow of activity. So, I was twenty-six when I got convicted of first degree murder of a National Parks Ranger. It was a very strange thing, because not ever having to have an experience with the law and justice and all that kind of stuff, sitting there in the courtroom, clearly things were running pretty ragged. Eda, I had some very good defense lawyers, and I could see they were doing their best, but I also could see that apparently the deck was stacked.
I’m going to try to make it real brief and straight to the point. They had two main witnesses—one guy that I knew well (and I knew his brother even better) and another guy I had never met, although I knew his brother. The first guy, the main witness, testified that on the night of this killing that I was with him—which was a lie. And that I was the trigger man—which was a lie. And in exchange for his lie and his testimony (he had already been convicted of an unrelated bank robbery and had received twelve years), he wound up doing two years at some camp and received $10,000 for his testimony.

The other witness—who I had never laid eyes on in my life—he had three cases pending in court for possession, sale and distribution of heroin. And in exchange for his testimony against me (he corroborated the main witness’s testimony with another lie by saying that I came and told him everything that happened), the State’s cases for possession and sale of heroin were dismissed and he received $10,000. Plus, we had a 1973 Grand Prix that was taken, and it was awarded to him. He was rewarded with our own Grand Prix for his duplicity.

Those two testimonies, with no physical evidence, sealed my fate. And I’ve languished in prison ever since, unable to unravel that strange web that was weaved. Weaved at a time in history, Eda, when (as it is generally known, now) there was a program called COINTELPRO (Counter-Intelligence Program) that was designed to disrupt and neutralize the Black Liberation Movement, the Civil Rights Movement, the American Indian Movement. Many of us were victims of that program set up by J. Edgar Hoover and the FBI. And the web was spun so tight that we haven’t been able to unravel it except in a couple of cases like Geronimo Pratt out in California. After 27 years, they finally proved it was a wrongful conviction and he was released and awarded something like four and a half million dollars. That does not amount to much for your life, and that is not a fair exchange.

And there was one other brother out of the Panther Party named Dhoruba Moore. After 19 years of wrongful conviction by the state of New York, he was awarded some million odd dollars. But that is in exchange for a life, and our lives are just as precious as anybody else’s. We are political prisoners, and there are many others who are still lingering in prison in New York State and California and Maryland, and Mumia up there on Death Row in Pennsylvania. Leonard Peltier over there in Leavenworth. Eda, we just continue to try to do the best we can. To try to live and do the best we can.
My case has so many clouds on it, and it’s been through many procedures, but it can be summed up pretty quickly this way. I was arrested on state charges—a number of them and they were all dismissed, not only because of the search warrant (the Judge ruled the search warrant was illegal because there was no probable cause or anything). Back in those days there were a lot of fishing expeditions going on. And then, after the state charges were dismissed (each of them carried five-to-life in the State of California—three or four different charges), the “Feds” stepped in and charged me with the murder of this National Parks Ranger. And because there was no physical evidence linking me to the crime itself, the government chose to use two people who already had trouble with the law (one of them I thought was a friend of mine, and like I said, this other guy that I didn’t know) and in exchange for their testimony and all the rewards that they got, the “Feds” secured a conviction.

I appealed all the way to the US Supreme Court, and of course, got no relief. And I haven’t got any relief up until this day, including when I go to the Parole Commission. One of the things they require is that you show remorse for the crime that you committed, and from my first time going there in 1983 up until the present, I’ve always maintained my innocence. I explained to the Commissioners on more than one occasion that that places me in a dilemma, because it is one thing to have remorse and sorrow for something that you’ve done, but it’s an impossibility to have remorse and sorrow for something that you haven’t done. And I have made it very clear to them that I did feel sorrow during my trial when I heard the Ranger’s wife testify about her husband—I could tell that she loved him. The taking of human life is something It shouldn’t be taken lightly. But at the same time, I’ve expressed over and over again that my life, in essence, was taken without remorse for a crime I had nothing to do with.

So that’s the thing I have had to deal with, coming into prison as a young man—by the time I got to Atlanta, I was just turning 27 and I’ve had all those birthdays in between. But basically, I became eligible for parole in 1983. I was sentenced to a life sentence, but in 1983 I became eligible for the first time for parole, and at that parole hearing they told me to continue to a full consideration hearing, which meant 1993. I took my court appeal all the way to the 11th Circuit and actually won the Appeal in the 9th Circuit, and that took ten years and the court ordered the Parole Commission to recompute my parole release date, give me an immediate new hearing,
absent any erroneous and false information about an alleged assault that never took place—it took place, but I wasn’t involved in it.

And the Commission went through the motion of giving me a new hearing, and then said “Continued until two-thirds expiration,” which is 2004. Since 1983, I’ve gone to the Parole Board in ’91, again in ’93, ’95, ’98, 2000 (I haven’t gone in 2002 yet.). And in 1993, for the first time, the Parole Board examiners recognized that something was wrong, and they attempted to give me a Parole Release date. They recommended I be released on December 7, 1998 and they awarded me 57 months for superior program achievement because there have been a lot of things I’ve done positive since I’ve been locked up. And it went to Washington and they took that back. And again in 1995, the Commissioners attempted to give me a 1998 release date, and again, it was taken back in Washington.

I appealed that decision, and thanks to the effort and support from numerous friends, too many to mention, I was able to get some very good legal representation. And now, we have a case in court down in Florida and it’s right up to the ending point, whereas if the judge rules in my favor, I will get immediate release. If they rule not in my favor, then no doubt I’ll be released in 2004—if life lasts and death passes.

But it’s been an on-going struggle with the Parole Commission. And I have to mention this, Eda, it’s not just me. Particularly those who are considered political prisoners, like Leonard Peltier and Mumia Abu-Jamal in state prison, and many up in the state of New York—all over the country, about 150 of us. That’s the treatment that we received—we received long sentences; in many cases, wrongfully convicted.

And in spite of the fact that we have pretty much been what they call “model prisoners” because we are who we are, we do what we do—in spite of all of that, we keep getting denied parole over and over again. Like Leonard just got denied parole on July 9th, this year [2002]. And Mumia got his case overturned insofar as the death penalty phase, and they’re trying to re-sentence him either to life imprisonment or the death sentence.

But thanks to the many people whose eyes are now being opened, we’re getting a lot of support. Because in the old days there was very, very little support. We were pretty much going on our own. Thanks to the untiring efforts of many people, I was able to get some very good legal representation. But in spite of that legal representation, the Parole Board has dug its heels in and has refused to honor its own rules, regulations and guidelines, as well as the law of the land. And so we have a case in court that addresses all those
issues and it will be decided in the not so distant future. Maybe within a month or two. Hopefully, less than that. Obviously, I’m eligible to go every two years. So, I’m waiting.

Because when I went in the year 2000, represented by my attorneys, the examiner told me he recommended I be released on Sept 12, 2001. And as witnessed by our interview right now, this is 2002 and it’s September 11th, and I still haven’t been released. It’s a lot of things that don’t meet the eye. But at any rate, we continue to struggle.

**Eda:** How do you maintain the positive spirit—and sanity—after being in prison so long?

**Veronza:** That’s a question I’m often asked by a lot of the youngsters that are around today—when I look around prison today (because I was one of the younger guys in prison back in those days in maximum security penitentiaries). And so I meet a lot of young guys—young, very, very young with more time sentence-wise than they have been on the earth. Like 22 or 23 years old with life sentences and 45 years, and they often ask me: “Man, how do you do all of that time?” That’s the question. But when you say *how?* Obviously, you just continue breathing—you know what I mean. But it’s also (in my particular case) because I’ve always recognized that myself, as an individual, I’m just a part, a small part, of the suffering of a people.

And so even though I’ve suffered the pain and despair of being separated from my loved ones—my mama, she’s 86 years old now and in bad health, and my daughter, when I left her, she was five years old, now she’s just had her 36th birthday and married with two children, my grandkids. So that pain at that type of separation—longing to be with your family—can never go away. It’s the 24/7 type of pain.

But I also recognize, when I look back and look at the suffering that Granny and Grandma and all the other grannies and grandmas and mommas and daddies and children who have been living lives that could be so much better (you know) if things had changed to some degree or another, that that individual pain and suffering is long-standing; and so, my suffering becomes very little when you compare it, or make the connection between that type of suffering and the suffering that I endure as an individual.

And I’m surely not saying that because I understand a few things I didn’t when I was a little boy, if that makes it any easier. And of course with friends
(and I could just name a whole list of friends and supporters who’ve given me courage, who’ve given me hope—guys in prison too [This call is from federal prison.] but a lot of people whom I have been in contact with over the years who have given unconditional love and support and friendship.

And then when you look at the struggle of peoples throughout the world, you recognize that you have to live life somewhere. And I recognize that. That whether I am in prison or out in the so-called “Free World” that I have to live my life somewhere. And I’ve determined long ago that I want to live it the best I can, and as fully as I can wherever I am and wherever I find myself.

In those maximum security penitentiaries back in the old days, you used to do a lot of “hard time”, they called it. It reminds me of a poem:

Without the cold and disillusion of winter, there can never be the warmth and splendor of spring.

Calamity has hardened me and turned my mind into steel.

It’s like the life of a willow tree: you learn to bend when you have to and weather the storm.

So people have told me: “Man, you seem to have found a way to maintain your sanity and dignity.” And I remember reading in one of Nelson Mandela’s books (you know, he did 27 years over there in South Africa, he and his comrades), he said one of the hardest things that they found doing that type of incarceration and misery, was how not to adjust. That you maintain your dignity and self-respect and honesty in dealing with people and you care for people.

I think I’ve done that because that’s the way I was raised. And so when people look and say, “You’re a strong man”, it’s not because I’m a strong man but because I was raised by strong women and a strong people. And I’m just blessed and thankful that some of those characteristics of those people I just mentioned found a way into my own heart. I just do the best I can, because I love people, and I love life, and I’ve been blessed and fortunate enough to have good people in my life.

Like a Master flute-maker I know named Monty, and an eloquent lady, Kayd, and your sister, Anna. Those in the Jericho Movement: Safiya and Paulette and Herman. My sisters Cynthia, Rhonda, Voni and Joi, Betty,
Jean-Marie, Ovedia, Debbie, Debb. Mamma Mae, her beautiful daughter, Theriseta. My attorneys: Neoma Kenwood, who fought single-handedly for ten years, Curtis Crawford, Benjamin Malcolm (may they rest in peace), Edward Hammock and Donna Sullivan. John Neptune and the world of Shakuhachi. Maynard Garfield—the list goes on to where you just can’t name all of the people who have influenced your life, and you accept that blessing as it comes.

One thing that I have to mention is that I had tried to escape from Lompoc in 1979, and I was shot and apprehended, as was my comrade. Archie Fire Lame Deer sent a couple of warriors over and invited us into a sweat lodge ceremony of Native Americans, and from that ceremony that day—it was a healing ceremony—I’ve adopted those ways and I walk that path of what is called the “Red Road”. And that sweat lodge, the ceremonies—the discipline it takes and the connection with all living things—has made a significant change in my life.

Including Shakuhachi: the blowing, the using of the breath, connecting with your inner self in meditation. Those kind of things, and healthy exercise and trying to eat the best you can, you can still smile in spite of the harshness of the environment. Environments do make a difference, but I don’t think they are the determining factor in how you view the world and how you respond to that world.

Because today is a lot different than it was in the old days. And particularly, Eda, this institution where I am—Coleman, Florida. It’s the first time (after 26 years) that I came to a lower-level security-type institution. It’s unlike any other place I’ve been. I’ve never experienced an administration like this one. Here, because of the broad vision of the warden and his administration, we’re allowed to have quite a few programs that are meaningful. Programs in the sense that the guys can contribute something back to society. We have a little program we call YES—Youth Encouraging Support—wherein we are able to make contact through our program with young kids who they call “trouble kids”, but they really are kids in trouble, kids from the ages eight, nine, ten, eleven, twelve, thirteen, fourteen who have been in trouble with the law. We’re able to sit with them in the visiting room and interact and exchange a lot of ideals and feelings and thoughts—to try to make a difference.

We have a program called “Non-Violence Training Outreach”, an outreach program teaching guys self-respect and character building. We have
a Fine Arts Department where we put on plays that are slices of life. These types of programs, because of the way things are going today, have not been allowed in many, many places. So I think we’re like pioneering and laying the groundwork for the future. Because today, there are so many young guys coming into prison, many of them without a GED or communication skills. And we’re able to make a difference. And that is very meaningful to me as an individual. So even though prison is a place where no one wants to be, because we are here, some will make a positive use of their years of confinement—and some don’t. And it’s real painful and terrible to see those that don’t, who often times, through no fault of their own.

At any rate, all the little things combine together to either make you into a better human being or break you and make you unrecognizable as a member of the human family when you are released.

**Eda:** Today marks the anniversary of the attacks on the Twin Towers and the Pentagon which resulted in the deaths of thousands of Americans and undocumented workers. Could you describe what happened inside the prison that day, and how it has changed since September 11th?

**Veronza:** On that particular day, it was probably like everywhere else. What happened was something that we couldn’t have even believed to be possible—the loss of that many lives all at once. And not just the lives that were lost immediately, but the families, the things and everyone that was affected by it.

There is one guy here, Siokatarne Hafoka from the island of Tonga—that’s way in the middle of the Pacific—he’s a member of our Sweat Lodge ceremony. He’s a big gentle giant—I mean a huge guy—and he’s a gentleman and has a heart as big as he is. Big. And this guy (there are about 1,700 people here in this institution) was so affected (as many people were), he fasted every single Tuesday until today—until yesterday—which made it a whole year of fasting—without food or water. Just to remember that day and remember the spirit of what had happened.

I know that in other institutions, there was lockdown, meaning everybody was locked into their cells. But this place is a lot different than a lot of other places and we didn’t directly experience that, although a few guys got locked up because of their religious affiliations with Islam.

And you hear a diversity of attitudes. But I myself recognize that not only
were a lot of innocent lives lost here, but that there have been repercussions on the people of Afghanistan and that people throughout the world have been affected by what happened that day. I think it was something like 2,824 people have been identified through body parts that have been found. In my own mind and heart that was a great tragedy. And like in all wars of all times, war is a mutual slaughter of men and women, and those kinds of things, they can only sadden the heart.

**Eda:** If there was one thing that you could change in this world, what would it be?

**Veronza:** I would love to be able to change the relations among men—when I say “men” I’m also including women. Humankind.

Because we talk about war, poverty, hunger and misery on the one hand, but its opposite always exists. But it evolves down to the relationships. Relationships to me are very, very important, and if there is to be a world free of sexism and fascism and ageism and all those other “isms” and schisms that divide humankind—not to mention racism, which is an artificial division of human beings based upon skin color, or positions and stations of life...

If we could go back in time to that time called “primitive communal society”, but really was a society when there was a lot of collective and mutual co-operation in order to survive against the beasts of prey and the forces of nature that man didn’t understand; if things could be ordered in such a way (not ordered in a sense of a dictatorial thing) but ordered by mutual respect…. Like the way I grew up in a community. The elders had respect, not because they had authority imposed upon those who gave the respect, but because that respect was well-earned and understood. And that’s the type of respect that even great presidents and generals and foreign ministers don’t have, [*This call is from a federal prison*] because those things are not something that can be forced upon a people.

So if those relations change—relations to the point of production—then we could have a much better world where a woman would never know what it is to have to give up her body in prostitution, or people would never know what it was like to grow up in slavery, a beast of burden. That’s what I would hope for my children and grandchildren and the children after them, and yours, and those yet to be born. And it could be so. But that requires
a lot of struggle and a lot of sacrifice and a lot of willingness of people to understand that unless we co-operate as a human species, then we are going to perish.

**Eda:** Is there some advice you would like to tell youth in America today?

**Veronza:** Yeah. It’s been said (and it’s not rhetorical) that the youth are like the sunshine at eight or nine o’clock in the morning—bright, full of beauty and vigor. And they will visit places where those of my generation and other generations can’t even dream of, yourself included. You have places to go that can only be dreamed of. So, the youth have a great responsibility, like all generations that come after the generation that’s currently trying to make a better world. The youth have to take a sober look at that. Not in the sense of foregoing all the joys of life that come with youth, but recognizing that youth, just like old age, is a passing thing, and it’s here now and it will be gone.

So we listen to our past, reflect on our past, and plan for the future and live in the moment. Often we see that youth have been criminalized as a generation. They still are our hope, because they are going to be the future leaders of tomorrow. And so, that responsibility that they have, that has been squarely laid on their shoulders, it will be a heavy burden. But I have full confidence in our youth—the hip-hop generation.

Every generation has its ways. The youth of today are very much in tune with life and the world around them. You hear it in the music, you hear it in the rap music; you see it in their dance, the way they walk and talk. It’s just a matter of being willing to listen, as we all have problems listening when we are young. I pin my hopes upon the youth.

And when I see these youngsters come into the programs I was telling you about—we’ll be out in the visiting room talking and you look in their eyes and sometimes you see despair, and sometimes a few sparks flare up, and your heart hurts inside because, without some changes, you know a lot of people will live half-butchered lives, who could otherwise live meaningful lives—not just in the sense of being professional people like doctors and lawyers, but just contributing positive things to their own communities, and to their own families. That’s where it starts, with the family. And it goes out from there to the community and to the city and the state and the nation. And the world!
Eda: What are your own future plans when you finally get out in the year 2004?

Veronza: If that happens, and like my mama always says, “If life lasts and death passes”. In other words, if I keep breathing and I am fortunate enough to be released in 2004 (or if I win my case down here in the court that I have going now and am released immediately), I have a lot of plans.

One is to try to keep breathing, living. And I would really like to be able to open up a Meditation Healing Clinic. Over the years I’ve studied and learned and practiced acupressure and hands-on-healing and pseudo-therapy, and a variety of healing aids including blowing shakuhachi as a means of self-meditation healing, and have gained some insights and rewards doing all of that stuff to relieve pain. Pain is a thing people don’t have to necessarily live with, or “learn to live with” as the medical profession often says. But pain can be relieved with the touch of a finger or the sound of a note or the sound of a voice or a birdsong. I would like to try my best to open up a clinic of that nature and train some youngsters in that art of caring, and try to make a little difference in some lives, and take it from there. [Loud commotion sounds like: Closed, closed, prepare for …] That’s a big announcement.

