

THE OPENING STATEMENT

of those who are supposed to remain silent

Fall 2017 Newsletter

Perspectives on Justice | Introductory Note

This issue contains a variety of perspectives on justice. In “What Independence Mean to Me,” MoeMoe reflects on the double-speak inherent to what we might call “American values” while Al Button, in “Common Sense,” suggests that there have been times in the past—now gone—in which America was able

to live its values consistently. Baba Lowe’ Eba Logun and Lashaun Creighton explore institutions of “justice” as constructs of oppression, while Rand W. Gould sees the very idea of justice as the enemy. In publishing these pieces side by side, we hope to invite the reader into a dialogue, a process of learning

together. We feel it is important to be honest about difference, even while seeking points of unity. In this spirit, we open with an anonymous editorial, “Abolition & Solidarity,” in which the publication’s commitment to prison abolition is re-affirmed regardless of the process through which we arrive at that point.

Abolition & Solidarity | Anonymous Editorial From Behind Bars

Abolition

The Opening Statement believes that the process of abolishing prisons should be democratic and participatory, inclusive and affirming of human agency and human capacity for working collaboratively to create change. Toward those ends, there is the need for prisoners to develop the critical analytical tools necessary to understand oppression and their own socialization within oppressive systems, and to develop the sense of agency and capacity to interrupt and change oppressive patterns and behaviors in themselves and in the institutions and communities of which they are a part.

In grappling with these questions, The Opening Statement believes in the explanatory and political value of identifying both the particular histories and characteristics of specific forms of oppression, as well as the patterns that connect and mutually reinforce different oppressions in a system that is inclusive and pervasive.

White prisoners experience some of the same economic and social oppression as Black prisoners. The problem, however, is

that in our society, Black lives are valued less than white lives; and because of that Blacks as a group are disproportionately imprisoned. Which explains why when challenging the space prisons occupy in our society it may appear to be a disproportionate emphasis placed on the struggle of Black prisoners.



Current debates and struggles to abolish prisons cannot be fully understood without acknowledging the historical debts from slavery, legal and de facto segregation, relocation, and racial violence that have advantaged whites as a group (some more than others), while locking Blacks out of positions that would allow their collective, rather than token economic and social advancement. Context is vital for understanding the historical appearance of prison, and unquestioned “facts” down through the ages.

Power and privilege are relative, however. And because individuals hold multiple complex and cross-cutting social group memberships that confer relative privilege or disadvantage, it is important that all prisoners, regardless of race, religion or geographical origins, that they share their individual and group experiences with imprisonment.

Solidarity

The Opening Statement believes that those who authentically commit themselves to solidarity with prisoners, solidarity across race, religion, geographical origins, and class, must reexamine themselves constantly. Solidarity

is so radical not to allow ambiguous behavior.

Those committed to solidarity, whether on the inside or outside, are surrounded and influenced by the conditions which generate prisons, and often do not perceive their true significance or their dehumanizing power. Paradoxically, then, they utilize the same instruments of alienation in what they consider an effort to liberate. We can no longer remain as we were. We must take on a new form of existence, a profound rebirth.

Furthermore, The Opening Statement believes that those committed who proclaim solidarity with those like or unlike themselves, yet who feel alarm at each doubt the other expresses, alarm at each suggestion the other offers, and/or feels alarm at each step the other takes, are gravely deceived. True solidarity requires entering into the situation of those with whom one is in solidarity. It means being at their side to transform the reality which has made solidarity necessary.

The “Howl” of Justice | Rand W. Gould

Justice, dignity, nobility, freedom . . . these words that yap and howl, are they anything other than household pets whose masters have calmly awaited their homecoming since the time when heroic lackeys won the right to walk them on the streets? To use them is to forget that they are the ballast that enables power to rise out of reach.

- Raoul Vaneigem

Justice does not mean fairness, rightness of equity, as most people think it does, implying something good they should seek for themselves. Quite the oppo-

Untitled | Eugene Marr

I know why the dog in that cage barks all day!

That mouse eats food from his bowl

That cat runs by free, with a smirk on its face

That bird sings from the tree only to fly away

I know why the dog in that cage barks all day!

Never meant to be in that cage, he doesn't like

the plastic under his nails

He beats his tail against the metal bars of that

cage until it begins to bleed

But it doesn't hurt near as much of the pain he feels

from being locked away

I know why the dog in that cage barks all day!

He knows one day the door to that cage

is going to open again

He still remembers the feeling of the wind

breezing against his face

He knows to NEVER come back to the place

of that cage

He still remembers FREEDOM, he can TASTE it—

That's why the dog in that cage barks all day!

site, it means ritualized punishment or retribution. Most people in prison can tell you that, once arrested, your cry for justice will only be answered by the “yap and howl” of a dog on a short chain—the masters’ “household pet.”

One of the biggest public secrets in America and the world, today, is the true meaning of the word justice and its use as a tool of oppression. Even Black Panther Party chairman Huey P. Newton was fooled into thinking it's a good idea to seek out justice and wrote, “It is difficult for an ordinary citizen to get justice in the courts when those who are trying to convict him break the law to get him convicted” (emphasis supplied). Talk about taking a dog for a walk. Huey should've known better because he, also, wrote, “Words are another way of defining phenomena and the definition of any phenomena is the first step to controlling it” (Huey P. Newton, *Revolutionary Suicide*, 1973, ops 317-8, 163).

The word justice is rooted in the Latin *jus*, which originated in the terminology of the Roman state's religious cults and signified sacred formula or ritual. As such, justice is, by definition, a religious, or a quasi-religious, ritual or formula for state-administered punishment or retribution that has been adapted from the Roman state's religious cults. This religious aspect is especially revealing, considering the word religious originated in the Latin *religio*, “obligation” or “bond,” which likely derived from the verb *religare*, to “tie-back” or “tie tight.” *Re* meaning “back,” *ligare*, “tie.” (John Ayto, *Dictionary of Word Origins*, 1990, 310, 438).

Well-known attorney Clarence Darrow once said, “I don't believe in God because I don't believe in Mother Good.” I don't believe in “God” either, nor do I believe in justice, at least for myself and my friends, because I don't want us to be tied-up and punished via ritual or anything else. I prefer the masters keep their “household pets” to themselves.

It's no accident, the courthouse

of the United States Supreme Court looks like a Roman temple. It is simply tacit recognition of the “gift” of justice from the Roman Empire, the seminal Western state, to the American state. A gift that comes replete with all the trappings of state power, including a raised dais, or “the bench,” the black robes of priests and medieval executioners, and a bureaucracy that allegedly follows the quarter-million plus volumes of law that fill American libraries!

Many people go to court relying on those quarter-million volumes to get justice, which they mistakenly interpret as the proverbial American “fair shake,” only to be confounded by one of the first principles of “New World” colonialism, the Spanish Empire's legal aphorism, *Ce obediencia, per no se cumple* (The law is to be obeyed, not followed). All the law will ever get you is justice, and justice is exactly what you don't want—a household pet or a tool of the masters. This is exactly what Audre Lorde was talking about when she wrote:

The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. The may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about a genuine change.

A court in session in America today is little more than a legal lynching, only the robes aren't white, there are no burning crosses, or ropes hanging from tree limbs, but there's always a Bible you can swear on.

It is a commonly held belief, but an erroneous one, that you only get as much justice as you're willing, or able, to buy. Any truly wealthy person, i.e., a member of the 1%, could tell you, but won't, that the goal is to buy your way out of the justice system, not seek justice. The black-robed priest-executioners known as judges will twist the law according to the amount paid. One judge, Baron Parke, admitted as much and stated his greatest joy was to write “an opinion in which by reasoning with strict legal concepts, I arrive at a result no layperson could conceivably have anticipated.” Today,

Parke would be a member of the Federalist Society, as are at least four sitting justices on the United States Supreme Court.

As in the Roman Empire, the wealthy and powerful in America, and in the world, today, are not held accountable by justice, the law, or anything else. Least of all the United States Constitution. Justice merely serves to preserve the status quo, thereby giving license to do what they will to the criminals, thieves, and mass-murderers who run the transnational corporations, that in turn, run America in a zero-sum race to loot and pillage a dying world.

And, yet, I still hear the howl. For justice, more of a whine really, from all and sundry, even the so-called “left wing” press, when justice should be the last thing they want. Justice, like “dignity, nobility, freedom,” etcetera, inevitably returns home to lay at the feet of its masters, no matter how long or far the dog-walked walks it on the streets. We've known this, or should have, since the 1960s, when Raoul Vaneigem first wrote the epigraph that began this essay.

In America, you're guilty upon arrest and you cannot be found innocent at trial. The best you can hope for is a finding or not guilty. Exonerated convicts suing for false arrest and delicious prosecution, quickly learn that a finding of not guilty is not proof of innocence, and probable cause, that is as little as one person pointing an accusing finger at you, is enough to absolve police, prosecutors, and the courts of their act of railroading you into prison. This explains why out of 2.2 million prisoners in America, a third are innocent, a third were only convicted due to police, prosecutorial, and/or judicial misconduct, and a third are guilty of something according to the masters' laws. This, my friends, is justice well-served. None for me thanks, but I will have a little of that injustice if you don't mind.

What Independence Mean to Me | MoeMoe (The Coldest)

You can't put a price on life, yet life has a price—what you eat, watch your weight and depending on where you live you have to watch who you be with. Life is precious and short so we have to make the best of it, not knowing what tomorrow will bring, we try to cheat it by making up laws and rules to manipulate those that can do harm or help you.

We can't control what people think, say, or do, for the most part, but we advocate thoughts of unity in a group or a society to make them think we all want the same things. Which is to be safe, healthy, and productive. The only way to do that is to make them believe they have a say in what does on around them. Give them rights—you have the right to freedom of speech, the right to spiritual upliftings, the right to vote, etc. etc.