Anyway, I really have to say that I’m very happy that my mother, who is 86 years old, and my daughter Veronica, even though they suffered so much pain in my absence, that they’ve understood that I had to follow my dream for a better world for us all. [This call is from a federal prison.] Because at one time, I don’t think they understood. But they do now. And those kinds of things help one situated like myself to continue. Those are the kinds of things that mean so much. And I want to thank you, and I want to thank Dan, and I want to thank all of the people at KZYX and all of you listeners who put up with all of my ramblings. Obviously, I definitely want to thank all of the people who have believed in me and have supported me. And I can only hope that they will continue, and that somehow in the future, that my own life, what I have left of it, will be used in a way that is befitting that type of unconditional love and support.

[This call is from a federal prison. This is a prepaid call. This call is from … Veronza.]

Eda: This concludes my interview with Veronza Bowers, Jr., a former Black Panther who’s been incarcerated for 32 years and claims his innocence.
He was speaking from the federal penitentiary in Coleman, Florida on September 11, 2002. If you would like more information about Veronza, or an up-date on his current case, please log on to www.geocities.com/veronzab. To contact me, e-mail me at eda@pacific.net.

This has been a special edition of YouthSpeaksOut produced by Dan Roberts and Eda Levenson. YouthSpeaksOut has its own website at www.youthspeaksout.net. There you can find more information about the project, get addresses for contacting us and listen to many hours of previous programs in streaming audio. We really encourage our listeners to give us feedback on our shows. You can do this through e-mail at the website, or by writing us at:

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Note:
After being held in continuous custody and denied parole for over 30 years, Veronz Bowers reached his mandatory release date on April 7th, 2004. He was one of the longest held political prisoners in the US and had a record of over 20 years of exemplary conduct. An entourage of family and friends arranged a celebration of Veronza’s release and to be at the prison gates to greet him on that day. Inside the prison, friends came together to wish him well. Veronza gave away all of his possessions to the men whom he was leaving behind.

On April 6th, he was advised that he would not be released, on the orders of the National Parole Commission.
Because I wanted to improve the quality of life for Black people and to be part of a well-structured political body that sought to uplift, educate and discipline black social consciousness for self-determination, I became a Black Panther. Treated as second-class citizens, scorned and degraded, and subjected to unprovoked physical abuse, is also why I became a Black Panther. America, the land and culture to which I was born, has always been a house of bondage and unfulfilled promises to me; thus, it has exerted a compelling influence on my opinion of it and the world around me. Historically, she has demanded so much of Black people and has given so little in return.

Wanting to help create a better life for my people, and since marching, praying and demonstrating were not for me, I resolved to ally myself with a political body and community of individuals fighting against a vicious political and economic system in the u.s. controlled by a privileged social class. It is a class that actively represses and exploits Black people; a class that derives tremendous monetary and social benefits from our pain and suffering. These are people who manipulate public and private institutions; police agencies, banks, employment, real estate, newspapers, insurance companies, public education and the like to achieve their aims. I regarded it as a fight for the very survival of Black people. And I grew to understand how the underpinnings of these institutions work against the poor and people of colour—an understanding that comes not to the idle and incurious, but to people who are well-seasoned in their fight against social injustice, poverty, hard times and bad luck in order to overcome them.

And in telling the story of the Black Panther Party (BPP) to the sons and daughters of former afrikan slaves, who continue to live under the hegemony of this vicious political and economic system, they will know that this story is about them and their legacy; that it is a legacy that they can feel proud about and build on. History shows that people will seek their freedom regardless, however long they have been subjugated and downtrodden. How did I become a Black Panther? History showed me the way. Self-repair after damage or injury is the natural order of things. The urge to restore oneself to a sound condition is an act of nature. Conflict arises when an aggrieved people, spurred on by a long train of injury and abuse, heed this innate impulse. Are Black people expected to act biologically different than anybody else?
Life simply goes on. And in the interim, from one generation to the next, things happen: the times, the people and the conditions change. Are Black people somehow exempt from this process, as though we breathe, feed and feel different pain than anybody else, and are we to accept a legacy of poverty, abuse and domination as our natural allotment in life? I don’t think so.

The Party exuded an air of expectation and confidence that was rarely savoured in the Black community; it created social programs and challenged social traditions and thereby gave Black people hope and a reason to dream of new possibilities. It furnished us with the tools and political analysis with which to build our own future. While it was a very Black thing, the Party was also universal in its scope and reached out to all people. And “haters” living outside our community hated the existence of this Black thing.

Without a trace of unfettered thought, without even a dream of hope and new possibilities that might appeal unbidden in the still of night, how can a people climb off their knees if otherwise uninspired? The BPP embodied that unbidden dream, that unfettered thought and it is why the u.s. government made its destruction a national priority. To hark back in u.s. history not long ago, we are reminded that blackmen had rights that no whitemen were bound to respect; reminded that u.s. laws mandated that escaped slaves be returned to their owners; that the u.s. government presided over a segregated society as the law of the land, and that it turned a blind eye to white mob violence and decades of routine lynching of Black people that too often took on a festive air; and it permitted use of private and public institutions to further humiliate, terrorize and deprive Black people of basic human rights and self-dignity so as to control and super-exploit them.

In these matters, history adjudges the u.s. government as disingenuous, as not being an honest broker, and that it now aims to protect a reputation and standing in the very matters that its predecessors disclaimed responsibility for. In his April 4th, 1967 “Beyond Viet Nam” speech, Dr. King said: “I knew that I could never again raise my voice against the violence of the oppressed in the ghettos without having first spoken out clearly to the greatest purveyor of violence in the world—my own government (the u.s.a.).” Then and now the u.s. government continues to condone the use of terror and violence as a policy instrument to control Black people.

I joined the BPP because I wanted to be part of something bigger than myself, part of something that affirmed my self-worth and self-identity, that
protected my rights, my safety and well-being; part of something that told me I matter and that I can accomplish things.

How can you feel the pain in my people’s heart, the tiredness in their souls, the callouses on their hands if you don’t know them? I’ve seen them on street corners, in rat and roach-infested tenements, in unemployment lines cashing cheques not commensurate with their labour; in crowded classrooms instructed by tired, over-worked and under-paid teachers; in gin joints, pool halls and in alleyways shooting dice; in newspapers looking for “the number” that never comes. I’ve seen the hustler, con-man, dope-dealer and pimp plying their wares in my neighbourhood. I’ve seen my people in church crying and praying and singing in jubilation, hoping for a change to come; seen them tired and despondent and picking up their weary feet going to work the very next day. I’ve seen a policeman’s authority brutalize a “colored man’s” self-respect; seen the charity of a condescending smile that says: “I am glad that I am not Black like you”, or a stern look that says: “Keep in your place”. How could people not want to disentangle themselves from this nightmare of an appointed place? The Black Panther knew and felt the people’s pain and this is why I became a Panther.

Herman Bell, born in the rural south, spent his youth in New York City. When he moved to Oakland on a football scholarship with the University of California, he was introduced to the Black Panther Party and, as a member, participated in their community programs. State aggression drove him underground. He was captured in 1973 and convicted in 1975 of the 1971 killing of two policemen in New York City. Along with his co-defendants (the New York Three), Jalil Muntaqim and Albert Nuh Washington, he was sentenced to 25 years to life.

During the course of his 33 years of imprisonment, Herman completed a university degree and was active with inside and outside communities, working on issues as varied as prisoners’ rights and the environment. Despite his impressive institutional record and accomplishments, he was denied parole for the second time in February, 2006.
Release Ruchell Cinque Magee: Sole Survivor of the August 7, 1970 Courthouse Slave Rebellion!
Ruchell Cinque Magee with Kiilu Nyasha

Shortly after August 7, 1970, photos of what’s become known as the “Courthouse Slave Rebellion” hit the front pages of the nation’s dailies showing four Black men emerging from the Marin County Court with guns and hostages, including a judge, prosecutor and three jurors, provoking panic in some and pride in others.

In the historical context of aggressive, official violence against Black prisoners, Magee appeared in court that fateful morning to testify for fellow prisoner, James McClain, defending himself against the charge of assaulting a guard in the wake of the murder by racist San Quentin guards of Fred Billingsley, beaten and tear-gassed to death in his cell earlier that year.

Magee was on the witness stand when Jonathan Jackson (age 17), younger sibling of Soledad Brother George Lester Jackson, burst into the court room “courage in one hand, assault rifle in the other”, and took charge. The plan was to release McClain and William Christmas, use hostages to make it to a radio station to expose the virulent prison conditions, and demand the immediate release of the three Soledad Brothers facing capital charges in the death of a prison guard following the murder of three Black prisoners at Soledad State Prison. The Soledad Brothers were ultimately acquitted, Jackson posthumously.

What the rebels failed to anticipate was the total disregard for human life of the San Quentin guards who arrived in time to riddle the van with bullets before it could leave the parking lot.

In this barrage of gunfire, Christmas, Jackson, McClain and Judge Harold Haley were killed, the prosecutor was seriously wounded (remains paralyzed), a juror slightly injured, and Magee was critically wounded and lay unconscious.
Professor Angela Y. Davis was captured and imprisoned for having purchased the guns (legally) and was later acquitted of all charges in a separate trial.

The following statements were written by Ruchell Magee (with some editing by Kiilu Nyasha):

I was charged with kidnap to rob for $10 in the Los Angeles prosecution which commenced March 1963. A life sentence from LA still goes on 42 years later. The Board turned seven years to life, into life without possibility of parole. I was also charged with kidnap out of Marin County Courthouse, August 7, 1970, in addition to murder and conspiracy charges. I was acquitted of the more serious kidnap charge (PC 209), although the jury verdict was not honored, but convicted of the simple kidnap charge (PC 207). You will find the murder and conspiracy charges were dismissed.

In an affidavit signed by the elected Jury Foreman in Magee’s trial (#68668, Superior Court of San Francisco County), Bernard J. Suares stated, on August 6, 2001:

That at the end of the jury’s deliberations (commenced on March 26, 1973 and terminated April 3, 1973) all 12 jurors found Mr. Magee not guilty of violating P.C. 209 (kidnapping for the purpose of extortion).... I have appealed to the Court and have presented proof of acquittal, which is being concealed by the court in violation of the Rico Act and Mr. Magee’s Constitutional right to a fair trial. I have been ignored for more than 23 years and demand that I be heard in a court of law.... I declare under penalty of perjury the foregoing is true and correct to the best of my knowledge and belief.

In a letter to Public Defender Richard Such, dated May 2, 1975, Juror David F. Smith stated:

The State presented no evidence to indicate that Mr. Magee knew in advance that an escape attempt would be made.... Most of the jurors thought that Magee was a person who felt strongly that he
had been wrongfully imprisoned, who felt morally entitled to be free under the Constitution and the laws of the land ... who sensed a momentous possibility of immediate freedom and who grasped at it.

Citing failure to comply with Penal Code 1170.2 (Determinate Sentence Law) requiring the Board of Prison Terms to set a release date for prisoners not doing life without the possibility of parole, on May 10, 2000, Mr. Albert M. Leddy released a declaration, which read in part:

I was attorney at law, currently retired... Between 1983 to 1992, I served as a commissioner and then as Chairman for the Board of Prison Terms (BPT)…. At one point I became concerned enough about the ‘no parole policy’ that I wrote a nine page brief about how we were not complying with the laws. I gave a copy to each Board member, pointing out that we could be sued. Such a no-parole policy is contrary to Penal Code § 3041 which requires that BPT shall normally set a parole date in most cases, unless the prisoner is shown to pose a threat to public safety....

It has been clear to me that there is a general conspiracy to prevent life prisoners from paroling, especially those whose offenses include murder.... If you can deny a prisoner suitability solely on the basis of the crime, you can deny him forever. The crime won’t change. The parole law is based on the idea that prisoners do change, and become no danger to public safety.

There is no rational explanation for the Board’s conduct, which is in violation of Penal Code 1170.2 (Determinate Sentence Law). In fact, some prisoners held illegally have died inside unnoticed.

Moreover, do you recall the case of Dr. Bernard Fink? He was convicted of the torture murder of his wife who was decapitated, and did less than 15 years. There are many other cases of prisoners convicted of horrific crimes who came to prison after me and have been released.
Magee poses no threat to the public if released. He is 66 years old, has no mental problems, doesn’t use drugs, smoke or drink alcohol, or allow others to think for him. He believes he would be a mentor in the community to help young folks turn away from negative behaviors that lead to prison and senseless death.

In closing, I urge you to write to the Governor asking him to assign a special Board for compliance with PC 1170.2 (DSL) that would bring relief to countless prisoners suffering prolonged incarceration in prisons throughout California.

Forty-two years is enough! Free Ruchell Cinque Magee now! Free all political prisoners!

You may write directly to Ruchell at:

A92051
3C 02-127
Box 3471
Corcoran, CA
All praise is due to Allah, Whose aid we seek, and Whose forgiveness, guidance and protection we seek against our own evil and the sinful acts of others. He who Allah guides aright, none can lead astray, and whom He leads astray, none can guide aright. I testify that there is no true god except Allah alone Who has no partner, and I openly testify that Muhammad is the slave servant of Allah, and His Messenger.

The above is my basic political outlook and way of life today. Islam is a total way of life that governs one’s secular and spiritual outlook and way of life. There is no separation between one’s political views and religious views. They are both governed by a person’s adherence to the Islamic way of life.

I’ve been asked to submit a piece on my current political philosophy which is the reason for the above statements. In addition, I’ve been asked questions regarding the present crisis and fight that we, as oppressed people, find ourselves in today. I will start by stating that writing is not something that I enjoy doing or do well, but I will attempt to answer some of the questions put to me as best and honestly as I can.

Islam has been my sustainer. It has given me a sound and proven way of life, that has sustained me during those low periods. Now that I’ve come to understand and internalize its basic tenets and concepts better, I see it as an extension of my former revolutionary political views.

Today, if one looks at the geopolitical situation and motion in the world, it is Islam and Muslims at the epicenter of the struggles currently taking place. The countries whose world outlook was Marxist-Leninist or revolutionary nationalism have abandoned it. Today, China, the Soviet Union and most of their followers have fundamentally changed their world outlook. The way of life viewed as the scourge of mankind by the West today is Islam, not Marxism.

Although I am sustained by my religious belief, I still cherish, seek and welcome the relationships of my family, friends and supporters. They have made numerous sacrifices on our behalf and have supported us for years. They are cherished and appreciated very much.

The human spirit has a basic herd instinct and one looks forward to the relationships of families and friends and the interplay (as limited as it is under
the circumstances) that a person has with others. I’m a basic people person. I enjoy and love people especially those with whom I have a commonality or am united in some fundamental way. Most of the folks in the movement are very committed and self-sacrificing. A person can not help but cherish this type of person, especially since they are not the kind that this particular society produces a great many of. The basic tenet of this society is premised on individualism and being primarily about yourself. So, when we meet and know those committed to the betterment of humanity, one can not help but to cherish them.

My family is extremely important to me. My elderly mother has been the foundation of our family like so many of our women are. The same appears to be the case with my brother and co-defendant Abdul Majid’s family, his mother being the bedrock there. My family’s support and sacrifices over the years have been extremely important, especially my sisters. I also have developed a strong and loving relationship with my son and his family. I look forward to the phone talks with my eight year old granddaughter and fifteen year old grandson. Over the years, I have developed extremely strong relationships with nieces and nephews. I treasure the relationships that I have developed with our supporters and our conversations and visits. We have a wide array of supporters of various ethnicities and ages, and I enjoy them all.

One of the main premises that I try to impart to the young folks here is that I talk about the struggle and the importance of struggle being love-inspired, and that struggle cannot be sustained, maintained or based upon hating someone because of their ethnicity.

Maintaining one’s dignity is a constant struggle. Like George Jackson said, they are about “breaking our spirits”. Unfortunately, today’s main cultural genre hip-hop, for the most part, has degenerated into a self-hating, materialistic and hedonistic minstrel show. A genuine relevant culture should reflect the on-going struggle of the aspirations of the oppressed. There are a few progressive groups and individuals righteously speaking to our condition and plight, but they, for the most part, don’t get the airplay or aren’t promoted by the mainstream entertainment venues and folks. Opportunists like Russell Simmons are viewed as icons and progressives because of accumulated wealth and his (Simmons’) 11th hour involvement in the recent drug law (Rockefeller Drug Law) issue, and his relationship to Louis Farrakhan of the Nation of Islam.
I no longer get angry when I hear remarks allegedly made by folks who were former revolutionaries. Over the years, I have heard remarks allegedly made by Bobby Seale (co-founder of the Black Panther Party) that would make one wonder what he was thinking or if he was thinking at all when he made these comments. Congressmen Bobby Rush (former member of the BPP) and John Lewis (former member of Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee, SNCC) were two of (President) Clinton’s most co-operative and docile sycophants. The criticism of these brothers isn’t based on my personal dislike, but I’m just curious as to what could have transpired, that I haven’t noticed, to make them take such radical (right) turns from their former positions. It isn’t like folks are free or any genuinely fundamental changes have come upon us. This society has become more of a police state than ever.

The struggles and persistence of our ancestors and their indomitable wills are also important factors in our willingness to continue to struggle. I love it when we hear of former BPP members still struggling around the country in various ways, e.g., Brother Malik Rahim in New Orleans and the O’Neals in Africa. Character is built during our youth in many different ways. It is also one of the many things that maintains one’s faith and hope. In Islam, maintaining hope and faith are fundamental tenets of the religion.

The question was asked, do I think that I will walk out of here? Would I like to? Yes. Would I mortgage my soul to? I would pray not. I think that how we conduct ourselves in here is of the utmost importance. They would love to see us groveling at their feet. They know the psychological effect that it would have on the others here. They make countless assaults on all of our dignity daily and especially those of us who are political.

Bashir Hameed (formerly known as James York) was born and raised in New Jersey. In 1968, he joined the Black Panther Party while residing in Oakland, California. Once he returned to New Jersey, he became Deputy Chairman of the New Jersey Chapter of the BPP. FBI documents obtained during the 1970s reveal that, during this time, Bashir became a COINTELPRO target. He was charged and convicted of the murder and the attempted murder of two police officers in April 1981. This conviction came as a direct result of his political activity. Bashir Hameed and his co-
defendant, Abdul Majid, were tried three times. Their first trial ended in a hung jury divided along racial lines. The second trial was declared a mistrial by the judge immediately after the jury rendered a decision that acquitted Bashir on the murder charge. At a third trial, they were eventually convicted for murder. Bashir is currently serving a sentence of 25 years to life and is presently being held in the Great Meadow Prison (Box 51, Comstock, NY 12821).
Interview with Hugo Pinell

Hugo Pinell and Kiilu Nyasha

The following is an edited transcript of an interview for Prison Focus radio show, KPOO, 89.5 FM, on June 15, 2006 with political prisoner, Hugo Antonio Lyons Pinell (aka Yogi Bear)

Luis Bato Talamantez: We have comrade Nedzada [Handukic] and Kiilu Nyasha and we have Gordon Kaupp, an attorney here in San Francisco who is representing the subject of our show, Hugo Antonio Pinell. And online shortly, we will have Kiilu, all of whom traveled to Pelican Bay State Prison, which is, I think, 10 miles away from the Oregon state border, a very remote prison, super-maximum prison, to visit Hugo. We claim that he is probably the longest held Nicaraguan citizen in the world, 42 years. And in the past he was also a co-defendant with myself [sic] during the 1970s in the so-called San Quentin Six case. We want to ask Gordon here, for somebody here in America who has been in prison for 42 years, I mean, how do you square that with justice? Can you tell us more about his case, Gordon?

Gordon Kaupp: I have the honor of representing Mr. Pinell, and I had the honor of meeting him several weeks ago up at Pelican Bay State Prison which is an extremely cold, dark, foreboding institution in which many lives are thrown away. There are legal reasons and social-political reasons why Yogi is up there. In the board hearing, we’re dealing with the legal reasons which serve as the mechanism for the social and political reasons that keep him locked up; namely, the way that they keep somebody held for such a long and inhumane period of time is by focusing on the suitability factors in his parole board hearing. And the suitability factors are mostly factors that remain unchanging, things that he can do nothing about since the convictions that he has suffered. So the Board will say, well, we look at the underlying crime and if it’s so callous, if it shows a callous disregard for suffering, we’re going to deny him his hearing. If he’s got a prior criminal history, we’re going to deny him his release. If he has an unstable social history, we’re going to deny him his release. And so, you look at these parole board decisions that the commissioners issue, year after year or every couple years, however long it is between your time visiting the Board, they deny prisoners, old lifers, for the same reasons every single time. And these are unchanging factors. So, essentially they convert a sentence of nine to
life to a sentence of life without parole. It’s a really big problem here in California.

**Bato**: Hugo Pinell will be going to the board very, very shortly, as he has been going to the board for the last 42 years that he has been in prison. We’re saying 42 continuous years there’s been no parole, there’s been no furloughs, it’s all been very, very hard time that Hugo, my comrade, has had to do all these years in the worst conditions because before they built Pelican Bay, he was in the second worst, which was Corcoran State Prison, and before they built that supermax, they took him back to Tehachapi, which is out in the desert. These are horrible places for a human organism to have to try to exist in. We also understand that because of his political history inside prison that he is a legacy who will always be remembered in connection with comrade George Jackson and that whole period of prison rebellion and prison reform that has stretched from thirty years. I remember not too far back they even took him to the board and slammed him with five years and since then the times for him to return to the board have lessened, but, nonetheless, he’s been continuously denied. Suppose he is denied, where do you go with a denial from the Board of Prison Terms?

**Gordon**: That’s a really tough question when there is no justice in the justice system—where to go? Fortunately the courts have been a little bit better than the parole boards. The parole board is pretty much a guaranteed denial. Surprisingly, Arnold Schwarzenegger is a little better with releasing prisoners than Grey Davis was. But still, what you do is, you go to the parole hearings and you make the best arguments you can, and essentially, you pull the rug out from under the commissioner so that any excuses they have to deny him parole, you destroy those, you whittle away those excuses so that after the board denies him parole, you bring it to the courts. The courts have continuously reigned in the Board of Prison Terms and told them, look, you gotta follow the Constitution and what you have to do is base your decision on some evidence. And if you continue to deny life inmates parole based on unchanging factors, that begins to weigh upon the inmates’ liberty interests. So what we really have to do is set up a really good record at his parole board hearing and then take it to the courts and show the courts that they are denying him parole without any evidence that he would pose an unreasonable risk of danger to society, which is the legal standard they operate under.
**Bato:** Well, I’m glad that you mentioned the so-called liberty interest because for a number of years at the California Prison Focus and prior to that at the Pelican Bay Information Project, a span of 15 years, the work that we did around prisoners and prison issues was that the State just did not acknowledge that there was a liberty interest. I mean, why are you being held? Any democratic society requires that, through habeas corpus, [you] be able to explain why are you holding me. With Hugo, there’s never been that explanation other than the fact that what we know about prison internal politics is that the Department of Corrections considers him a trophy, so to speak. The Guard’s Union, they say he’s the worst of the worst and this and that; they hold these guys as some kind of emblem. But the thing about Hugo is that he has always been able to maintain his humanity. Hugo and I, we’re in touch kind of spiritually, you know. He knows that I wish him all the love possible in the world and that when I left the Adjustment Center, August 20, 1976, the day they told me I would be set free, after the San Quentin Six trial, they popped my cell door in the Adjustment Center; they gave me a minute to run down the tier and say good-bye to everybody. I saw Hugo in his cell and you know what, he had the sweetest look on his face. He was so happy for me. And I said “Hugo, Hugo, I’ll never forget you.” All he said was to say to his mother that he loved her. So there is that very human quality about Hugo a lot of people don’t understand because he grew up between here and the Fillmore and the Mission and he vanished off the streets of San Francisco in 1965. The State gobbled him up and we have factored in that the State of California has made about one million dollars in upkeep and rent holding him captive all these years; and it makes no sense today. He has been in the Security Housing Unit [SHU] absolutely too long. It’s a miracle he’s still in the great condition he’s in.

I want to also ask Nedzada, who also visited Hugo, when you first saw him there in the SHU where the visits take place in this kinda dungeon keep, through Plexiglas, through a phone, what was your first impression?

**Nedzada:** Well, I don’t know. We just felt like it was a bond there, like I already knew him for so long. I had been writing letters to him, you know, I started through Kiilu, and it was just the expression, his look in his eyes and everything; he just looked like he was gonna hug me, you know, I was like, oh my god, I couldn’t believe it! I couldn’t believe the shape that he was in and he looked really, really good, and you could tell that this man
was so positive and had such great, wonderful energies about him and it was beautiful to be there. At the same time it was very sad to see him locked up in there because I feel like he would be a wonderful contribution to our society to be out here instead of locked up in there, and he sets such a good example, and his principles are like, whew man, outta this world, like, he won’t compromise for anything, and you know that.

Bato: Yeah, and, Gordon, I know this was the first time you had a chance to meet Hugo face to face even though it was in the conditions you guys were in, but what was your first impression?

Gordon: You know, I didn’t know what to expect when I arrived at Pelican Bay. And when I met him, I met somebody who deeply moved me. He is an inspiration; he is someone who has taken everything that they have tried to do to him to break his spirit and he has reversed it on them. He says, the one thing I learned from W. L. Nolen is that they cannot take control of how you live your life. And so when they try to make me angry, I turn that into love. And he is such a warm person. He is such a loving person. Everything he does is from his heart, and it’s about his love for humanity, his love for nature, his love for all life. And he blew me away. When I went the second day, even though we only had a couple hours the day before, when I walked in, he came right up to the glass, he put both his hands up. And he had a wide grin across his face and he is just something else. He’s really the kind of person like Nedzada said that would contribute so much to this world.

Bato: Yeah, I do remember that he had a very infectious smile. So my heart always goes out to Hugo and I’m so elated that you, Gordon, and comrade Nedzada and Kiilu Nyasha, who will be coming on the line real soon, have gone up there because I think that you really have put some energy into this dungeon-keep where everything is designed to shut the sun out, and Hugo hasn’t seen the moon in 30, 40 years. We need to understand that this is a story of tragedy. It’s a relatively unknown story, but America is not good about justice for everybody. You know, it really is not .... because that’s what we’re talking about right now, 42 years! It’s just unimaginable. I have been free 30 years, you know, but he never did get free after our trial. Three of us were released after the San Quentin trial and three of us were convicted. So you tell us, Gordon, what’s possible for helping Hugo out?
Gordon: Well, I will talk a little bit about Hugo Pinell, but I will also say that I think we need to bring a larger campaign to bear for all political prisoners in the United States. And I was so inspired by Hugo Pinell, but also so disappointed that so many people will talk about political prisoners, but very rarely do people bring real concrete support. So, what I would like to do is to campaign people to get money together, to get resources together, to get a clinical program running for all political prisoners in the United States; so we have a concerted effort to work on their cases. Because before I stepped in on Yogi’s case, he was going to do this on his own. He did not have an attorney. And a lot of these guys who have been in, and who are in here for every single one of us, have been left behind in a significant way. The same was true for Ruchell Magee whom I represented earlier, last year. But I’d also like to go back to something, and that is that Yogi Pinell has been in the security housing unit for 33 years, solitary confinement, and every year, once or twice a year, there is a confidential memo that is put into his file that he does not see, that his attorney does not see, that there is no way to challenge, that says that he is in a gang and that he has been in a gang, and that’s why he’s in the security housing unit. So, there’s this backdoor way that the prison has used to keep him in the SHU and they keep saying he’s in a gang. But, if you’re in the SHU how can you maintain a gang affiliation for 33 years? It’s impossible for that to be the case and it’s also impossible to challenge, because, like I said, it’s a confidential memo that his attorney can’t see, that he can’t see. So, we’re going to challenge this at his hearing. We’re going to challenge this in the courts, but what I’m also going to do is to start getting a larger campaign together to put pressure on, legal pressure on for all political prisoners. And we’re going to go to the people with money, and we’re going to attorneys across this country to help free the political prisoners who are serving time for every single one of us.

Bato: Thank you, Gordon. We’re going to come back to Gordon in a little bit. We have Kiilu Nyasha on the line and we’re going to patch her in and she was also there to see Hugo. Hugo is a very powerful person, you know, a completely new revolutionary person, you know, in who he is and what he stands for. Like Nedzada says, he will not budge on certain issues, he will never surrender, because the Department of Corrections sees him as their trophy and they would like to really break his spirit, and the spirit of all revolutionaries who have fought inside prison, comrade George Jackson
and all the other revolutionaries who have fought the system from in prison and are fighting the system today in prison. You know, our prison radio show is basically about keeping the spirit of resistance alive. Kiilu, more than anybody, the last 30, 40 years, you have been a great source to a great many people including myself, the San Quentin Six, and across the country the old line Panthers whom you knew, Romaine Fitzgerald, the longest held Panther here in California. You have been an inspiration for all of us. And to see Hugo Pinell, you know, he just loves you so much. Tell us, how’s he doing these days, Kiilu?

**Kiilu:** Well, again, I have to be repetitious here. He’s amazing! He’s just absolutely amazing! This was the fifth visit that I’ve had up there, but the last visit was close to five years ago. And it just amazed me that he looked better than he looked five years ago. I mean he’s just unbelievable—in his discipline, in his high energy, and he’s a vegetarian, as you may know. By the way, the Chaplain rescinded his vegetarian diet that you guys fought so hard for him to get, California Prison Focus, I mean, because it wasn’t on religious grounds. He sticks to his vegetarian diet, but I worry about him getting his nutrition and his protein. But in any case, he still looks fantastic. And he works out and his high energy is unbelievable and of course his loving spirit. And I want to just give some quick quotes from some letters I have been perusing.

I don’t ever regret speaking out and standing up for our people in here. I regret not being able to give more.

That’s out of one letter. And here’s a kind of political statement:

I used to believe that for our freedom to be real and effective, we first needed land. But with time, I’ve come to realize that just like our struggle is for humanity, freedom lies in the people, new people, first and foremost, for the people will make it all happen and wherever we are, that will be our freedom home, our freedom land. Once I was sure of that, I began to grow closer to my true loved ones, for in their true love and hearts, I have found my personal freedom, justice, peace and security, my personal home. That’s how I’ve managed to keep pushing and growing, living in the hearts of beautiful and special people.
In another letter he says, along the same vein, by the way.

I hope you’ve understood what I’ve tried to say. The way things are for us in the world, we don’t have a land we can really call our own, since we don’t govern it. Therefore, the surest, safest and best station of living is in our hearts. That’s my home. For I know I’m really loved and wanted there and you all already live in my heart.
You take care, big hugs, kisses and real love, Yogi Bear.

**Bato**: Hugo has just really, really been a great correspondence writer, you know. Over the years he’s written really, really outstanding humanitarian letters, you know, that everybody should take to heart.

**Kiilu**: And that’s how he survives 24/7 lockup, you know except for the, the “dog run”, that outdoor closet they allow him to get out in. But people need to realize that is a windowless cell that he has been in 16 years of his 30 odd years of solitary confinement. Pelican Bay SHU is what they call a supermax prison that is right now being cited by the UN Commission at the recent international court hearings as a violation of human rights. Pelican Bay itself is a violation.

**Bato**: Pelican Bay early on, as the work we did with the Pelican Bay Information Project, was cited by the Human Rights Commission of the United Nations in their journal 1994/95 as one of the worst three prisons in America. So, we believe that during the early formative years of running Pelican Bay, which was ‘91, ‘92, ‘93, prior to the Madrid [Madrid v. Gomez] “cruel and unusual punishment” federal case here in San Francisco, some of the worst atrocities had occurred during those years in America, just by the personnel who were coming home from the first Gulf War taking jobs within the prison system. So, it’s been a very, very brutal regime there at Pelican Bay and elsewhere at California prisons because, you know, the training that some of the personnel get, and today we’re seeing a lot of these same Service people being the custodians and keepers of a great amount [sic] of people that are going through prisons today. So, the spirit of Hugo Pinell is just so important to keep alive. I think that there will be a major campaign to free Hugo.
Kiilu: There really should be because, Bato, collectively speaking we Americans are losing our humanity. I mean, it’s a sad and frightening thing, because we are tolerating Guantanamo, three suicides, and we’re tolerating this incredible, callous statement that came out of the State Department about that. And then, we’re tolerating Iraq and the on-going slaughter there. We tolerated Haiti and the slaughter there. We’re tolerating so much inhumanity. And as you know there are well over two million people in prison, and rising at the rate of a thousand prisoners a week.

Bato: What about that, Gordon?

Gordon: I mean, it’s absolutely true, you know. We’re incarcerating large numbers of our own population at levels that have never been seen in humanity. I was watching this documentary yesterday and this law enforcement against prohibition was putting up figures about incarceration rates of Black males under South African apartheid. It was something like 849 black males per 100,000 under apartheid were incarcerated; in the United States, Black males per 100,000 is something like 4,991. So we are way, astronomically beyond even what South Africa during apartheid was doing to Black men. Not to mention the rise in women prisoners, not to mention the rise in Latino prisoners, not to mention that Native Americans proportionately have more people incarcerated than any other group of people in this country. And I think Kiilu was right on. We have a sub-human conscience in this country that has been corroded, corrupted, and we need to regain our humanity. One thing that Yogi said when I was up there, and this is the quote I wanted to read and I’ll insert it here. He said, “If you want to change the world, change yourself. We have a society of half-people, to have a whole society, we need whole people.” And that’s what he’s about is transforming himself. And that’s really why he is still locked up in Pelican Bay. Because it’s not about rehabilitation, it’s about domination. And the prison system wants to break your will, they want to dominate you and they want you to submit. And it’s like a man-over-a-dog kind of environment, and they want you to submit, and they want to rub your nose in it. And then maybe, maybe they’ll let you out. And because he’s not gonna submit, because he’s proud, because he has dignity, and integrity…

Kiilu: ...and he will maintain it at all costs
Gordon: Yes.

Kiilu: Yes. And that’s why I love and respect him so much. I don’t know too many other people in the world who have the kind of integrity and uncompromising principles and great love that Yogi has. And he would be an incredible role model. Also, I want to throw in another thing. Yogi is so principled that when he first went on the yard at San Quentin—you know how segregated it is, it’s divided into basically Mexican, Whites and Blacks. And years ago, back in the 1960s, it was very segregated and you didn’t cross those lines. So, Hugo identifies as a Black Nicaraguan, and the Mexicans wanted him to, well, because he is bilingual, they expected him to hang with them. And he had Black friends that he knew from the Fillmore and hangin’ out in the streets here and he wasn’t about to give up his friends, and so he stuck with the Blacks. And of course when you break ranks in prison, Bato can tell you, they don’t like that. So the guards had it in for him right away. Then, when he became politicized with George Jackson and W. L. Nolen and Howard Tole and they started turning a criminal mentality into a revolutionary mentality, and fighting racism in the prison, and started trying to unite prisoners of all ethnicities, then Hugo was of great value and an even greater threat because he’s bilingual. He could unite, potentially unite Blacks and Mexicans. So, he’s been locked up all this time because they really want to break him. And I want to just share one more thing that gives you an insight into Hugo’s personality. When Geronimo [Pratt] came out and I interviewed him on Free Radio Berkeley after 27 years [in prison], he talked about Yogi. And he said Yogi could be out on the yard and if some brother that he didn’t even know was being assaulted by a guard, Yogi would come to his defense. He would jump in and of course wind up in the Hole himself. I’ve had letters from Yogi where he would tell me about—he loved W.L. Nolen and he knew Cleveland Edwards and Sweet Jugs Miller, the three who were killed in the yard at Soledad in January 1970 which precipitated the Soledad Brother’s case. Yogi was telling me about Cleve and he said W.L. was thrown in the Hole and they were worried about him, so they caught a case by getting beat up themselves and thrown in the Hole so they could go see about W.L. This is the kind of brother we’re talking about. We’re talking about a brother who is really standup. I mean if he’s got your back, your back is covered.
Bato: Yeah, I remember a lot of times when there was a so-called ass-whoopin’ to be given out, Hugo usually was the one. And even though we was going to trial, during the San Quentin Six trial, the judge had told the prison guards there at San Quentin to bring us to court no matter what. We decided we were going to protest going to court that morning because of the horrible conditions they had us in, all chained up, they had dog collars on us at the time, and Kiilu, I remember, you had to go into court with 30 pounds of chains.