These rights are not made by the people who live by them every day, but by a government that hand-picked itself a few hundred years

To Feed or Not to Feed | Shannon Shivhan Roden

It is said that the way to a person's heart is through their stomach. How true. Have you ever woke hungry? Stabbing pains that only intensify as every thing your eyes encounter makes you think of food. How about drinking glass after glass of water to fool your stomach so you can fall to sleep? All the while knowing when you wake it will be the same or worse. Have you ever felt unrelenting hunger pangs while a delicious aroma lingers in the air teasing your sense? Starving while someone sits before you preparing what to you looks to be a feast while you lack even a slice of bread to sate your hunger.

In the animal kingdom, when food is not to be had, there are some species that will eat their own young. Memory fails to recall the specifics, but some time ago there was a plane crash where the survivors had to resort to cannibalism in order to survive. An unimaginable and gruesome thought, that. Just try to imagine the brutality one must succumb to, the depths of despair, to reach that level. I wonder, does one ever come back from such an ordeal? Obviously, it is not something that will ever be forgotten. How could it be? Likely, you will never be the person you were before, but with help and support, you could eventually come back to a manageable point.

What has this to do with prison and prison abolition many might ask. An understandable inquiry. But before I explain the correlation, let me state that abolition is going to take many different forms of action. Various steps fixing key issues, as trivial as they may seem. And although trivial to some, to others, they are willing to fight, maim, kill, and die over.

Something many people are unaware of, is how many prisoners go to bed hungry. Wake each morning hungry. And often the more fortunate prisoners are preparing food, which to the hungry, is tantamount to a feast. When considering the level of brutality those unfortunate individuals upon that mountain had to resort to, it's easy to see that many of these prisoners begin to form packs, and by any means nec-

ago. With the same method to fool and control the majority. We pay taxes so our government can protect us from other countries and our country in turn pays other countries to be allies with us, so we become indebted to them. Just as the American citizens are indebted to our own country.

Our country pays for protection. America fought Britain to be free from its stranglehold, rules, and regulations for our so-called independence. Who's really independent? Independence means to not rely on something or someone else, not to be governed by another.

Here we are, the American people governed by a system of individuals that tell us what we can and can't do, with limitations that teach us how to act, how to dress, how to think and what to eat, within a country governed by thieves, liars, and trick-knowledge. I fit none of the descriptions of being independence as

a Black man in America. I was born depending on the government to take care of me. My family's welfare checks showed me who governed us, my school books taught me who my life was governed by, and my neighborhood produces the attitude that would govern what I'll become.

So when I think about what independence mean to me: I can sit here and honestly say I don't know. Because I've never been. If I had to say something, I would say this: Independent is being able to feed your child every day and not have to worry about if you will be able to tomorrow. Independence is not being afraid if you're going to be killed by some racist white person in a uniform, or not be served in a restaurant, or not get a job because the color of your skin. And if independence really mean not relying on another, then I'll never be independent, because I rely on my race to show society that we as human beings need each other if in fact we are going to survive as humanity.

essary—robbing, stealing, extortion, what ever it takes—provide relief of those hunger pangs. Not to mention a deep-rooted anger towards those they feel allowed and treated them so. These are not ideal conditions to nurture civility. These individuals have not been properly prepared to be reintegrated back into society productively.

“Three hots and a cot.” An old saying applied to lock up and military. The concept is, 3 hot meals, a bed to sleep in, and zero responsibility. And it's generally taken as a fact that prisoners receive 3 tasty, nutritional meals each day. And that may have been true once. Today, a prison has become big business, it's all about profit. As a result, the bulk of prison food has become filler food, potatoes and rice. A menu that cycles every 28 days, offers potatoes over 30 times. To make this even more daunting, the majority of the time, either they are mostly uncooked or cooked to liquid. In either case, maybe a source of carbs, but seriously lacking in protein and other vital nutrients.

As for proteins. How's this for a nice way to cheat? Weight vs. volume. Let's say the menu calls for 3/4 cup of taco meat. This, then, is obviously a volume measure—six ounces in volume. So, let's take a 6 ounce scoop and scoop 1 serving and weight it. We get a weight of 8 ounces. Not it comes down to semantics. They say, “The menu calls for 3/4 cup which is 6 ounces, so we will use a 4.5 ounce scoop which weighs just under 6 ounces, which can be attributed to a weight loss from cooking it as the menu means precooked portions.” Potatoes and rice may fill your stomach for a little while, and even put on weight, but it is nutrients that your body is screaming for when it's hungry. Remember the child with the bloated stomach starving in a Third World country? It was malnutrition that those children suffered from.

An argument often given against this is that prisoners can augment their diet by purchasing food items from the prison commissary. To an extent, this is true. How much would a ramen noodle cost you today? And if you buy them in bulk? *Continued on Page 4*



Common Sense | Al Button

Common Sense and civility are brothers. Zero tolerance is the evil stepmother. So, let's take a glance at the endangered creature called "common sense." First, a few egregious examples of its demise:

- A grade school boy bites his cookie into the shape of a gun—he's expelled from school.

- A passenger during a traffic stop doesn't produce ID like the cops would like, so they smash the window and shoot him.

- A teenage girl suspected of drug possession is taken to the school nurse station and forced to strip search.

- A Braille magazine, allowed in all 50 states, is rejected by a mail room clerk because it is in Braille and it "could" be a danger. It explains the new PC products just released and rates them. All of the appeals filed were denied. Who knew Braille could be so dangerous in a prison.

This zero tolerance and utter lack of common sense has percolated throughout our society. The government has set up secret courts just for terrorists. Courts where even the defense attorneys aren't allowed to see all the evidence against them. There is no public admitted. No news media coverage allowed. Oh, you can be sentenced to solitary confinement

for the rest of your life. Does this ring a bell for you? Does it sound like old Russia, or the Argentine military rule we all so vehemently criticized for holding these kinds of secret trials? What happened to our constitution? Even after reading it again, I can't find anything that remotely allows this to take place in our legal system.

So how did we get stuck in this place? We could always place the blame on what happened on 9/11. Those terrorists wanted to destroy our society as we knew it. Looks like they did a pretty good job of that. But we cannot blame everything on terrorists—after all, it's our government doing this to us.

I believe there are many causes for the lack of common sense. One is the large corporations. Congress has failed to enact antitrust laws and US corporations have become huge multi-national monsters. They no longer believe they owe society, or their workers, anything. It's become all about profit to the detriment of everything else. All those jobs that built middle class America are gone. The middle class and its former solid roots and values has crumbled. Families are barely scratching

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It's been many years, but last I remember, it was 7 cents each for a single pack and 3 cents apiece in bulk. I pay 34 cents today, for a single pack. That is more than I make in a day at my prison job. In February of 1992, I earned over \$30/month as a unit-porter. Last month, I made less than \$9 (April 2017). Ironically, the cost of our commissary items have increased with inflation. But our pay, across the board, has decreased. So sure, I could purchase food items. It just means I cannot have any hygiene items. And I also cannot get sick or need dental work or medication.

2.2 million Americans locked up is insanity. And it's going to take many small steps to stop the insanity. As unbelievable as it may seem, feeding prisoners a reasonable, nutritious meal is part of that process. If hunger can result in cannibalism, it can certainly lead to resentment. Torture—everyone resents torture.

out a living in this new world of high prices and low wages. That family breakdown is preventing time and collective teaching of the young. They don't learn civility and common sense. Grandma isn't there to keep them in check anymore. They are seeing a lack of good jobs and less of a future.

Schools are also responsible. Once middle-class families began moving away, the schools also began to deteriorate. To cut costs they dumped civic classes that taught kids what their rights and duties as citizens were.

Along came cheap TV. Stressed mothers sat their kids in front of the TV and used it as a baby sitter. You can't watch thousands of hours of something and not have it influence you. The cool dude with gold chains and hot cars and chicks. With so few job opportunities, that looks like the life for me.

The came cheap crack. It destroyed what was left of poor communities. Those without hope found a way our of pain. Those with some hope, fro watching TV, found their way too. Neither came out ahead. What was left of families was destroyed and the prisons

filled.

The reasons go on and on. But then there is us. You and me. Why aren't we holding elected officials accountable for what they promised us? Why are we allowing prisons to be run by those who are incompetent? Why aren't we applying peer pressure to those among us who are not civil? We all have our reasons, our excuses. But there are enough "halfway normal" folks to make changes. Can we form small groups and support each other? Can we reach out to others wh want the kind of changes we do and support them? Can we shun those without common sense and a sense of civility and fill their jobs with those who have those traits?

Well, maybe. I see that trait in MAPS. But this is a new baby and how it's raised will determine how it matures and acts. Remember what your grandma told you—Stay away from those who would steer your wrong. So, stay away from those without common sense and civility. Take a long, honest look at yourself, at us. Common sense and civility starts here.

Equation: Prison = Slavery = Prison | Baba Lowe' Eba Logun

Eliminate slavery, you eliminate prisons. We must begin to call slavery what it really is—"prison"—no cosmetic in-between words like "incarceration," "paying a debt to society" (based on slavery), "enjoying safe streets," "law and order," "Jim Crowism," "Black Codes," "apartheid," "reconstruction," "indentured servants," "serfdom," etc.

Hell! Since the Puritans brought the prison concept to these western shores there has been slavery, payroll to payroll forced to pay taxes to those who don't pay taxes (Sheriff of Nottingham type stuff if you've ever read Robin Hood or seen the movies). 13th Amendment my ass!

We are the best dressed, best housed, best motorized Cadillac-driving slaves in the world, we even own slaves we don't know about in Third World countries making our shoes etc. for pennies a day. Quoting Malcolm X speaking at a college, "Oh don't be surprised when I say I was in prison, you're still in prison! That's what America means: Prison!" (In other words "slavery.")

We must learn to research history instead of being told history. For example, the Egyptians (Kemitians), one of the most advanced civilizations in the world, had *no* prisons (slavery). Even the great pyramids were built by people proud to build them, not slaves (prisoners), no whips, lashing bodies, not Cecil B. DeMille's "movie version" we've been duped into believing.

The Olmec and Aztec civilizations had no prisons (slavery), the Sioux Nation (North America) had no prisons, no slavery. As I said before, the religious groups of Puritans came from Europe and started the prion systems. This world was doing just fine without them or prisons, no slavery. Only those like MGM movie industries made it look like we were savages. See the reading list at the end of this article for recommendations on accurate historical accounts.