Yeah. So, we had one of the chains, pretty loathsome, pretty odious that was the chain that went around your neck that was held by the escort, the guy behind you. We thought that was one too many chains for us. So the guards came in and seeing that we were going to protest and the judge in charge of our trial had given them permission to beat us up and stuff, they went in with the whole thing, put on their attack gear, came in with their Billy clubs and they brought gas with ‘em that morning, they brought these big old canisters, you know this was gas during the Vietnam time and they brought it into the cell block and it was like, Oh boy! We all got gassed and shot and stuff, but Hugo, they went for him fi

First. I always regretted the fact that if I had not proposed this taking a stand, maybe Hugo, but Hugo just laughed, later, you know, he just laughed about it. He’s always been that kind of self-sacrificing kind of person. He’s always put himself out there to get hurt fi

First, you know, or to help others, regardless of whether it was going to hurt him or not. But we want to turn and ask comrade Nedzada more of her impressions on her visit talking with Hugo.

Nedzada: Thank you. Well, one of the first things I remember is that he kept asking me about me and you know, I didn’t know how to react. Because I went in there and I was like, what am I gonna talk about and you know, I wonder what his life in there is like because when we write letters, you know, he just kind of helps me out with my problems, which is weird because I have all these people out here around me and I can get advice and just talk to people and he can’t. And then we went in there and he wanted to talk about me. So what’s going on with your little sister, and you know, how you been, and how’s work and are you going to school and everything, and I was like, Wow. This man really cares about something other than himself. But, yeah, I just had a very, very—it was a new, new experience in my life. I’ve never met anybody that was, you know, anywhere close to him.
**Bato:** Well, I have been into the SHU, allowed just one time, the only time I got to see Hugo. It’s been about ten years, you know. I somehow was allowed that one time to go in and visit as an investigator with the California Prison Focus monitoring group that went in and we saw each other briefly. And it was like, five minutes of kinda like us not really believing who we were seeing was really who we were seeing because he kept asking me if I was Bato, and I telling him “Yeah!” But he said he had never seen me in a suit. He said you look like a lawyer. And I go yeah, well, for the purposes of seeing you (Laughter). But also I know what it was to go in there, and it turned my stomach going through the security, through the dungeon, through the bars, hearing the clanging doors, you know, the rattle of keys; it’s just unnerving, you know. And for me it was a psychological first to go back into the dungeon-keep that I had left years before.

**Kiilu:** And I give you high praise, Bato, because I have been dealing with prisoners for over 35 years or something and very, very few will ever go back because of what you’re saying. And so for you to overcome that and go anyway, I think you deserve kudos.

**Nedzada:** I want to say when you spoke about psychological torture, I mean, that’s just the most beautiful place [pristine redwood territory] that I’ve been to, like, it had all these trees, and these little rivers, and our drive up there was so nice, but…

**Bato:** Crescent City is beautiful, yeah.

**Nedzada:** And then to think that these people are in there but they can’t see any of this stuff, they can’t even look outside. It was very hard; it was hard in that sense. And then, you know we talked a little bit about just what it was like in there and he talked about how they separated a lot of the people that were near his cell block so now he really has nobody to talk to. He mentioned that a lot of people in there—I guess that’s one of their tactics—that if they tell you something for long enough you’ll end up believing it. And he said they’ve accused a lot of people of being gang-affiliated, and they started to believe it. They just walk around and they’re like, yeah, I’m this big shot and this and that …

**Bato:** Yeah, psychological, I think, right.
Nedzada: He said, I refuse to because I was not in a gang. I’m not that, I’m not what they say I am. And it was just, like wow!

Bato: Yeah, Hugo was always been a revolutionary. He’s gotten away from the criminal mentality mode, I mean 20, 30 years ago. I mean it’s like everybody gets caught up in that, you know, and some people never get out of that criminal mentality mode. But through the teachings of Che Guevara and Ho Chi Min, and Malcolm X and George Jackson, there are prisoners today, I believe tens of thousands of them who are politically conscious. It’s a perfect place for the revolutionary spirit to manifest itself, to show itself. But we want to once again turn to ask attorney Gordon Kaupp, what’s the next phase for the struggle for Hugo Pinell legal-wise?

Gordon: The next phase is his parole board hearing, which is on July 10th [postponed until November], and I’m going to go up there with Yogi and we’re going to present his case before the Board of Prison Terms. And we’re going to have to face these cold commissioners who lack humanity and will be evaluating his case. And my job essentially is to take away any excuses that they have to deny him parole. And I do not expect, and he does not expect to walk out of there because one of the things that they hold against him is the fact that he is still housed in the SHU. And so another thing that we have to do after this parole board hearing is get him out of the SHU. And we have to get his case before the courts. And we’re going to have to fight that very, very hard. But I want to go back to one thing, Bato, that you said before and that is you were in there, you were part of the San Quentin Six and like you said, Yogi is one of the guys who stood up for everybody and the Department of Corrections has not forgotten that. Although people have changed, the institutional memory has remained. And he stands out in their minds. He told me that the old prison guards, from way back in San Quentin came by on a tour. They got together, drove all the way up to Pelican Bay to see him because the prison guards up there now had said that they had broken his spirit. He said they walked by his cell and he had a big smile for them and “I remember you”, and immediately, their smiles turned to frowns. A lot of people have been let out, but he’s remained. Because their job, as they see it, is to break him.

Bato: I believe what you’re saying is true. It’s very, very detestable, but they would come into the Adjustment Center [the hole] to see if any of us
had been broken by the treatment, by the every day—[you’re] just a nervous wreck in there with all the commotion and all the noise. It’s like an insane asylum. And so Hugo Pinell has put up with that for 42 years and he is still somebody, when you see him, he radiates, you know. He’s somebody who …

Kiilu: He does that.

Bato: He’s created his own light in there, you know. He’s always had that ability to do that. He generates light. He generates goodness and kindness and absolute strength, you know, the kind of strength that you can only acquire from 42 years within the California prison system. So, Kiilu, we’re gonna have to get off the line pretty soon, but do you have anything else that we can read from Hugo, because like I said, he’s just a great correspondent, and I wish there would be a booklet put out on his behalf, that would have just some of his really, really courageous and humanitarian letters in them.

Kiilu: Well, here’s a paragraph that was written after the last board hearing.

I was denied two more years. Some lady DA from Marin County was present to speak out about the S.Q. 1971 incident, how bad I am, even though we never met, and why I shouldn’t be released. It’s really blanked up, you know, how the deck is stacked up against Rue and I.

He’s talking about Ruchell Magee. Don’t forget, Ruchell Magee is always a year ahead of Yogi, so he’s been in there 43 years, and of course he’s the trophy for the Marin Court House rebellion, the sole survivor of that case. He was Angela Davis’ co-defendant.


Kiilu: August 7, 1970. Black August. If I can briefly mention Chip Fitzgerald, the first Black Panther railroaded to Death Row, and fortunately the death penalty was rescinded in 1972, so he got off death row, but he is still doing life. Chip is closing in on 40 years in prison. We have the New York Three who are 30 some years in prison now. Nuh, one of the New York Three, passed away a few years ago, but Herman Bell … and Jalil Muntaqin [Anthony Bottom] is coming before the board again very shortly,
we should find him on the web site or through the San Francisco Bay View web site, http://www.sfbayview.com and find there’s a current article about his case, so you should support him and write letters for his release. We’ve got Leonard Peltier, we’ve got Marilyn Buck, who just had another board hearing and Assata Shakur in exile. We have so many political prisoners that I can’t even name them off the top, Eddie Conway, Mutulu Shakur, Sundiata Acoli ...

**Bato:** Ramsey Nunez and Alvaro Hernandez, Oscar Fernandez Rivera

**Kiilu:** Yes, Mumia Abu Jamal—who himself is before the courts now and if he loses this one he’s on a fast track to execution. So, we really have our work cut out for us, folks, there are so many prisoners’ lives we must save.

**Bato:** We don’t want to forget all of John Africa’s people in prison.

**Kiilu:** Oh yes! the MOVE Nine, absolutely, and one of them died, so there are really, literally eight MOVE members still locked up in prison doing up to 100 years for the death of one police officer killed in friendly fire. Even the judge said, “I don’t know who shot the officer.” We have a total picture of total injustice in this country. Mumia’s obviously framed. Now it’s in Congress. They’re trying to get France to take away the street they named for Mumia Abu-Jamal in a [French] town, a suburb of Paris. And he’s been named an honorary citizen there and the last person named an honorary citizen was Pablo Picasso. So, there you have it. Mumia, our wonderful, brilliant journalist, keeps us posted with his commentaries.

**Bato:** Thank you very much Kiilu, you know, we’re at a quarter of an hour, we’re going to have to be fading out here, we want to thank …

**Kiilu:** Yeah, thank you so much, Bato, for all your good work with Prison Focus, I’m a regular listener.

**Bato:** Thank you very much, Kiilu. You put a light in that man’s dungeon-keep, let me tell you …

**Kiilu:** Well, listen he lit me up too, don’t forget! (laughter)

**Bato:** Well, you stay lit, Kiilu!
Hugo Pinell (also known as Yogi Bear) has been in California prisons since he was 19 years old. He is 61 on March 10, 2007. His original case (an assault charge for which he turned himself in) would have cost the average citizen a few years in prison. Hugo became politicized by revolutionary prisoners such as W.L. Nolen and George Jackson, who promoted revolution amongst prisoners and organized resistance to the racist attacks against them. They wanted fair treatment and opportunity for a good life when they left prison. On August 21, 1971, Jackson was murdered in the yard at San Quentin in an alleged escape attempt. Six prisoners were put on trial for the murders and assaults of three guards and two inmate trustees during the incident. Hugo is the only one of the six who remains in prison. He is now in his 40th year of continuous custody. Thirty-four of those years have been in solitary confinement.

Hugo is kept in the infamous Pelican Bay Security Housing Unit (SHU) in the northwest corner of California near Oregon. The prison is solid gray concrete and the SHU is windowless with only doors for entrance, like a large tomb. It is “hi-tech”, with automatic doors and gates and only artificial light. Even the so-called yard is nothing more than a “dog run” or outdoor closet with 20 foot high walls covered on top with Plexiglas. SHU prisoners are locked down 24/7 except for a possible hour on the “dog run” where they can exercise alone with no equipment whatsoever. They are not permitted any arts and crafts, and only a very limited number of books and property. They are chained hand and foot whenever they leave their cells, escorted by two prison guards. Visits are limited to week-ends and holidays and are less than two hours. Visits are conducted in a “phone booth”. They cannot call outside. In short, Yogi’s mother, who has been visited him for all these years, has not been able to hug her son in 30 years.

Hugo Pinell
#A88401
P.O. Box 7500
SHU-D
Crescent City
California 95531
July 28, 2006

Greetings,

I am writing to thank you for your support, love and concern in my bid for release at my fifth parole board appearance. Sadly, release wasn’t granted. Instead I’ve received once again, an additional two year hit for the fifth time “due to the seriousness of the crime, release at this time would undermine respect for the law”.

This is a standard, pat answer based upon political views (the governor continually insists that violent felony offenders should not receive parole) rather than the application of the law. We are going to appeal.

Naturally that brings up the need for your continued support. You have been strong for me over this difficult period and I ask you for that support and commitment awhile longer. I have already submitted my appeal papers. I now await the transcripts from the parole board hearing. It is from those transcripts and our strategy that I hope to secure release via the courts.

As things develop, I will update everyone through mail and the web page www.sethhayes.org.

It is hoped that the court will agree that there is unreasonableness by the parole commissioner’s decision and opt for another hearing that follows the guidelines of parole law rather than the implicit political stance of the governor. Again thank you for your continued show of love and support. I look forward to seeing your efforts in the vanguard of the future. We are correct, and we will win.

In struggle,
Robert Seth Hayes
BPP/BLA PP/POW 2006

Please address all correspondence to:
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#74A2280
Wende Correctional Facility
P.O. Box 1187, 3622 Wende Road
Alden, New York 14004-1187 USA
Robert ‘Seth’ Hayes is one of the longest-held political prisoners in the USA. Born in the Bronx in 1948, Seth was imprisoned due to his activity in the Black Panther Party and the Black Liberation Army, a fighting formation which grew out of the Black liberation movement of the 1960s.

It was in the period of social upheaval in the late 1960s that Seth was radicalized and joined the Black Panther Party and later the Black Liberation Army. Drafted in the US Army and sent off to fight in Vietnam, Seth was wounded and awarded a variety of military awards including the Purple Heart, the National Defense Service Medal, the Vietnam Service Medal, and the Vietnam Campaign Medal. Back in the US, when riots exploded across the nation in response to the April 4, 1968 assassination of Martin Luther King, Seth’s troop was ordered to assist in putting down the massive rebellions which took place and spread across the United States. According to Seth, “It was the saddest day of my life, and I could never identify again with the aims of the armed forces of the government.”

After the assassination of Martin Luther King and the social upheaval which followed it, Robert Seth Hayes joined the Black Panther Party, working in the Party’s free medical clinics and free breakfast programs. Seth, like many other activists was then forced underground by FBI and police repression of the Panther movement.

In 1973, following a shootout with police, Seth was arrested and convicted of the murder of a New York City policy officer, and sentenced to 25 years to life in prison. Seth has always maintained his innocence. Jailed for over 30 years, Seth has long since served the time he was sentenced to, and while in prison he has worked as a librarian, pre-release advisor, and AIDS counsellor. He has remained drug and alcohol free throughout his entire period of incarceration and has maintained a charge free record in prison. Seth first came up for parole in 1998, but prison officials have refused to release him, and are effectively punishing him for having been a member of the Black Panther Party, and of having remained true to his ideals after 30 years behind bars.

Seth has been diagnosed with Hepatitis C and adult onset Diabetes since the year 2000. Unfortunately, despite his repeated requests Seth has not been receiving adequate health care … and his condition has deteriorated.
Two More Black Activists Resist and are Jailed:
October 5, 2005
Claude Marks

A San Francisco Judge had two Black activists jailed today for refusing to co-operate with a State Grand Jury investigating a 30 year old case. Ray Boudreaux and Richard Brown now join Hank Jones and Harold Taylor in SF County jails.

Their attorneys argued that the Grand Jury procedures were abusive because the original indictments for a police shooting in 1971 resulted in the dismissal of charges because the US government failed to disclose that their “evidence” was obtained by torturing at least three Black activists in New Orleans. This “tainted evidence” and “involuntary testimony” were introduced to a grand jury at that time by the same government agents that are working with the current grand jury.

Judge Robert Dondero refused to allow the defense questioning of Ed Erdelatz, one of the cops on hand in New Orleans, who was present in court today, and who has been roaming the country in an apparent attempt to interview numerous individuals alleged to be involved with or have knowledge of the 1970s incidents.

All other motions by defense attorneys Michael Burt and Richard Mazer were denied. An appeal to the State Supreme Court challenging procedural and other legal claims by the defense team are expected to be filed Thursday, October 6th.

BACKGROUND ON THE GRAND JURY TARGETING BLACK ACTIVISTS IN SAN FRANCISCO

Shortly after the founding of the Black Panther Party, FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover described it in September 1968 as “the greatest threat to the internal security of the country”. By July 1969, the Party had become the primary focus of COINTELPRO and was the target of 233 of the 295 authorized “Black Nationalist” COINTELPRO actions. The FBI placed illegal wiretaps on Party headquarters in Oakland and San Francisco, and nationally, infiltrated the organization with numerous agents, used every possible means to provoke violence within the organization and engaged in a number of schemes to arrest, detain, falsely accuse, incarcerate and murder members of the Black Panther Party.¹

The San Francisco Police Department worked closely with the FBI during the sixties and seventies to promote the goals of “neutralizing”
and destroying the Black Panther Party. Two of the San Francisco Police Department Inspectors who worked in tandem with the FBI to promote these goals were Frank McCoy and Ed Erdelatz.

In August 1973, several Black Panthers, including John Bowman, Ruben Scott and Harold Taylor, were arrested in New Orleans. McCoy and Erdelatz were on hand in New Orleans immediately after their arrest (as were detectives from New York City) and participated in the interrogation that took place over the course of several days. They were investigating the killings of two San Francisco policemen that took place in the early 1970s.

When Bowman, Scott and Taylor didn’t answer questions by McCoy and Erdelatz, the San Francisco policemen exited the room and members of the New Orleans Police Department proceeded to torture the detainees using various methods including the following:

- Stripping them naked and beating them with blunt objects
- Blindfolding them and throwing wool blankets soaked in boiling water over their bodies
- Placing electric probes on their genitals and other parts of their bodies
- Inserting an electric cattle prod in their anus
- Punching and kicking
- Slamming them into walls while blindfolded

Their screams were heard throughout the jail. After a period of torture, McCoy and Erdelatz would return to the room, and continue questioning them. Each time the answers they sought were not forthcoming, the San Francisco police would leave the room and the torture would resume. This process lasted several days. The three men were interrogated separately and were held in solitary confinement. Bowman, Scott and Taylor all suffered permanent physical and psychological damage.

These two Inspectors are not new to accusations of physical abuse as the San Francisco Examiner ran a series of stories in the 1970s suggesting McCoy and Erdelatz had coerced testimony from a witness connected to a Chinatown slaying.

In 2003, McCoy and Erdelatz began roaming the country in an apparent attempt to interview numerous individuals alleged to be involved with or have knowledge of the 1970s incidents. At times they were joined by San
Francisco Police Inspector and FBI Special Federal Officer Joseph Engler. They went to people’s homes and places of employment. They visited prisoners in the New York State prisons where they were incarcerated. They attempted to interview spouses, former spouses and family members. At least one person in the Bay Area was commandeered off the street as he drove home from work and taken for interrogation. They used thinly veiled threats, intimidation and harassment. They demanded that some individuals provide saliva samples. Some people were served with federal grand jury subpoenas to provide fingerprints.