Only in Rome/Europe were people enslaved (imprisoned) and forced to build for the "privileged" empire. On April 22, 2011, The History Channel aired a show entitled "Bible Battles." According to the show, Jews were not slaves in Egypt but plunderers. In this country we are literally bombarded with tidal waves of cop sitcoms/shows on TV like Hawaii Five-O, Starchy & Hutch, The Wire, Law & Order, Blue Bloods, Bones, LAPD, supporting prison (slavery) 24/7 on the TV

screens conditioning the mind to think prison (slavery) is the "natural" way of life. This rash of the TV to see who was going to snitch on who, saturating the networks as if law and order really exist in this country. How it's Ice-T, Lawrence Fishbone, "big stars" playing the roles so many lesser actors would usually play. We should read the book *Data Smog* about the negative effects of repetitive images of TV. One loses the ability to think skeptically, to question even TV ads or news media.

As long as this entity of prison/slavery is profitably it will continue to exist, bulking the taxpayers, controlled by the news media's hype fear tech.

Example: NPR News 11/29/1999

Boskaville, WI - Supermax being built for \$30,000 per prisoner (slave). A state rep says more and more prisoners are coming in more violent. (But we know, though they exist, the rates are low at this time.) People of the town bought the land for \$5000 and gave it to the state and celebrated! Selling t-shirts, hot dogs, etc. The facility will cost \$44 million to build and will make at least 30 million per year starting for inmates that don't exist yet. The whole city celebrated!

In other words, the word has gone out amongst guards, in prisons of IL, MI, IN, and OH to squeeze and pressure to make some violent prisoners to fill up the new prisons. Of course, cops and prosecutors in the states have been told to make more arrests/convictions to fill the prisons.

And of course conditioning the public's mind to accept this new form of slavery with shows like "The Wire," etc. and so many shows entic-



ing, with hip hop music, fashion, slang street language, sex, justify cop arrests (slave-catching), investigation of law violators (slaves), cop beatings, shootings (justified murder), justifying the executions of people like Christopher Darner, cop veteran turned rebel, "slave-catcher killer." We should get nauseated every time we hear the music jingle to Law & Order, conditioning the mind to think that we actually have a justice system for "slave" law-breakers. Slave-catchers in blue, with black and white skin, it's all a big slave con game like the 13th Amendment: "No slavery in this country except blah blah." This country's government has made 3500 treaties with Native Americans and to date has broken 3499. The forked tongue at work is a very fascinating thing, perpetuated by criminals who need to be taken to court—not their courts, but the world court like Malcolm X stated to the United Nations and accused of crimes of genocide while the US has to point its hypocritical fingers at other countries' human violations while violating the human rights of so many here on its own shores, constantly.

The enslavers say, "Ignorance of the law is no excuse." I say why not? If you don't know, you don't know! Once again, who made that statement? The enslavers of course, so they have you jumping through law "hoops" already set/timed to change once you think you understand it.

Article 7 of Rome Statute of International Criminal Court states: "The crime of apartheid includes acts committed in context of an institutionalized regime of systematic oppression and domination of one racial group over another racial group or groups with intention of maintaining that regime." The statute lists apartheid as a crime against humanity. Genocide is further articulated in Article 2 of The Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, by the United Nations General Assembly on December 9, 1948.

This country's government is in constant serious violation of our human rights and we must confront them by taking these human rights criminals to the world courts. Slavery is illegal and prisons—one and the same—are inhumane. At the time of writing this, June 9, 2017, I am watching the news of a man of color running from the cops. His car crashed and caught on fire; so did he. He jumped out and rolled on the ground to put out the flames on himself and as he lay *Continued on Page 6.*

Equation: Prison = Slavery = Prison | Continued from Pg. 5

on the ground, cops came and started stomping on him and kicking him. Of course, his family is taking the cops to the racist court but we all know how that is likely to turn out.

Slavery in the guise of this prison mentality has reached critical mass in this country. MAPS, Prisoner Solidarity Committee, NAACP, Black Lives Matter, action networks, coalitions, radio stations: The time is now! We must act! No justice, no peace! No slave prisons or no peace! I close with a statement from the book *The Destruction of Black Civilization* by Chancellor Williams, pg 360:

“The idea must be bold, daring, an effort of unheard of audacity. If we fail to accept this challenge at this critical turning point, we will have proved ourselves unworthy of having decedents and our names should be forgotten by them or cursed by the farthest generation.”

**How to Write an Essay** | The Opening Statement Crew

There's no right or wrong way to write. Some of the most famous writers have broken all the "rules." However, some people find it helpful to follow a rough guideline through the process of writing an essay. Here's one set of steps you can take to write an essay:

1. Pick a topic with which you are familiar or want to learn more about. Perhaps this is an experience you have had, a situation you find yourself in, something you enjoy, or a topic that interests you.

2. Inquire and reflect: Ask yourself "why?" and "how?" questions. Discuss the topic with a friend. If you have access to books on the topic, read more on the topic. If not, or if your topic is personal, skip the books and reflect in your own mind.

Reading Recommendations

Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee by Dee Brown (an account of Native American history before and after Columbus invaded the Americas)

Black Man of the Nile and His Family by Dr. Yosef Ben Jochannan

The Destruction of Black Civilization by Chancellor Williams

Black Athena by Martin Bernal

Stolen Legacy by George G. M. James

Editorial Note:

In the spirit of Baba's essay, we encourage all readers to investigate history actively rather than accepting it passively. Because European colonialism has succeeded so thoroughly in its project of destruction, we may never have access to artifacts that shed light on the past. At least partially for this reason, the specifics of historical record are often disputed amongst scholars. We take the main points of the above essay to be:

1) The dominant narrative—the one we may have been taught in American schools—was developed to protect and uphold the horrors of European colonialism.

2) Prisons have not always existed! Prisons are neither natural nor necessary institutions. Prisons were created to protect and uphold the horrors of capitalism.

Hint: Sometimes a thesis is also a great title because it tells your reader exactly what you plan to address.

4. Explain your thesis. You can describe how you came to your perspective, defend your perspective from counter-arguments, or pick apart a commonly held perspective that is different from your own. Some people find it helpful to use one paragraph for every main point.

5. Don't worry too much about spelling, grammar, and style. Writing is like anything else—over time, with practice, it gets more comfortable. The important thing, if you want to write, is that you get around to actually writing.

Text above translated from Menominee: Never Give Up

Interview of Lashaun Creighton | The Opening Statement

OS: *What is the first thing you want people to know about living in prison?*

LASHAUN: That prison is an emotional and psychological torture that is far worse than any torture to the body, by design. Days and weeks and months and years of being told up is down and right is left, punished for not acquiescing, for not showing extreme deference, influences the overwhelming majority of imprisoned men and women to give up or give in, and become mere shells of themselves.

I would want them to know that a relatively small guard force does not control a much larger prisoner population through brute force, alone. Prisoners are controlled through techniques of emotional and psychological weakening that is of no benefit to those imprisoned or society.

I'd want them to know that prisons are not country clubs, that there is no stake and eggs, that I haven't seen an egg, let alone eaten one in maybe ten years. I'd want them to know that there is no premium cable packages, no free rides to college, no sex in trailers. Prison is deprivation, despair, and depression.



OS: *How did your experience with the criminal justice and prison systems change your political perspective?*

LASHAUN: Prior to imprisonment both systems loomed in my mind as machinations of a larger racist system that harassed and brutalized those who were raised in poverty, but I possessed no ideas that could be thought of as a political perspective. I was aware that the police were not present in my neighborhood to serve and protect my friends and me. I was also aware that the courts separated and divided families, and prisons did the same, but never gave much thought to the social and/or historical appearance of those institutions; never gave much thought to who's interests is ultimately served by them; nor did I give much thought to what the larger power dynamics at play were. The criminal justice and prison systems were simply two of the many obstacles in my life.

Just recognizing those systems as racist or destructive, which I did at a very young age, didn't automatically lead to resistance. Which is what first comes to mind when I hear the term "political perspective." Experience absent critical analysis provides little in the way of understanding. There are working class and poor people with experiences to spare when it comes to the criminal justice and prison systems, which really should not be seen as exclusively distinct from one another, but at the same time lack awareness of what's actually taking place, and aren't consciously resisting.

It wasn't until I met George L. Jackson, Frantz Fanon, Paulo Freire, Attiba Shanna, and other radicals, through the pages of their books, articles, and continued social justice work that I began to understand my experiences as part of something much larger, as something bigger than myself.

I also had the good fortune of having the late Mayor of Jackson, MS, and premiere freedom fighter, Baba Chokwe Lumumba as a mentor and friend. It was through his tutelage that I began to see the world, my place in it, and responsibilities to others, different than what I saw them before. What I can tell you for certain is that there was no burning bush, no mountain top experience that transformed me. It was new information, that led to new understandings, that changed my life forever.

OS: *Can you describe the prison industrial complex?*

LASHAUN: The obvious description, it's a multi-billion dollar industry that encompasses the superstructure of the justice system (e.g., police, courts, parole division) in general, and the prison industry (e.g., prisons, work camps, prison vendors) in particular. The not so obvious is its an extension of a larger effort to marginalize, control, and exploit working class and poor people, prison's majority clientele. It's the result of a public school system that trains instead of educates, a continuously shrinking job market, class and raced based laws, the profit motive.

OS: *How do you see corporate interests dictating the structure of incarceration?*

LASHAUN: In order for corporations to escape organized labor in this country, higher wages and benefits, corporations comb the world in search of cheap labor pools and exploitable resources. When they are found, corporate migration leaves U.S. communities in chaos. Huge numbers of people lose employment and prospects for future employment. With the economic base of these communities obliterated, education and other surviving social services are profoundly diluted.

Corporations promote legislation that eliminates restrictions that protect people, but increases protection for corporate interests. This process turns men and women into perfect candidates for prison. It is now possible to predict the probability of a percentage of the population spending some time in prison based upon corporate behavior.

When we limit criticisms of corporations only to the business they do by setting up factories in prisons and exploiting the labor of imprisoned men and women, we give up opportunities to better understand the increased reliance on incarceration to begin with. When we accept corporate influence and control of society as inevitable, we not only shrink from demanding a society that places people before profit, we also throw away strategies and tactics that can be used to end corporate rule.