The actions of McCoy, Engler and Erdelatz in 2003 and 2004 were connected to a federal grand jury sitting in the Northern District of California also investigating the incidents that are the focus of these grand juries. In the summer of 2004, the federal grand jury expired. In May 2005, a California State grand jury was convened and began taking testimony regarding these same incidents. That grand jury was purportedly investigative in nature. It was expected that the government would next present evidence to an indicting grand jury. However, in August 2005 another investigative grand jury was convened. This time a group of people identified by the government as targets were subpoenaed. Both of these grand juries were conducted by the California State Attorney General rather than the San Francisco District Attorney’s office. Working in tandem with the state AG was an Assistant United States Attorney.

The full role of the federal government in this investigation is yet to be revealed. What is clear is that no federal, state or city agent or police officer nor government agency has ever been held culpable for the illegal acts, violence, imprisonment and murders conducted in the name of COINTELPRO nor has there been any admission that these activities are continuing under the Patriot Act or under any other name.

**Endnote**

Claude Marks is the Project Director of the “Freedom Archives”, a non-profit project that is organizing over 5,000 hours of radical oral history dating from the late 1960s to the mid-1990s. He is a former political prisoner who served time for a conspiracy to break two Puerto Rican and Black political prisoners out of Leavenworth. Claude taught English as a second language, literacy, writing and history inside.

Under Claude’s direction, the “Freedom Archives” has developed a youth training curriculum and has released documentary CDs and videos combining restored historical audio and contemporary interviews. The videos focus on Jalil Muntaqim, David Gilbert and Nuh Washington. “Prisons on Fire” focuses on George Jackson and the Attica Rebellion, Robert Williams and, most recently, a special DVD historical documentary on the Black Panther Party. Claude remains a prison activist and uses media to educate and advocate for prison abolition and the freeing of all political prisoners. His most recent focus has been on building a defense for the 2005 Grand Jury attempt to frame five former members of the Black Panther Party for a 34 year old case in San Francisco involving an attack on a police precinct following the assassination of George Jackson. A DVD documentary titled, “Legacy of Torture: The War Against the Black Liberation Movement” is on the case and can be ordered from the “Freedom Archives”.

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Editor’s Note:
On January 23, 2007, seven men, all suspected Black Liberation Army members, were charged with conspiracy and the 1971 murder of a police officer, 36 years after the alleged event. They are Herman Bell and Anthony Bottom (Jalil Muntaqim), both incarcerated in New York State, Ray Michael Boudreaux, Richard Brown, Henry Jones. Francisco Torres and Harold Taylor.
Revive the Federal Parole System

Sundiata Acoli

PAROLE CHAIR WHO DENIED SUNDIATA PAROLE LINKED TO MOBSTERS

Andrew Consovoy is the New Jersey Parole Board member, along with then Chairperson, Mary DiSabato, who denied Sundiata parole and gave him a 20 year “hit” in 1993. By the summer of 1998, Disabato had quietly resigned and Governor Christine Whitman quietly elevated Consovoy to Chairman of the Parole Board without the normal media announcements and fanfare usually accompanying the appointment of a new Chairman. Friends of Consovoy were not so reserved. They held a lively celebration of his promotion at Trenton’s “Roma” restaurant, and guess who came to dinner? Well, there was Consovoy, the guest of honor, and Dennis Steo who apparently paid for the party. Steo had been released by Consovoy and the rest of the Parole Board in 1995 after serving a lengthy sentence for two murders. Law enforcement sources said Steo used to be the enforcer for the Philadelphia mob. His boss was Albert “Red” Potani, reputedly a made member of the organization. Party guests saw Consovoy walk over, shake hands and sit down in conversation with Steo.

Also present at the party was Joseph “Gus” Ferrera, who Consovoy admits is one of his best friends. Ferrera is an ex-con and former jail guard who was convicted in the late 1970s for helping Robert Spagnola escape from the Essex County jail. Spagnola was a Newark police officer and county sheriff officer before he started shaking down drug dealers. He moved on to run the Lucchese crime family’s sport gambling operation in New Jersey and has been in and out of prison many times since. Ferrera was sentenced to three years with a mandatory two years in prison without parole in the Spagnola affair, yet Ferrera was paroled after seven months. Before his parole was over he was hired by New Jersey state to be an “ombudsman” for the Department of Corrections (DOC). At the time Consovoy was in charge of co-ordinating gubernatorial appointments for the Governor. Ferrera is 72 years old and draws a paycheck of $73,000 for the unusual Passaic County Jail job of helping prisoners prepare for parole. No other county jail has such a post. Although Ferrera is a DOC employee, not a Parole Board employee, he’s frequently seen at the Parole Board Office in Trenton and has considerable access to Consovoy, Parole Board employees say.

Consovoy recently attended the wedding of Ferrera’s daughter and also used Ferrera’s condo in Marco Island, Florida, this spring for vacation.
Ferrera is the cousin of Michael Taccetta, the former New Jersey boss of the Lucchese Family. Consovoy’s son played on the basketball team with the son of Marty Taccetta, Michael’s younger brother who’s also a reported mobster. Consovoy said naturally he got to know Marty Taccetta, but the link was purely social. Consovoy is the target of a state criminal investigation into the possible early release of a number of mobsters or others with “connections”. One released was Clifton mobster, Samuel Corsaro, known to law enforcement sources as a major figure in the Gambino crime family. Corsaro walked out of prison on February 14th, after serving minimum time for parole despite a long prison record and previous parole violations. Another is Jason J. Guerrera, the son of a Superior Court judge in Atlantic City, who served twenty months on a seven year term for manslaughter. His accomplice is still in prison. Consovoy will also be questioned about the backlog of thousands of prisoners who have waited months and even years after their eligibility dates to have their cases heard by the Parole Board. The overwhelming majority, 90 per cent, of New Jersey’s prisoners are Black or Latino.

Consovoy is the same Parole Board member who vilified Sundiata in the media and crowed about giving him the 20 year hit, the longest in state history. All the while, he was quietly giving preferential treatment and early releases to his pal mobsters. Sundiata’s lawyers appealed Consovoy and the Parole Board’s decision on grounds that it was biased and an abuse of their power. Sundiata has done almost 28 years in prison.

A fair court decision could result in an order that Sundiata be paroled.

**WHAT YOU CAN DO**

Under the present system most federal prisoners must serve 85 per cent of their sentences before being released. Almost no provisions exist for federal prisoners to earn early release through good behavior, superior work performance, outstanding achievements and the like. A federal prisoner sentenced to 10 years today must serve 8 and a half years before being released; one sentenced to 20 years must serve 17 years before release, no ifs, ands or buts.

Under the old Federal Parole System all first-offenders were eligible for parole after serving one-third of their sentence. Also, most were actually
paroled after completing one-third of their sentence and all reached “mandatory release” upon serving two-thirds of their sentence. A federal prisoner sentenced to 10 years under the old laws was usually paroled after doing three and one-third years and reached mandatory release at six and two-thirds years; one sentenced to 20 years was normally paroled after six and two-thirds years, or received mandatory release after 13 and one-third years.

Now Congressman Danny Davis (D-IL) has introduced to the House, HR 3072, a bill “To Revive the System of Parole for Federal Prisoners”. In order to get this bill passed he needs the support of other congresspersons nation-wide.

Write and/or call your Congressperson (see below for contact information) and urge him/her to co-sponsor HR 3072, a bill “To Revive the System of Parole for Federal Prisoners”, so that:

- Your family member, loved one or friend in the federal prison may be released early and reunited with you earlier;
- Billions of tax dollars being spent to confine mostly non-violent drug offenders can be saved or diverted to better and proven methods of solving drug abuse and addiction problems; and/or,
- A safer society can be built by promoting rehabilitation, shorter incarceration times for deserving prisoners, relief of dangerous prison overcrowding, prohibition of another wasteful and futile spree of prison-building and promotion of a better use of public funds to strengthen needed social programs.

After you write and/or call your Congressperson, get your family members and friends to write/call their Congresspersons.

To get your Congresspersons address(es) and telephone numbers access http://www.visi.com/juan/congress and click on your state. It will give you all contact information for your Congressperson. Write your Congressperson at her/his local office. It will reach him/her faster. Letters to his/her Washington D.C. address will be delayed several months while being checked for anthrax.
Learn more about Sundiata Acoli at www.afrikan.net/sundiata and www.assataashakur.org and write to him at:

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National Jericho Movement
P.O. Box 340084
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REFERENCES

The Court: Mr. Conway, I’m going to warn you right now on the record that unless you behave yourself…

(The remainder of the Court’s remarks inaudible because of the defendant’s interruption.)

The Defendant: Behave myself? I want an attorney of my choice. What you mean, why don’t you behave yourself? You said I could have an attorney of my choice. I give you a name and you’re going to tell me behave myself and give me somebody who you hope to participate in the railroad job.

The Court: Mr. Conway, would you allow me to make one statement? That is this—I’m formally advising you and warning you that if you persist in this conduct, the trial will go forward without you. You will remain outside of the courtroom.

The Defendant: The trial will go forward without me if you don’t let me have an attorney of my choice. If you’re going to give me an attorney that I don’t desire to have on a homicide charge, then the trial will go forward without me, because I’m not going to participate in it, because I have an attorney of my choice, and you will not allow him to be here. So it’s your trial.

The Court: All right. Now would you care to be seated, or do you wish to leave the court room?

The Defendant: Right. I wish to leave the courtroom. (Holds hands up to be cuffed) Look, the man asked me did I want to go. I want to go.

The Court: All right.

The Defendant: Look, I’m not going to be taking part in this madness.
CHILDHOOD

My earliest memories are from 1951, and they are the typical remembrances of a boy growing up in America at that time ... like my first train set ... or the little red wagon which was a gift from my favorite uncle. Yet some recollections are less typical; one in particular still burns in my memory as the quintessential experience of oppressed people in this country. I can remember being very, very thirsty one afternoon, and this thirst led me into the house looking for something to quench it. My family members were out in the backyard doing summertime things, but I needed a drink badly. Too short to reach the faucet, I spotted a glass of water sitting on the sink counter top, and I knew if I tried real hard I could just reach it. I did, and I got it.

Looking back upon that incident years later makes me wonder if this wasn’t some sort of omen, a terrible portend warning me of things to come. For, that glass of clear liquid that had sat there above my head on that counter calling out my thirst, soon had me choking and clinching my throat in both pain and agony. In my quest for relief I had drank nearly half a glass of bleach. My first memorable adventures in America had begun and they were caustic!

The forced acceptance of White supremacy in every aspect of life in this country is akin to that drink. It began with the myth of superiority that has been perpetuated by whites to justify the theft of resources, conquest, genocide and enslavement of other groups and has resulted in an internalized belief by African descended people that we are somehow inferior. Therefore many of us accept the lie that conformity to the dominant culture will make us better. Yet those pieces of the spirit that remain untouched by the lies and mythology force us to choke on this toxic truth.

During those years we lived in Cherry Hill, a neighborhood on the outskirts of Baltimore proper. The community was an all Black development with mostly low and middle income residents. Although it would soon become one of the largest housing projects on the east coast, it was still under construction when I became aware of my surroundings. We were a rather large family living under one roof. There was my grandfather and grandmother, my mother and father, two aunts and uncle and my sister and me. My grandmother had come to Baltimore from Virginia and my grandfather was thought to have come to America from the West Indies. I later learned that it was more likely that he was mixed race, probably Black
and Pacific Islander. Together my grandparents had three girls, my mother and her two sisters. My sister and I were the only grandchildren from this union at that time. There would be more children to come. Although my sister Cookie was a year older than I, she was always so small that it looked and felt as if I was her big brother.

We eventually moved to a house in a West Baltimore neighborhood that was set for demolition in order to build a new police station, and so we were given 90 days to move. After a while we settled in East Baltimore near the intersection of Preston Street and Milton Avenue. The formerly all White community was just becoming an integrated neighborhood, and ours was only the second black family to live in the area.

I was getting older and like many of my friends I was into riding bikes and traveling into the surrounding communities. There, we would get into scrapes with the white kids whose families hadn’t moved further away yet. The blistering Baltimore summer presented the backdrop for an ongoing battle with these kids. It was as if we had discovered a new land, and conquest presented the possibility of an abundant treasure trove. We would take their radios when we could, and their baseball gloves and bikes if the opportunity presented itself. There has always been this expectation of aggression where the Black male is concerned, and we were simply living up to it like a child who inherits the legacy attached to a nickname, misnomer though it may be.

Our childhood excursions had evolved into real raids and forays into the nearby White neighborhoods for larger and more needed material goods. No property was safe from confiscation, neither was any person invulnerable to shake down. Whites in cars in our community, those riding through on buses, their stores were all fair game. The older brothers in the community had set the pace and some of us younger brothers were trying to live up to their examples. Somehow we all knew, or at least believed, that our stuff had been stolen by them, and we were just getting it back using similar methods.

The varying shades of African descended people, the lack of a connection to a language, a culture, and land can only suggest like a whispered threat the depth of the true larceny.

Soon I had a summer job with some of the older brothers from the community who peddled goods from horse-drawn carts; in Baltimore this phenomena is referred to as “Arabbing”. We went from neighborhood to
neighborhood selling fruits, vegetables, and fish. I was finally making a few dollars and in the process seeing more of the city, and I took everything in with the interest of someone waking up to a new environment. In my observations I became aware of some things that had never before entered into my consciousness; many of the older brothers who worked on theses wagons had heroin habits, and the difference between Black and White neighborhoods was stark.

*I saw a Baltimorean*

*Keep looking straight at me.*

Now I was eight and very small
And he was no whit bigger,
And so I smiled, but he poked out
His tongue, and called me, “Nigger”.

*I saw the whole of Baltimore*

*From May until December;*

*Of all the things that happened there*

*That’s all that I remember.*

It was as clear in what it stated about wealth and affluence as was the difference between white marble steps and rotting wooden ones. The contrast between clean and dirty streets, and blocks lined with trees and well-tended lawns compared to block after block of cement sidewalks with bars and liquor stores dispersed throughout, said more to me than all of the stories of inequality and injustice that I had heard growing up. On the one hand there were few, if any YMCAs, Lion’s Clubs, parks, and swimming pools, while the other neighborhoods had far too many. This all demonstrated the difference between Black and White, poverty and wealth in Baltimore during that time. I was aware of all of this, but didn’t fully understand it nor would I really begin to question the cause of such disparity for some years.

My own community was always full of people hanging on the street corners and police cars patrolling the blocks. It all seemed so normal, since there were so many fights. I soon found myself hanging on these same street
corners with everyone else until all hours of the night. There just was not anywhere else to go or anything else to do that didn’t require money, and it wasn’t long before I started to run with a group of brothers who were into stealing cars and joy riding in the outlying communities. We would go to dances in our new cars and pick up girls to ride around with us. Drinking and partying became a way to duck the reality that nothing else was happening for us.

*An uncertain future and a sense of hopelessness came to define the status quo for many young Black men in the urban landscape of 1960s US as industry died and jobs dwindled.*

Around this time, a few of my friends and I started talking about going into the army. The more I thought about it the better it looked and I saw it as an opportunity to get out of the ghetto. My girlfriend was getting bigger and bigger with each passing day and I would soon be a father. So I decided to join up and take a new direction.

The process itself took only a few days and before I knew it I was in a basic training camp in Georgia. After many weeks of long hard training in wet, muddy, Georgia backwoods where it seemed like everyday was a rainy day, I was headed to advanced training at Fort Sam in Houston, Texas for training as a medical corpsman. There I would spend another three months that were spiced with trips to Mexico and other points west. I was beginning to see the world, be it only in the western hemisphere at this point. I was rather proud of myself when I finished the school in the top ten of our class.

Fortunately, I had begun to learn my work so well that I was able to operate in a fairly independent manner. Any time something happened or someone got hurt they would send for me or one of the two senior medics, and at this point I was doing jobs that other members of the unit were assigned to do. This led to a promotion that was based in part on my ability to complete assigned tasks, and the fact that I passed every test and training course they gave me. Within 18 months I received another promotion to the rank of sergeant. This would lead to contact with other brothers from different units and battalions.

I was now free to roam wherever I wanted to without reporting to anyone but my unit commander. The knowledge that I began to acquire about the army from this position led to my shock and surprise. I had always been willing to listen to the problems of other brothers and now several Black GIs
who'd heard from others that I was a standup type sergeant started coming to me with all types of reports. They informed me about Klan meetings in their billets at nights, unfair racial promotion policies, and like my own earlier experience, many of them reported that dirty duty details always went to Black GIs. Unfortunately, many of these things were beyond my ability to resolve. I believe it was simply the fact that these men saw me as a peer, even though I was a sergeant, that gave them hope.

The Klan situation was getting out of hand, however, and some of us decided to do something about that. We found out where they would be holding their next meeting. That night we went to the meeting and beat the shit out of them. They had been leaving KKK signs all over the place and we had had enough. We managed to get some other brothers promoted and organized the black GIs a little. No one thought the problem was anything other than a few racists in the armed forces. During this time I still had some White friends and I can remember right before becoming a sergeant my friend Turney, who was White but hung around with the brothers came running into the barracks looking for a few of us guys he hung around because he had gotten into a beef with a few hillbillies at the club we partied in.

We redoubled our efforts after seeing these hillbillies. They were huge. Turney was only about 5 foot 5 and 130 pounds. While the guy he had the beef with was at least 6 feet and close to 200 pounds. Nevertheless, there was no stopping the fight. So he asked me to make sure the guy’s buddy did not jump into the fight between them. I really didn’t think his buddy was needed, but while we were going outside I saw who his buddy was and I said a little prayer that this dude wouldn’t jump in. This was the biggest white man I ever saw. This guy was 6 foot 6 and pushing 270 pounds. The only thing wrong with this guy was that he had two eyes instead of the one I thought should have been in the middle of his forehead. The back of his hands could have been dragging the ground.