OS: *How has corruption affected your situation?*

LASHAUN: Language such as fair or corrupt is meant to get across that state actors often act in ways contrary to their written or stated values, but such language also gives the im-

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pression that the criminal justice system is at times something other than corrupt, when it's nothing but corrupt. I have ditched such language from my vocabulary, at least when denouncing the race, class, and gender inequalities built into the criminal justice system.

I think the fact that U.S. economic, political, and cultural ideology justifies a system of winner and losers, with the latter far outweighing the former, is corrupt. I think state actors incarcerating people for not being a winner in that system, is corrupt. My incarceration for a murder I had no knowledge of, or participation in, was simply business as usual.

I can say this, the entire experience of essentially being kidnapped by the police, charged by the prosecutor's office based solely on the fabricated testimony of a jail house informant, that testified in multiple cases claiming to have received confessions, and sentenced 52 to 80 years, has influenced me to think more deeply about in whose interests does the criminal justice system really operate.

OS: Can you speak specifically about prison guards and administrators?

LASHAUN: Prison administrators and guards have, until recently, been spared the sort of aggressive investigation that imprisoned men and women routinely find themselves the subject of. The logical place to begin a critical look into prison is not with the poor, uneducated, disorganized men and women that are property of the state, but with the state and its representatives. "All other inquiry," the late George L. Jackson said, "would be like walking backwards: you will never see what is in front of you." We must begin with the director of the department on down to guards.

OS: Will you elaborate further?

LASHAUN: For most of history prison has meant prisoners, not the people who operate and staff these places. The collapse of the meaning of prison into prisoners has led to a myriad of social and moral blind spots. Not only in the narrow conceptualization of what it means to be a prisoner, but in the severe lack of attention paid to how administrators and guards are a source of crime and punishment.

If anyone thinks the varied expressions of containing, and micromanaging the lives of

prisoners down to when they can use the bathroom, when they can talk, and what they can talk about, what they can and cannot think about is not a crime, they should think a little more deeply about personal rights and economy of action. Think more deeply about what it means to be a human.

Critics of prison generally ignore the special talents required to control every aspect of another person's life. In the process smoothing the path for rampant neglect and abuse. Indeed, what administrators and guards do in the names of corrections is most vicious when it is invisible. When it is taken for granted.



OS: If what you say is true, how come so few people are aware of this?

LASHAUN: Well, most people only source of information about prison comes from the media. That being the case, if your only source of information about the people the U.S. imprisons is the movies, COPS, if it bleeds it leads local news stories, or other products of the media, chances are your information is distorted at best, but more likely so thin it should not be considered information at all. That is dangerous considering the U.S. is the most incarcerated crazed society in the industrialized world.

When the media does put a face on imprisonment it is not likely to be a human one. The most sensational stories about super predators, almost always urban, poor, black and brown, looking to victimize the reader or viewer, is the subject.

Furthermore, policy makers and social planners invert reality so that the broader society learns to fear, resent, and blame imprisoned men and women for a rapidly declining quality of life. Not massive layoffs, financial speculation, government graft, or corporate wheeling and dealing that serves the interests of the rich and wealthiest Americans.

It is no wonder that we are thin on information about imprisoned people. The mass media is neither objective, balanced, independent, nor neutral. Those that own and program mass media are themselves part of the economic and political elites. Their interests in preserving the current economic and political relations require making prisoners invisible.

OS: What is the most severe prison abuse you have heard of at a prison you've been in?

LASHAUN: Michigan has approximately 42 prisons. I have been to over half in the twenty plus years I've been imprisoned. I have witnessed everything from decades spent in solitary confinement to highly questionable deaths. But I have to refer back to the last question, and that emotionally and psychologically the horrors of prison can never be told. Sequestering people, relegating them to an isolated existence, marked by an authoritarian regime. I think we have been conditioned to accept the presence of prison as an inevitable fact of life. So much so, most of us cannot imagine a world where people are not housed behind tons of concrete, razor wire, steel, bullet proof glass, motion detectors, and armed watch towers. We have accepted the violence of separating people from their families and communities as natural; and merely show frustration with the spectacular acts of physical violence.

Prison itself is a severe abuse. Depression and feelings of hopelessness are its hallmarks. A blinding and deafening violence that does not leave scars on the body, but lasting imprints on the mind and heart.

OS: What does prisoner justice and solidarity mean to you?

LASHAUN: In all honesty, I never actually thought about the words prisoner and justice together as a concept. However, a recent rash of publicized fatal shootings of unarmed black pedestrians by law enforcement has raised the cry for justice. But there is no coherent understanding of justice other than

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arrest, prosecution, imprisonment, and in some instances, civil suits. This is because the criminal justice system makes extensive use of state sanctioned punishment.

For me justice is based upon a deeply spiritual process of transformation. Transformation of persons, situations, and above all, future interactions. Justice responds to human needs holistically in order to restore the moral bond of community, and is based upon the principles of accountability, repentance, forgiveness, compassion, and reconciliation. The realization that when a harm has occurred, human relationships become fractured, and some times broken. And as long as human relationships are damaged as such, we can never be wholly or truly human. Meaning justice is not the state acting as if it has been harmed, but people entering into dialogue to reconcile, repair, and restore both victim and victimizer.