So Turney and the other dude squared off. Dumbo was right there beside his friend telling him not to worry about the niggers because he had them covered. I believed him so once Turney and the dude started to fight I decided to get my end of this thing over with. I jumped on Dumbo with both feet, hitting him with a flurry of rights and lefts that I could not count. I must have hit him at least a 100 times before he passed out and toppled over on me. The guy fell on me before I had time to back up off him and it was
all I could do to stay on my feet with 270 pounds of dead weight hanging across my shoulders. I didn’t dare try to roll out because I had no desire to end up on the ground with this dude asleep or awake. Finally after a few more punches in the ribs he toppled over in a ditch. Turney had beaten his hillbilly silly and we all left. On the way back to the billets Turney saw a lot of blood on my shirt and thought I got hurt. He wanted to go back and beat the dudes up some more. I was checking myself out too because I knew this guy never got a chance to hit me so we agreed that this dude bled all over me to get even. There were not many people that I would help in fight situations like that one but Turney was one of them and the fact that he was white did not seem in any way important to me at that time. I continued to deal with people on an equal and individual basis until one morning I was forced to a rude awakening.

Getting out of bed in the morning was never very easy for me, and this particular morning was no exception. Any eagerness to leave the comfort of my bunk was being hindered greatly by the after effects of my partying the night before. I’d had a few drinks too many. My assistant brought me breakfast and a newspaper, and the food and coffee was helping to get me ready for the day. The troops had been up and out for at least two hours. Rank having its privileges, I didn’t have to show up until I wanted to. I let my assistants alternate duties weekly; more work got done like that, and this seemed more effective than me hovering around.

As I sat there eating, my eyes scanned the morning newspaper. What I saw did more than free me from that hangover, it threw me into a rage. I could not believe that I was actually looking at a photograph of an American soldier aiming a 50 caliber machine gun at a group of unarmed, Black women gathered on a street corner in Newark, New Jersey, as they stood with their arms raised and fists clinched. The women were obviously discontented and angry as hell with the soldier who was perched safely atop the armored personal carrier, his hands planted firmly on the trigger of one of the Army’s most sophisticated weapon systems—right in the heart of a Black community.

Although I did not want to accept the realities suggested by the photograph, I was in a mild state of shock. I just stared at the picture until I was able to break away, only to find myself staring into my open locker at the heavily starched olive-green uniforms hanging there. On the sleeves of each were the symbols of my dedication, three neatly sewn yellow stripes.
The morning light reflected its rays off the highly polished boots that stood below the uniforms. The sunlight did not, however, help to illuminate for me the reality of what was happening in the world, nor did it shed any light on the unreal role I had been playing in it all. After all I was an American solder in Germany doing his part to uphold democracy and the great American principles of justice for all, freedom from oppression etc. etc. I was defending the American way of life—the right of all men to be free. Wasn’t I???

I just could not fathom what a White soldier, or any soldier for that matter would be doing on any corner in our country with that weaponry pointed at a group of unarmed Black women; American women. I couldn’t imagine why he was there, or what thoughts were going through his head as he held the possibility of life or death over dozens of Black women. American women.

I certainly could not conceive how anyone could require the order of such a show of force, let alone why anyone would follow such a command. But, the one thing I did know was that if that soldier would have sneezed more than half of those fragile Black bodies would have been dead. The faces in the photograph were not unlike the faces of the family and friends I had left behind. In fact, I had a growing sense of awareness that my family, my friends or even my mother could have just as easily been standing on the very same corner in Baltimore facing the same guns. In search of answers to the many questions that flooded my mind, I grabbed my robe and the newspaper and walked out into the hall.

There I stood in the middle of the hall stopping anyone I could find to ask them what they thought of the whole situation. To my dismay I could find no responses that were more than apathetic. My last hope for gaining some understanding and support was in finding my closest friends. I was sure that they, if anyone, could tell me just what the hell was going on and more importantly what we should be doing about it. It was about nine o’clock when I located them on the parade grounds. I was totally out of order to approach them in the middle of the parade ground dressed in my bathrobe, unshaven and with my hair obviously uncombed. To them it was not within the functions of a military encampment and I was looking wild to say the least.

However, at the time I could have cared less what the Army considered normal. In my estimation, that photograph demonstrated that the armed
forces and the government itself were behaving in an abnormal way toward the Black community. At that point I still did not understand that the show of force was actually typical of the government’s response to non-conformity on the part of People of color. So I naively posed my questions, but no answers were to be found among my friends. I left there with a feeling of dejection and made my way back to the confines of my quarters. Once again sitting on my bunk, I began to reflect on the past events in my life, the situations that had primed me for this awakening. I had always viewed each incidence of racist violence as an individual thing that was the act of some misguided bigot, or the action of irrational persons. Well suddenly I was being forced to view this as a government supported situation, perhaps even government directed. I sat there reflecting on the past couple of years.

We had all been kids when we signed up for the army; two friends, my future brother-in-law and myself. Having enlisted together, we had planned to stay together. Yet Uncle Sam had a different design; I was sent to Germany, and our two buddies stayed in the States. Unfortunately, my brother-in-law ended up in Vietnam and within 11 months of his arrival his lifeless body lay face down in the middle of a cow pasture where his squad had been ambushed. It took three months for me to receive word of his death. He was one of my closest friends and his death hit me hard. The loss of someone so young and vibrant always strikes at the heart. As youth we were so unprepared for death because we thought we would live forever. None of us could see the shadow of death that hung so heavily over our generation. Yet it was there, Vietnam. Angry and unable to articulate my feelings of loss and grief, I made plans to go.

I signed up for combat duty in Nam, and having less than a year left to serve, found out that I would have to re-enlist for two more years in order to be able to receive the training and serve a full tour. All I wanted was to go to Vietnam and sit behind a 50 caliber machine gun and kill as many Vietnamese as possible to avenge this death that I felt so much guilt about. My guilt stemmed from the fact that Boo had wanted to be like me so much that he had given little thought to joining the army, he had been following my lead. So I had begun to contemplate the best way to get the training and promotion I would need to have some control over my situation once I was in Vietnam.

Boo’s death had occurred some months before this newspaper photograph, and suddenly I was confronted with a new reality and I no longer wanted
to go to Vietnam and get my oppressor Jones off by killing people who had not done me any harm. The visions of stars and stripes had faded and I no longer felt that sense of loyalty to the red, white and blue. For me it was time to consider the red blood that was being spilled by Black bodies. My uncle a decade earlier, Boo, and now these women whose defiance made them targets, all represented the various degrees of sacrifice that we, the descendants of enslaved Africans, had made. So I wondered how the United States Army could be in Vietnam under the premise of protecting citizens’ rights there, yet standing ready to murder unarmed Black women in Newark.

I posed a question to myself: What was the difference between those Black women standing on that corner in America and the Vietnamese women standing at the edge of their villages? There was less difference and more commonality. The same government that my uncle and Boo had died for was now placing both groups of women in the crosshairs. It was then that I came to the realization that I was in the wrong Army. I would never wear that American uniform again as I had worn it all this time, with pride. I put on some civilian clothes and went to ask for emergency administrative leave.

**Home Is Where the Hatred Is**

When I returned to Baltimore I moved in with my mother, stepfather and three younger sisters. We lived on Federal Street, near Greenmount Avenue in what was and remains to this day a very impoverished neighborhood. This area of Baltimore is near the cemetery where Johns Hopkins and John Wilkes Booth are buried. Federal Street runs east to west and ends at the front wall of this cemetery, picking up on the other side. The poverty and despair found there create a literal deadend for a good number of the community’s residents, many of whom never get back up once they bump into that wall.

My son’s mother, Kay Rogers, moved into this house with us and later we were married and moved into an apartment on 25th Street. These times were to be the best time that I would spend with my son, Ronald, who by then was three years old. By the time I came home I had become motivated to help create changes in the Black community. The fact that Ronald would grow up into this world helped to push me into a more radical position and eventually made groups like the Panthers very appealing.
While we were committed to education, and knew the value of such books as *The Wretched of the Earth* (1968) by Frantz Fanon, it had long occurred to the party leadership that the best way to advance our communities was to *actively* address the problems that existed.

Every chapter [of the BPP] in the country had developed a free breakfast program in their community to feed hungry children. We started our program after polling the neighborhood for miles around our office to see if such a need existed and if a program would receive support from the family members if in fact we started it. Once we learned the results, which were strongly supportive of such a program, we began by contacting individuals and organizations that might help us locate a site from which to operate.

There was always real pressure on supporters to stop assisting the program. A 1969 memo from J. Edgar Hoover to 24 FBI offices stated:

> The free breakfast program represents the best and most influential activity going for the BPP and as such is potentially the greatest threat to efforts by authorities to neutralize the BPP and destroy what it stands for.

Shortly thereafter the now infamous coloring book program was started by the FBI to discredit the breakfast programs across the country. Around this time odd things started to happen around our chapter. A few people would leave the office to go somewhere and they would be arrested en route and kept overnight on an investigation of some supposed crime. Groups of Panthers would go to different places, rallies and speaking engagements; ten members would go yet eight would return.

When finally one of our buildings caught fire, I was put in charge of security for the Baltimore chapter and this included the welfare of our members as well as the buildings. I soon became aware that we had some serious internal problems, and it was likely that they had existed right from the party’s inception.

With the number of incidents that were occurring regularly, it was clear that there were agents operating inside the chapter. There were many times when I reported security violations to the Defense Captain, but all too often no action was taken to deal with the problem or further investigate the situation. We soon discovered that the Defense Captain, who was the highest ranking Panther in the state, was a paid agent of the National Security
Agency (NSC/NSA), and there were others. Several other “members” were working for various law enforcement agencies. These activities created the kind of climate that left our chapter seriously wounded, and this was not a local situation, but rather something that was happening in every chapter around the country.

We couldn’t have known it then but it would not be long before it would be revealed that the FBI and other state and local agencies were in fact functioning as a national secret police. Unfortunately, by that time many of us would have already fallen victim to these covert operations.

**A FALL INTO THE PIT, A GAIN IN YOUR WIT**

The first week of December 1969 brought with it the chilly news of Fred Hampton’s murder in Chicago and a day long shootout in California at our LA office. This firefight involved armored cars and helicopters, and launched the inception of the SWAT (Special Weapons and Tactics) team, an ultra-militarized police unit in Los Angeles. This was, of course, a pre-dawn attack which seemed to be the modus operandi for these forces.

The last area of Baltimore to be organized was West Baltimore. This area was having an increasing number of police-related shootings. Human rights were violated all the time in poor communities like Upton. Soon incidents between police and neighborhood youth led to a mini-riot, and then there was a shootout that led to the deaths of a brother from the neighborhood and a policeman. The explanation given for these shootings was that they were the result of a drug raid. When this happened the Panther party was in the middle of negotiating the lease on a building about a block away from the incident site.

The following week there was another shootout a few blocks in the other direction. One police officer was killed and another wounded. The blame for this incident was laid at the feet of the Panthers because we had been working more and more in the area, and by then had become highly visible. Two of our members were arrested; both had been armed, and they were later charged with the shootings. According to the police reports, sometime in the night a patrol car was sent to a house in the area in response to a report of some type of incident. The officers left and were later called back. The shooting occurred soon after their return and one officer was killed and another wounded. Subsequently I was arrested on my job and held for the earlier FBI indictments involving the missing informant. My arrest
occurred two days after the shootings, and within the next few days some 24 members of our chapter would be arrested on various charges.

After being held for two months with no real evidence against me, the judge in the case ordered the State’s Attorney to release me or give a better reason for holding me. Coincidentally, the police department transferred one of their old informants into my cell. Charles Reynolds had been shipped from the Jessup, Maryland prison complex, an unusual move for a prisoner who was being sent to another state to serve out time.

I would later learn that the Baltimore City police commissioner, a man named Pommerlau, had been called to Washington D.C. to meet with Attorney General John Mitchell, who, according to the newspaper reports, was under orders to make the charges against us stick, whatever the cost.

I finally went to court on these charges. The trial lasted seven days. I recall very little about it since I spent the entire time in the bull pen (lock up section for the court). I had been fighting a losing battle with the judge and DA about having a lawyer from the Panther Party represent me in this case. We started off having problems in relationship to the lawyer situation. Milton B. Allen, who was one of the best black lawyers in the city at that time, came to see me with the understanding that he was considering representing my case. We talked for about an hour and he left with the understanding that he would get back to me. He never came back to see me and it wasn’t a week later that I learnt that he was offered an opportunity to run for State Attorney. In fact, he was the State Attorney during the time I got tried. I always wondered how much of what I discussed with him went to his assistants. Each day the court room was packed with people from the community and this led to a number of threats from the judge about limiting the number of people who would be allowed to watch the trial. I was forced to watch the day proceedings on the local news station at night to find out what happened that day.

During the trial I was held at the City Jail and during this time there was a major riot about the food and visiting conditions. I ended up being tagged as one of the leaders simply because I was there and a number of the young brothers looked up to me for direction and leadership. Any one who had ever seen or been in a riot knows that there are no leaders, only people relieving their frustrations and other people staying out of their way. I ended up in the hold and stayed there until I went down to the court house to be sentenced. I received life in prison plus thirty years to follow that. I was twenty-three years old.
The POW, 7th steps, Black United Front Connection

The 1976–77 period was a very active organizing period both inside and outside the Maryland Penitentiary. The prisoners were organizing a number of activities around the need for an inmate advisory committee (IAC) and many other structures like that. First, we should look at the effect and effort centered around the IAC. The administration was trying to maintain control over the many incidents that continued to accrue in the yard. The day after a major fire that killed two prisoners in their cell, there was continued unrest about the fire alarm situation and the door locks that were dangerous to all prisoners at night. The general population was demanding more effective fire prevention systems. The officials were attempting to use the incident as a flash point to attack the collective. The two prisoners who had been burnt up in their cell were in fact the leader of the new family youth gang and one of his lieutenants.

There had been a long standing conflict between that gang and the collective, but that gang in general and its leaders in particular had made so many enemies in the few years that it operated in the prison that any number of factions or individuals could have carried out the hit—it was no doubt a hit, and there was some belief the hit could have been encouraged by the administration for the purpose of creating trouble amongst different groups in the population. This gang was still one of the administration’s main tools in the prison, but it had also gotten completely out of hand. They were barely held in check. New members were trying to gain control of the leadership and make the gang move in the direction that they thought the money was in, that of course was the drug area.

Up to that time the gang was involved in wine-making and pill-taking. Now the drug thing was not what the administration wanted them to be doing since that amount of money would be used to corrupt the guard force which was always ready to do anything for a few dollars. Since this gang was aiding in things like stopping the union drive and keeping the youth population in gang wars, the officials turned a blind eye to their activities. Once the drugs started to come in there was pressure put on the faction that was into the drug scene.

The different gangs in the prison made something like fire-bombing very likely. And although the different gangs and the collective had been in conflicts before, very few physical contacts were made simply because
the collective was always working in the interests of the general population and a little gang of youth of a clique of killers didn’t stand a chance in the face of the population support we had. We were just too strong for anyone to want any trouble from us and in turn, we never tried to deal with the gangs or cliques on a level other than to educate them. Our members were the bad dudes in the prison long before they became members so we didn’t have anything to prove. The members all had spent months and years in training in the arts (martial) and in fact teaching others these skills. The ties and connection we had developed throughout the prison were very strong.

The other organizations in the prison, with the exception of the Black Muslim movement, were basically able to organize and develop because we were very supportive of them when they were getting started, so we had very strong ties to almost all the organizations that had structure and discipline. Finally, the collective was always working in the interest of the population so that won the collective at least 100 active supporters so the numbers were very great in the population of 1,300. For all these reasons, the collective members rarely found themselves in physical combat with any body, gangs or individuals.

The respect for the collective was very high and only from time to time did minor conflicts between individual members develop. These beefs would usually be worked out by a couple of people with working relationships to the principals involved. Very rarely was there an actual fight or the use of physical force. Now it was a known fact that the collective continued to work against what we thought were the disruptive and negative influences of the new family.

The introduction of the newly arriving youth into the drug and bisexual culture of the gang was actively opposed with massive education programs and a lot of individual rap to the new arrivals. Whenever we could, through our youth section, educate the youth away from involvement in this type of activity we would do so actively. On the other hand, because we continued to be the group in the forefront of most of the organizing in the prison we stepped on a lot of toes in the area of drug dealings and what that meant for our community and the future of our youth. The drug dealers and gang members would be used to delay, oppose or stop any kind of progressive activities.

In the midst of this high tension period, someone yells fire in the middle of the night. Several doors up from my cell a cell is on fire. My cell buddy
wakes me up. The guards have been to the cell which is burning out of control, they can't open the door because they are not allowed to have the keys upstairs at night. They have to run downstairs to the guard post to get the keys and by the time they got back with the keys the fire was out of control to such a degree that the door could not even be approached because the fire was jumping out the door. The fire-fighting equipment is so old and unusable that it's not having any real effect on the fire. The cells have been painted hundreds of times in the past 30 years and the build-up on the walls was so heavy that you could dig for hours and never see the steel wall. No one tried to clean the old paint away once they moved into a cell, they would just get some paint and re-do the cell the way they wanted it to look.

This build-up was now burning and the cell was completely involved. The lack of any fire hoses on the housing units was the result of criminal neglect. The fact was that for 1,300 men there were only a handful of hand-held fire extinguishers and no heavy equipment at all. The door locks were old locks from the 1930s and they had to be opened one at a time. This added greatly to the situation since the guards had to come in close contact with the area situation in order to release anyone.

To add to that, the after effect of the 1973 riot was that no guards were allowed to have keys in the housing areas after midnight. All the keys were locked in the guard's post desk and only a lieutenant could give them out. The minutes lost in a fire situation in a tiny cell are very important. Over half the prisoners on the tier were trapped in their cells and starting to panic and even worse the guards were also running around confused as to what action to take. The number of keys seemed to be limited and all the prisoners in the above and below cells wanted to get out at once. By the time everyone did get out they were mad as hell with the administration. The next day the officials were confronted with a number of protests about the door-locking procedures at night and the lack of real fire equipment in the prison. It really had not been noticed before. And about the paint that was built up on the walls of the cells. Everyone knew it was highly flammable and once ablaze almost impossible to put out. And about the fact that the guards had to go all the way back down to the guard station to get the keys to open the cells rather than having a lever throwing device at the end of the tier.

Any automatic opening device would have saved lives and freed other prisoners from their cells from suffering from smoke exhaustion. The fact that so many were trapped in their cells was a serious question begging to be
answered. What would happen if more than one cell was on fire at the same time. We barely got out of our cells an hour later and it was with one fire.

These and other questions were being asked in the yard by hundreds of prisoners the next day. There was a flat refusal to return to these cells until someone told us that the locking devices would be changed. Something else happened at the same time. It was pointed out a number of complaints had been made to the officials in recent months and most had gone unanswered. The fire issue just brought things to the surface.

Once the warden got into the yard there seemed to be a thousand questions being hurled at him at the same time. The end result was a shouting session and nothing was resolved. The warden agreed to meet with a select group of prisoners’ representatives. We picked a group that was the regular prison leadership anyway. I think it would have been impossible to send anyone else since each group wanted someone there to represent their interest. If the regular leadership didn’t go, the yard would still be in an uproar and nothing would be solved.

The meeting only proved that there was a gross lack of communication between the administration and ourselves. It was agreed that we need an on-going forum to deal with the issues that kept popping up and remained largely unresolved. The way to deal regularly was through something like an inmate advisory committee. The warden agreed to allow such a committee to be set up and promised a regular monthly meeting with such a body of prisoners to deal with agreed upon pre-arranged agendas. The other issues were to be worked on and by the time we met again the administration would have answers to the locking devices question and the other issues. We would have a charter and some by-laws to govern the formulation of any advisory committee.

We went back to the population with the information and things were partly under control. We got started on the paper work for the Inmate Advisory Committee as we knew that it was a delaying tactic because the conditions were that all the paperwork had to be approved by the warden before we would be allowed to officially operate as a body of prison representatives. There would be an election and one year terms. All this would require a six month waiting period.

Well, we got together and after some discussion we agreed that it would still be better if the population had such an organized structure to deal with the administration in future dealings. One thing we wanted to do was to
have more control over the funds and the programs that were coming into the penitentiary. We wanted some method of talking to the administration without going through the “on the yard” act every few months. The situation always held the potential for violence and never resolved anything anyway until we met with the officials so why not just deal with them on a regular basis from jump street.

We got the charter and by-laws approved and set up the election for the coming month. I didn’t run for any of the official positions because of all the double talk and bullshit that was required to deal with the administration and them with us. Nevertheless, we had to continue acting as the unofficial ad hoc advisory community until the six month time period was over and the elected officers could take their positions.

Getting back to the original situation on the yard that day after the fire and the meetings, the tension was still very high and a lot of little beefs were developing between the prisoners and the guards. The officials tried to distract the population from the real situation and use the fire in their own interest. The attention was shifted to the possibility that the fire was started as part of a gang war. The officials went a step further and locked up a number of people from different groups, gangs and organizations. They finally put the word out that the collective was behind this hit and they had already locked up one of our members. He was being held incommunicado.

The rumors that went around the yard ranged from this was a hit that I had ordered to the smoking in bed story. The real problem was that there was a lot of high tension and struggle for leadership in the new family gang with a lot of talk about hitting someone back. At the time I don’t even think they cared who they struck out at so long as they took some action. The leadership of the collective was in spotlight and we had to be very careful how we handled this situation. We had to take some time out and meet with a number of groups and factions of the gang to set the record straight. While this was going on the officials continued to fan the flames of passion and hoped for an incident to get some of the heat off them.

The newspapers were asking the same questions that we had asked about the locking system and no prevention program; heads were going to roll and things were looking bad for the administration. The situation in the yard was rather tight for a few days since the gang leader who died was in fact one of the administration’s key informants. Their other informants were scared to death and were willing to help them move on the collective.
The information being put out by these informants and unofficially by the officials was developing a mind set and creating not a little problem.

There was a lot of debate going on in the yard about the right or wrong of such attacks. There were all these hotheads that were on both sides and many were starting to believe the rumors. The general population knew the real story and refused to be played by the officials through their informants. The potential for violence was very high, but there was not a single incident in the yard among the prisoners. The administration was once again left with egg on their faces and their informants were exposed once they had to release all the prisoners they had locked up in hopes of triggering an incident that would have overshadowed the fire and gave them cover for their ineffectiveness in protecting our lives. Our days were spent pushing the development of the Inmate Advisory Committee and doing whatever maintenance work was needed to control the situation on the yard. This came at an odd time for us since we were working on developing an international hook-up to build a network of prison supporters. There was a world forum scheduled to be held in Africa the following year and we were part of the prison network that was putting together the issues to be raised at that forum.

While the networking was going on there was always training of our members and the martial arts was one of the areas we trained in; mainly in secret, whenever possible. We would have to continue to relocate our training areas for a number of reasons, mainly security and secrecy. We would shift the training from area to area to keep non-collective personnel from observing our tactics and training program. On the other hand, we had to do this to keep from getting locked up since it was illegal to train in self-defense. It was this moving around in out of the way places that caused us to be in the basement of “G” building one morning. We had been using the area for over three weeks and using it three times a week.

In reality we should have changed areas the end of the second week. The location was ideal because you had to get the elevator and go down to the basement. Well everyone knew that the area was all caged up and off limits so no one went into the area. Once we got into the area we could send the elevator back upstairs and really get a good workout. We would be trapped down in the area until one of the comrades brought the elevator back down, but there was no need to worry about anyone getting into the area, at least that’s what we thought. That morning we were working out when there was
a power failure. We knew that meant a problem for us, but we had no idea the amount of trouble it would cause.

An electrician came down into the area by a hidden door on the other side of the building. Since we couldn’t see what was actually over on that side, it was not possible to know that there was a tunnel. For his part, he thought we were all trying to escape which got us all placed on lock-up. The charges were reduced to being out of bounds since we were not in the tunnel area or for that matter did not even know about it. The officials on the other hand didn’t want anyone in the population to believe that there were in fact tunnels under the Maryland Penitentiary so they couldn’t charge us with something they denied existed. We did receive four months on lock-up for being out of bounds and that made our future selection of exercise areas much more selective. It wasn’t long after we got off lock-up that an even much more serious situation developed. Our membership soon came under attack.

The only other thing Bobby Mach recalled the next morning when he woke up in the hospital, besides seeing the ground rush up at him, was how loud the pipe sounded as it smashed into his head. He was locked up and placed on the administration segregation unit. After 30 days he was released back into the general population. No one knew what had happened to him or why. Early the next morning, as the prisoners poured out the west wing on the way to their job assignments, everything seemed peaceful and quiet for the new day. I walked up the path alone and fairly relaxed. A lone man stood leaning against the railed fence. He called me and since I knew him, I never gave the situation another thought. I did notice that he was carrying a cup in one hand and wearing a heavy jacket during rather warm weather.

Beyond that I really paid no attention to him at that point. It was only after he started talking that I realized right away that something was seriously wrong. Once you spent time in the prison setting, you pick up on the moods of people in seconds or a minute at the most. This brother appeared highly agitated, and scared on top of that. He was saying things like “I haven’t done anything to you. Why are you planning this?” and, “I thought we were alright.” Well right away I became alert and while shifting from my position I was checking him out now for weapons or any other materials that might be harmful to me. I was really caught off guard because here was a person that really felt threatened by me and I was not aware of any reason that he should be. The brother seemed rather shaky on top of all the other things.
I moved immediately to relax him and put him at ease and then started to question him closely about what he felt was going on and why he came to hold those ideas.

Well I soon learned that the brother had been informed by someone that he would be killed that day down in the music room by someone I had ordered to do it. The first attack was supposed to have been ordered by me also. The brother had been on some type of medication down in the psychology clinic. They had to feed him this story in the hopes of him acting on their information without giving it a second thought. I was really getting warm about this situation. Still, I saw it as an official effort to have me killed in the yard by another prisoner without the least awareness of any threat or provocation. This prisoner had a long history of violence on his record and this would just be another case. He was continuing undergoing treatment in the psychology clinic and was not only isolated from the general population, but also was from out of state. The perfect scapegoat for a murder rap.

The officials made two mistakes in their selection of him, however. First, I had met this brother while he was in the city jail. I had spent some time helping him with his situation and giving him some support since he was out of state. Second, he liked the Black Panther party and that gave me an edge. If I had been someone else, he informed me later, I would have been attacked without a warning or second thought. Recently one of the comrades had been attacked just like that by another out-patient of the psychological clinic. At the time we thought it was an isolated incident. Now a second out patient was telling me that Lieutenant “D” took him around the corner half an hour ago and warned him to be careful and watch out for me because his life was in danger. Well once he understood that he was being used by the administration to attack me he wanted to attack the lieutenant who was at the time somewhere off in the other end of the prison waiting to hear them call a code red. I told him that first we should confront this Lieutenant “D” together and see what he had to say about this before we decided on any course of action.

Well, once we confronted this “pig” together, not only was he surprised, but also he was scared to death. The look on his face told us that we had caught this fish out of water. When we demanded an explanation he told us his reason was that he had received a number of informant’s notes stating that something like this was going to happen. I wanted to know what he was doing there last night in the first place since he was a day shift officer.
Secondly, why didn’t he offer the brother some protection or if he really thought the brother was in trouble why didn’t he lock me up? Or at least why not confront both of us with the situation?

Threats and counter-threats are being made between prisoners all the time and the correct way of dealing with them is to call both parties in and have them body waivers. None of this happened in this case because there just simply were not any notes of threats. I read him the riot act and let him know that if any more attacks or attempts were made on me or any other member of the collective in the near future, he would personally be held responsible and treated accordingly inside or outside or whatever the situation called for. The leadership of the collective decided that the warden and other officials should be made aware of the situation involving Lieutenant “D” who was part of the racist clique that was working night and day to create situations leading to someone’s death or critical bodily harm.…

Life in the penitentiary was rapidly draining my energy; much of my time was spent just trying to navigate regular daily activities. By this time, a number of old comrades had been released and were back out in the community. The feedback that I was getting wasn’t good. Some of the problems that the brothers faced once they were freed were so overwhelming that they were unable to do any serious community organizing. There were other factors also, such as the daily struggle for survival, the move away from leftist politics in the 1980s and the abrupt swing to the right. These factors made it seem like these brothers were not going to be of any use to the community at large. The times were bad for me as well because I was confronted with the fact that I and others had made sacrifices and participated in struggles that now seemed for naught. I had begun to wonder what it had all been for, especially since these comrades seemed unwilling to struggle to make our community better and progressive in nature.

I spent a lot of time soul searching and talking to people from the community about the comrades and their actions, or lack thereof. These were people who had been struggling in the neighborhoods for the past dozen years or so, and were still continuing to work and struggle. I wondered how these sisters and brothers could continue their efforts year after year, yet the comrades who were just coming out of prison seemed to run out of energy
within the first two years or so. The problem seemed to be that community-based people were established in the area and had credibility with other community institutions and individuals. The just released prisoner is not accepted by the community as a positive role model based on his or her political beliefs. In all too many cases their economic situation was shaky at best. These returning comrades found themselves supporting a lot of beliefs that the community did not agree with or understand at this point. The lack of an infrastructure to accept these returnees added to the problems that they faced.

Needless to say, at the time all I could see was that a number of ex-prisoners who claimed to have serious political convictions were not dealing with the struggle like we from the inside thought they should. Who could we depend upon if the comrades were not able to return to the community and be committed to working for the comrades in prison as well as the community? These things seemed even more depressing when we continually learned that this or that ex-comrade did this or that to the community and that activity was negative in nature. By this time I just became wary of prisoners who for the most part seemed to lose all consciousness upon release from prison. It seemed to me that, after all those years hiding behind the cover of prison oppression to do their time and once their bit was up, they no longer thought the problems existed and simply spent their time partying and trying to forget the hard times that we had experienced over the years together.

The comrades were not the only prisoners who spent hard time in the prison system with organized groups and then returned to society to forget the struggle and their comrades left behind inside. Almost every group was experiencing the same problem and there was a lot discussion on the causes of this new development. The thing that we could not understand was how these brothers could spend years being beaten and oppressed along with the rest of us and then forget all these hard times. The programs and support from the community continued to come from elements in the black community and progressive elements of the white community.

I was nearing a point in my time where I could not put up with a lot of bullshit from people. I wanted to get out of the penitentiary for a number of reasons. This was my 13th year in the prison system and all my friends were going to other prisons or going home. The system itself was overcrowded and I had just finished four years of college. I had done everything humanly possible to do in the penitentiary and the turnover of the population would
require another few years to raise the level of political consciousness to what it had been a few years before all the transfers and the general mood in the US had shifted. I for one was not trying to spend any more time working in a setting where I felt my efforts were a waste of time and energy.

The classification department within the Penitentiary had claimed that they had been instructed to get a number of prisoners out of the prison and into other institutions, so I decided that this was an ideal time for me to make my move. I had been in the prison system for over 13 years and had only been in the classification department a handful of times. The system never worked for the prisoners and basically we understood it to be something the officials used to cover their asses with the public and the budget managers who controlled or questioned where the funds for prisoners’ rehabilitation went. The classification system was held up as the tool that reviewed and oversaw all the improvements or the lack of improvements in each prisoner’s situation. This system rarely, if ever, gives the prisoner a fair shake. And most people knew that it was pointless to go before these people if you had made enemies within the Penitentiary’s administration.

I surely had more than enough enemies to go around. The fact that the classification department didn’t work in the average non-political case made it that much more unlikely that I would be given real consideration. After all, I had a lot of time before me and the nature of my case was still very political and very public. The enemies that I had made some years before were now top administration officials and many of them had made it clear that they held grudges from past conflicts. In fact, there were some who refused to speak to me and who only spoke to me through a third party, and I responded to their behavior in kind.

In order to get official approval for a transfer each prisoner had to be deemed a non-security risk. Of course the staff would not mention the personal conflicts, but the bias could have an impact on your case if you were in front of one of the old clique members. The only chance that I had would exist if I could get scheduled to go before the classification team while a Black official was sitting on the team or at least a non-clique white official. Since the classification officials were working to get a number of prisoners out of the penitentiary as a result of a lawsuit that had been filed about the overcrowding and general living conditions at the prison and throughout the system, I thought the time was ripe. They were processing transfers largely because the staff had been scheduling prisoners to go before officials who
would easily approve of the transfer to other institutions. I made a request to be scheduled for a review.

The classification process takes only a few minutes at best. The prisoner is called into a room for an interview with three panel members. Each prisoner’s file has been read and discussed before this meeting, and likely the decision has been made in most cases before the prisoner appears in front of them. The interview becomes little more than a verbal stamp of approval and the decision was almost always supported by the administration officials, once it had been made. The key is to get a positive decision from the panel before the interview was conducted. That’s done in a number of ways. One of the panel members would be the prisoner’s classification counselor, another was likely to be a state employee who worked within the prison compound, and finally there would be a guard officer. So you find the time when the best possible officer is scheduled for the team, and then along with your classification counselor you know there are two possible votes in your favor. The state employee almost always goes with the decision of the other two persons unless there is a personal reason to oppose.

I was before the team and out of the hearing room in less than 13 minutes. They had decided to let me go to another prison with lesser security. The papers had to go before the warden for his approval. That takes only a few days to a few weeks at the most. Once the papers supporting the decision are signed by him then they must go to the commissioner’s office at the state headquarters for the Department of Correction. They are supposed to review the files and decide if you should be transferred or not. That takes another month or two. Finally your papers come back all approved and you are assigned for transfer to a new prison. In my case it was the Maryland House of Correction at the Jessup, Maryland prison complex, better known as the “Cut”. The next thing that happens is that you have to settle down for a long wait. The waiting part of the process is almost as hard as the classifying part itself. Week after week drags by and the pressure builds as group after group leaves and you wait for your turn to come.

In my case the situation was a little worse since I still had enemies in high places in the administration. They realized that I had got around them by planning the transfer and having it followed up on the commissioner level. They did not want me to leave from under their control but were powerless to stop me at that point. So the major that controlled the list of who was transferring called me in his office one morning and asked me if I
was ready to go and informed me that I would be on the next trip out on the following Tuesday. It was odd, to say the least, because this major had not spoken to me in a number of years, since 1976 and we both knew that we did not like each other and everyone around knew it.

As it turned out I did not leave that next Tuesday or the next Tuesday after that, ever. The wait grew into a month and then another month. I was uptight because I knew these people were really trying to fuck with me and get me to blow the transfer. Finally the day came when I was informed that I would be leaving and to bring all my property down to the central storeroom. I was at the point where I did not believe I was going to get out of that place until I left it behind me. The process took hours just to go through all the things that I had gathered over all the years in the pen. I left over half the stuff there and was glad when it was finally packed up and boxes sealed to be transferred out to the bus that would be taking us to the CUT.

They kept us locked in the storeroom for half the day. All day long brothers were coming by to bid us farewell and hope that we would never return to this place again under the same conditions. The bus had arrived and it was time to go. It was a cold, dull, rainy day in late November right after Thanksgiving. The mood was perfect. I have always loved the rain and this day it would seem more meaningful than ever because I found myself standing in the yard of the penitentiary for the last time. The place was full of memories of the last 13 years of my life. Yards away down in the central part of the upper yard many major events had taken place that would shape the lives and history of prisoners and the prison struggle in general. There was a fence between me and bus, the gate opened and we packed our things on the bus. Now all that remained was to drive out the back gate and onto the street behind the prison. One last look at the prison brought something home to me. The yards were empty.

Five of us were seated on the 70 seat bus, and after all these years I was rolling through the back gate. I thought I would feel happiness, but all I felt was the need to never come back this way again. I don’t ever want to see the penitentiary again as a prisoner. On to the street we roll, into the traffic and down to the stop light.

Relationships are often the one thing that keep prisoners going, yet they are also the one thing that makes them most vulnerable. This is evidenced by the
prison administration’s use of Family Day as a leveraging tool when they want to implement changes. The prisoners buck when told they will no longer be allowed to wear “street” clothes, and the administration pulls out their trump card, no Family Day. The change is implemented without incident.

In the last few years I have grown weary of these occasions, although I still look forward to regular visits with my sons and their children.

The day that I walked into the visiting room and saw my father, I knew that something was awry. His presence told me that things were out of sorts because the last time that I had seen him was over 20 years prior. That day would be one that I would never forget because by day’s end my life would be further altered, even more than the barriers and prison walls had already done. It was soon after my sentencing; I was in the penitentiary. The day had come just like the rest had been coming for the last two years. The sun rose almost as if it had been a burden, and the weight of it brought an oppressive heat into the prison. For me, this was just another day to get through, knowing full well that I didn’t earn this shit that had been heaped on me. Innocence had been of no consequence to the court, however, so I had the rest of my natural life plus thirty years to profess it.

Not even a blistering sun could be more bothersome, or so I thought, until my father showed up to inform me that he could not visit me there ever again. He assured me of his love and support, but said that he could not bear the weight that came with walking into that place. I had a genuine love for my father and he for me, and I understood how hard my imprisonment was on others. Visiting is hard to do, not only is it hard to leave, but the conditions that loved ones are subjected to can be a strain. At best they are treated with suspicion, and sometimes made to feel like criminals. So this decision was totally acceptable to me and over the years his absence from my life became very understandable.

So when I found myself so many years later sitting across from my father again, I could not be happy because I sensed that there was trouble. His appearance struck me immediately. Never a very big man, he had always been a thick man, not this fragile person that my eyes were gazing at. I knew instantaneously that he was dying. Had to be. The surprise visit alone had alerted me in ways that words could not. Nothing else would bring him into the prison visiting room. This was, after all, the place that had put a permanent wall between us, father and son, all those years ago. That is what prisons do; the institutions wall off all normal human relationships and interactions, completely changing family structures and personal behavior.
My father had sat across from me, his face, my face, making me consider my own future. We greeted each other warmly that day, but in the stiff manner of two people who no longer really know one another, yet are connected in ways that are unseen and unspoken. Father and son. I wait, even though I know without the informed knowledge of one who has been close to him, that his very presence represents goodbye. Despite the hopefulness that I felt, and the feeling that so much space was suddenly being filled in, I was looking at a ghost. My father died within the year. I was permitted to attend the funeral. It had been 23 years since I was last uptown, but now I was seeing Baltimore from the grieving eyes of a son whose father had long ago gone missing, from the eyes of a man denied his freedom for two decades. My family buried him, and perhaps a piece of me, for certainly I had lost so much in all that time that we did not see each other.

The Free Agent

… the demands two people make upon each other can be crippling and destructive. No matter how much they love each other, the values of our society conspire to add intolerable pressures to a binding relationship.

(Huey P. Newton, 1973, Revolutionary Suicide)

Imprisonment does not end life; it simply makes it much more difficult. The cycles that are a part of life continue as if unaware of the barriers that razor wire presents. Birth, death, and love, all of these things keep occurring because we have no real control over them. While life’s joy remains elusive, the pain that most people experience is actually intensified when one resides in a six foot by nine foot steel cage. Not only have I experienced the birth of my grandchildren from this place, but I’ve watched an entire generation of children be born and grow up since my initial incarceration. Two of my nephews have shared this same address on occasion. The fact is that the complications of life keep right on coming; often it is only the responses that are different. And sometimes, not.

Prison has the ability to capture the body, much the same way that slavery did, and it is especially important to emphasize the fact that it is the black body that is so often caught within this system. This prison odyssey has given me insight into what it must have been like to be a slave. Separation from
family and community, along with a sense of powerlessness define the last 34 years of my life. Presently in this country there are well over two million people within the prison system who are experiencing this same isolation, and their incarceration is not so much for the purpose of rehabilitation as the profit of others. This system creates the same vulnerability and helplessness that our ancestors experienced, as prisoner, family and community all seem powerless to change what amounts to a truly destructive system. I can’t help but wonder what will be the ultimate cost to these communities where the residents are already overcome by the post-traumatic stress caused by slavery and the terror of lynching. And who’s going to pay when the bill comes due?

Yet each individual has domain over her or his own mind and spirit as evidenced by the resistance of our ancestors to the system that enslaved them. Brother George Jackson, in the book Soledad Brother (1970), speaks of the individual who is completely unfettered by circumstances, in that spirit I have remained the free agent, that individual who refuses to let prison imprison my mind.
And so my journey into the pages of history began with my first step, with my accumulated thoughts of righteousness and unity. As a young man I often found myself dreaming of a utopian society without being aware of what that term meant. I knew I wanted a society free of stress and poverty, crime and police occupation. I’d often observed older people’s glances and postures of negativity whenever representatives of authority rode by. Why was that? Why were the police both feared and hated so much? I had no answers then but I saw the impacts nonetheless.

I cherish my growing up because it was never a path of hatred or isolationism. I was not taught to hate white people nor was that a hidden message amongst my peers. Instead I learned resistance to the class oppressor, the enforcer of racist policies. I saw in my own poor community, a love of family and commitment to joint responsibility for all the people’s children by those older than me. That sort of collective living was what inspired me to dream; to dream of a just society, surrounded by people working together with each other.

As I grew older, I carried forth those impressionable remembrances of love and compassion, discipline and respect. In those days, people shared food, child-caring responsibilities and discipline for everyone else’s children. When I grew up everyone was either auntie or uncle so-and-so. These were not titles but badges of respect. Elders gave children a sense of being a loved part of the community. Lessons at their feet taught respect, sharing and duty to pass on good teachings. And then I became older, independent, so to speak. I always knew I could make choices and could damn sure make them (that is if my daddy wasn’t close by or another who would report me to him). I was coming into my own, thinking about non-traditional things, like what constituted a family? And what role should the male or female play in terms of authority? Of course I chose the male leadership (what else did I know?) but never as a first choice. Instead it was always a conclusion arrived at, but always it was debatable.

I saw myself as a change maker, and wanted no more brutal cops, no more racist posturing from anyone, no more of being made to feel inferior. I hated how young people like me were made to feel so inadequate, of being less than important just because one of the enforcers was near. I really hated it when one of the “pigs” would beat one of us—we were eight years old,
ten, never more than twelve. Many a time we were beaten for being in the wrong neighborhood, or just for being the color we were. It never required an exact reasoning, just the opportunity for the oppressor.

And then Vietnam came and manhood followed, based on the possibility I might never get back home. I grew up through troubled awareness in Vietnam. I learned to kill and avoid being killed and how much others suffered at the hands of the USA. I finally came home with a new mindset, capacities and leadership qualities, but I was still grounded in my earlier upbringing.

I was made for the Black Panther party. I felt its call, I called it, and it was my calling card to life. The work they were doing for community empowerment was part of my dream as well.

Joining the party was an invitation to aid and assist all members of my community. The Party focused on blacks as a whole but sought alliances with all races. Doing work to help out was like looking out for a newly acquainted niece or nephew. It felt good doing these things. My journey through the era of my Black Panther Party days will always resonate with a flood of pleasurable images and work worthy of remembrance.

But alas, there came a time when mere demonstration and resistance gave way to greater acts of destruction. From my observations I saw it as a time when the powers that be determined that we as a whole were expendable. There were stories then of members (both women and men) giving themselves up, hands raised high, who were shot down dead in the street by police. With madness and retaliation, both sides saw the necessity of the necessary. The end results were many funerals on both sides. Tragedies of warfare, yet unavoidable.

The journey of a thousand miles found me functioning underground. It was still necessary to feed and clothe the neighborhood residents, as well as to make commitments to protect them. Our works detoured and detained the inevitable, slowing the destruction of our youth and neighborhood by the stronger and more potent drugs then being introduced. I trust that had we not been in the wings, fighting, agitating, struggling and resisting, the numbers of people consumed and destroyed would have exponentially increased.

For those fallen, lost or astray the price was and remains high from that battle. Even today, we are blocked from having a say or impact in rehabilitation. But the struggle goes on, and many more battles demand our attention. There are cries of war heard over there, here, and around the
corner. Rumors, actions, with many fallen, broken or no longer living. And yes the war wages continuously, with many now in its ranks wanting its end. Negotiations are now the watchword and no longer saber-rattling or deadly, deceitful actions.

But the beat goes on, and the struggle continues. And always the cry of the needy, wounded, and oppressed people. And my and our commitment to see to the end of their oppression continues, because our cause is just, righteous and humane.

Brave is the warrior who braves a thousand cuts to unseat the Emperor. So many have died and so many are confined, and so many are marked for destruction. Yet the strugglers march onward, dutifully seeking to add their own contributions, braving the cuts, the losses, the pain, marching in step with humanity, and seeking a place in the ranks of those who have aided humanity. It is when the last page of the history of the destructive era is written, when those who contributed and sacrificed are recalled, and when those whose wounds can finally be closed and be eternally healed, that I will recall your names as I hope you will recall mine. And it is at the bed-times of our young and before large crowds of well-wishers who cheer that we shall do that. Then in honor and admiration we will sing of our sacrifices and determination.

The journey of a thousand miles begins with the first step. Brave is the warrior who braves a thousand cuts to unseat the Emperor.

My name is Robert Seth Hayes and I am one of those warrior/soldiers. And like any other struggler, I hope that when I fall, the banner of duty and responsibility passes on to you and that it will be carried forward in the struggle for humanity’s victory!

A Luta’ Continua’ (The Struggle Continues)
PRISONERS’ STRUGGLES

Special Thank You and Dedication to Yuri Kochiyama

We extend a special thank you to Yuri Kochiyama whose life exemplifies the revolutionary spirit and whose dedication to freedom inspires us to keep on dreaming, to keep on fighting and to keep on believing.

Yuri Kochiyama has been a revolutionary for more than four decades. Born Mary Nakahara in San Pedro, California, her parents were both Japanese immigrants. Growing up in a Japanese immigrant family in California during the 1920s and 1930s, she was active in sports, school and church. She was both unquestioningly patriotic and largely unconscious of race and racism in the United States. At the outbreak of World War II, her father was imprisoned in a federal penitentiary and died shortly after his release. Her family was forcibly removed and incarcerated at a detention camp at Jerome, Arkansas throughout the war. Experiencing the fear and ignorance caused by racism, she saw this as a direct parallel to the way African-Americans were treated in the segregated South. Her commitment to eliminating racism became a driving force for the rest of her life.

Married shortly after leaving the camp, her husband, Bill Kochiyama, was a veteran of the 442 Regimental Combat Team. They moved to New York City and, in 1960, with their six children, chose to settle in the Harlem projects amongst the Latino and Black families. It was here that she began a new activist career. In these new surroundings, at the age of 40, she joined neighbourhood parents in a grassroots movement for safer streets. In 1963, Yuri was arrested while demonstrating for construction jobs for African-Americans and Puerto Ricans. While in court, she had the opportunity to meet Malcolm X. They developed a close friendship that included an active mail correspondence during his pilgrimage to Africa and Mecca. She later joined his “Organization for Afro-American Unity” and became a follower of his internationalist concept of human rights and nationalism based on self-determination and self-reliance. On February 21, 1965, in the Audubon Ballroom, she cradled Malcolm X in her arms as he lay dying from assassins’ bullets. His assassination intensified her commitment to work for the dignity and equality of all people of colour. She has spent much of her life working across racial lines to build multi-racial support for the end of South African apartheid and the war in Viet Nam, for redress for Japanese-Americans and equality for Asian-Americans, and for Puerto Rican independence, Black Liberation and Cuban solidarity.
Yuri Kochiyama’s life has inspired generations. At the age of 84, she was nominated for the “1,000 Women for the Nobel Peace Prize 2005”. Revolutionary activist, writer and one of the many political children of the Yuri style of revolution, Diana Fujino has written the first biography of the courageous champion of freedom, Heartbeat of Struggle: The Revolutionary Life of Yuri Kochiyama. It is published by the University of Minnesota Press.

YURI KOCHIYAMA FUND FOR POLITICAL PRISONERS (YKFPP)

The Yuri Kochiyama Fund for Political Prisoners is established based on Yuri’s belief that “political prisoners are the heartbeat of struggle”.

Eddy Zheng is facing deportation for criminal convictions from 20 years ago. He served 19 plus years of a seven-to-life sentence for a robbery he committed at 16. He is currently being held in Yuba County Jail in California. He is an avid writer, and he organized the first poetry slam at San Quentin State Prison. This is Eddy Zheng in his own words. More information at http://www.eddyzheng.com

According to the committee of the YKFPP, funds will be utilized to help political prisoners who have urgent needs, including health care and finances. The YKFPP will send $25 commissary funds to, and correspond with, four prisoners each month.

Diana Fujino, author of Heartbeat of Struggle: The Revolutionary Life of Yuri Kochiyama, will donate the book royalties to support YKFPP. Contact Diana Fujino at: fujino@asamst.ucsb.edu.

Anyone who shares Yuri’s belief and vision can help by buying Fujino’s book or contributing funds to YKFPP:

Yuri Kochiyama Fund For Political Prisoners
PO Box 80145
Goleta, CA 93118
On Going Organizing:
Black August Organizing Committee

Mission Statement:

The Black August Organizing Committee is a community-based organization, which has been in existence for 25 years. Our goals include: Working to free Political Prisoners, Prisoners of War and Prisoners of Conscious, many of whom have been locked away for 10, 20, 30 and 40 years with no end in sight. Working to shut down the sensory deprivation torture chambers known publicly as Security Housing Units or SHU programs. Working to maintain a community awareness of and involvement in the legal, medical and social issues affecting prisoners in general and politically conscious prisoners in particular. Working to provide alternatives for our youth in the streets to being caught up in the prison industrial complex.

As an organization, we began working in the community on issues directly affecting people’s lives, such as: police brutality, food programs, housing aid and legal assistance. To this day we have worked to be of service to the community in as many ways as we can. Our programs are people oriented and strive to educate and uplift. Our dedication is to those Freedom Fighters still in the concentration camps after decades of incarceration, as well as to the youth of our communities who are in grave danger of joining them, or dying in the streets.

Black August Organizing Committee
1714 Franklin St. #100-309
Oakland, CA 94612
510-658-7079
originalbaoc@dragonspeaks.org
www.dragonspeaks.org
Resources & Links

Black August
A Celebration of Hip-Hop & Our Freedom Fighters
http://www.blackaugust.com

Break the Chains Communities of Color and the War on Drugs
http://www.breakchains.org/

California Coalition for Women Prisoners
1540 Market St., Suite 490
San Francisco, CA 94102
(415) 255-7036 ext. 4
(415) 552-3150
info@womenprisoners.org

Critical Resistance
NATIONAL OFFICE
1904 Franklin Street, Suite 504
Oakland, CA 94612
Phone: 510.444.0484
Fax: 510.444.2177
crnational@criticalresistance.org
NORTHEAST REGIONAL OFFICE
451 West Street
New York, NY 10014
Phone: 212.462.4382
Fax: 212.462.4570
crne@criticalresistance.org
SOUTHERN REGIONAL OFFICE—reopened in New Orleans!!!
Physical Address:
2601 Tulane Ave., Suite 444
New Orleans, LA 70119
Mailing Address:
P.O. Box 71553
New Orleans, LA 70172-1553
Phone: 504-304-3784
crsouth@criticalresistance.org

Earth Liberation Prisoners Support Network
http://www.spiritoffreedom.org.uk/
Legal Services for Prisoners with Children
1540 Market St., Suite 490
San Francisco, CA 94102
(415) 255-7036
info@prisonerswithchildren.org

Malcolm X Grassroots Movement
http://www.mxgm.org

National Committee To Free The Cuban Five
http://www.freethefive.org

National Jericho Movement
P.O. Box 340084 • Jamaica, NY 11434
e-mail: info@thejerichomovement.com

North American Animal Liberation Front Support Group (NAALFSG)
PO Box 69597
5845 Yonge St.
Willowdale, Ont
M2M 4K3
CANADA
e-mail: naalfsg@envirolink.org

North American Earth Liberation Prisoners Support Network (NAELPSN)
e-mail: naelpsn@mutualaid.org

Prison Activist Resource Center
PO Box 339
Berkeley CA 94701—510.893.4648—parc
http://www.prisonactivist.org
  • Political Prisoners in the United States address list from the Prison
    Activist Resource Center

The MOVE Organization
P.O. Box 19709
Philadelphia, PA 19143
(610)499-0979
onamovellja@aol.com
My life began in rebellion and in a broken home. My parents separated while I was an infant. Although my father took custody of my sibling and me, he was almost never in the home because of his commitment, bordering on obsession, with rising from poverty into Amerika’s Black middle class. My primary care thus fell to my dear paternal grandmother, who was powerless to rein in my rebelliousness—especially that against my absentee father. When he did find his way home it was usually to repress my behavior with violence, to no avail. In turn I’d act out my own limited violence against increasingly larger opponents outside the home, which became a tendency to challenge bullies.

My father accomplished his career goals and tried to steer me in the same direction, but I had no interest in ‘success’ and the empty trappings that came with it. Despite my father’s years of sacrifice, including absence from his family’s life, none of the people I loved outside our immediate household reaped any benefits from our rise to status. If Amerikan success meant leaving behind, abandoning, forgetting loved ones, I wanted no part of it.

Though routinely praised as being particularly bright and talented, I never made much of a career of school. I was repeatedly suspended and expelled, leading to a lengthy incarceration at age 11, ‘arranged’ by my father. Shortly after my return home, he and I fell out completely and irreparably in what nearly became a fatal situation. At that point I vowed to never again tolerate anyone’s attempts to control me with violence.

From then on, my life was marked by living on the streets, resisting the Establishment, and learning the ways of the world. After living what seemed several lifetimes of experience, I found myself in prison for life at age 18. In prison, I relentlessly warred with guards in response to their organized oppression, terror tactics and abuses targeted at me and my peers. My resistance consisted of counter-violence and ultimately litigation. I quickly learned the futility of seeking a savior in the Establishment’s institutions (the courts).

In 2001, my journey towards redemption began through exposure to and study of socialist revolutionary theory and history, beginning with the
writings of George L. Jackson. I developed, refined, and contextualized my learning by applying it to the realities of my day-to-day life and experiences. I found my calling in the people’s struggle against capitalist imperialism and all its attendant oppressive features. I began compiling art and essays reflecting my ideological and political development, hoping to make what contributions I could from within these walls of confinement.

I continue to grow and develop an understanding encompassing methods of struggle toward building a world free of exploitation and division along lines of wealth, race, gender, age, sexuality, etc. A world where all life can co-exist as a community and interdependent whole. It’s my heartfelt desire to contribute all I can to help bring this world about. This new order can and must happen if we expect to exist even a few generations from now.

ALL POWER TO THE PEOPLE!

Kevin “Rashid” Johnson, Minister of Defense, New Afrikan Black Panther Party—Prison Chapter Fall, 2006