I suppose on further contemplation, I would say that "prisoner justice" is repairing the harm caused by prisoners. For each prisoner justice will play out differently.

As far as prisoner solidarity, it means moving together emotionally to respond to crisis and celebration. To commune in the everyday act of living. To be part of such a communing is to be fully alive, fully human. To be without

community in this way is to be alive only in flesh. To be alone.

OS: Where should those who want to get involved begin?

LASHAUN: The only place that anyone can start is right where they are at.

OS: And where is that?

LASHAUN: History illustrates how tenacious and variable systems of oppression are and how dynamic and creative we must be to rise to the challenge they pose. As individuals and as groups our visions can only be partials. But working together brings multiple ways of analyzing the multiple dimensions of imprisonment, and imagining a world far less reliant on it. Diverse coalitions and networks offer the most promising strategies for the challenge.

The impetus for this more often comes from imprisoned people and their families. Their lived experiences often allow them to see more clearly the contradictions between myths and reality and lead them to develop a critical perspective on crime and punishment in America. But those not directly affected by imprisonment also have an important role to play in building a movement to challenge imprisonment patterns.

OS: Do you have any parting words of encouragement or advice?

LASHAUN: Encouragement or advice? I'll put it like this, the most serious problem we face today is not poverty, schools that are custodial in nature, structural unemployment, mass imprisonment, or any other social crisis of unprecedented proportions. The most serious problems is we are failing to make connections between awareness and action i.e., once aware of these and other crisis we appear to be incapable of making shifts actions to do anything about them.

Most people who are catching the worst of it don't have to be convinced of their oppression. Its so close to them its epidermal. However, they lack confidence in their individual agency to change it. Society's ideology keep people passive by making this world seem eternal, natural, as if what other way could it be? So I encourage people to act, even if its a small action, do something that builds toward substantially changing circumstances and conditions. Link up with others even if it's its only two or three of you. That's the way it has always been. Or in the words of the Africa griots, "small creeks make rivers."

We Published a Pamphlet & We'd Love Feedback!

We've been working on a piece for the past few months explaining the rise of mass incarceration in relation to the ongoing crisis of capitalism. We wrote this in part to continue our political discussions with you, our comrades inside, as well as an attempt to analyze our current world with the hope of creating something different. If you'd like us to send in a copy, please write to us: MAPS PO Box 4811, East Lansing, MI 48826. We'd love to hear what you think of it! Below is the prologue.

prologue (write in for the rest):

"As the struggle against mass incarceration continues, we must ask ourselves the crucial question of how did we get here? so we can better answer the question of how do we get out of here? Mass incarceration did not appear overnight. The growth of prisons in Michigan, as in the broader Rustbelt region, is a response to decades of crisis. To build a strong movement of resistance to state violence, we must look at the history of the rise of mass incarceration in the Rustbelt region and analyze the specific reasons for this growth of State control and repression."

THE OPENING STATEMENT is an abolitionist newsletter driven by the voices and visions of Michigan prisoners, as well as those on the outside impacted by the prison system. **THE OPENING STATEMENT** hopes to foster ongoing discussion against the violence of incarceration.

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Attention mailroom:

The First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution protects free speech. Regulations that permit the government or its employees to discriminate on the basis of the content of the message cannot be tolerated under the First Amendment (i). Further, prisoners retain free speech rights. Thought control, by means of prohibiting beliefs, would not only be undesirable but impossible (ii). Fact of confinement and needs of the penal institution impose rational limitations on prisoner free speech rights (iii), but those restrictions must have a “valid, rational connection” to “legitimate penological interests” not related to the content of ideas (iv). Regulations and practices can only be justified when the practice “furthers an important or substantial government interest unrelated to the suppression of expression” (v). This means you cannot legally suppress the expression of ideas. Prison walls do not serve to form a barrier separating prisoners from the protections of the constitution (vi). Core political speech is most-zealously guarded and there is a public interest “in having free and unhindered debate on matters of public im-

portance—the core value of the Free Speech Clause of the First Amendment” (vii). Thus, exclusion of printed material on the basis of its political perspective amounts to free speech retaliation and discrimination, which is illegal (viii). If you exclude printed material for an unlawful basis, or if you simply conjure up a false pretext for its exclusion, you have broken the law. The prisoner recipient of this mail has cause for bringing a civil rights action against you and has cause for gaining punitive damages—which means money. You and everyone who permits this action, from your supervisor to the director of the prison system, may be named in those civil actions, and you may also be subject to termination from your employment. Because this primer is included in this mailing, you will not be able to claim you did not know your actions were illegal. For these reasons, we ask that you conform to federal law and refrain from unlawful discrimination against the enclosed materials, permitting mail service of this literature that objectively meets all legitimate criteria set forth in prison regulations. i, Reagan v. Time, Inc., 468 U.W. 641, 648-49, 104 SCt 3262 (1984). “[T]he fact that society may

find speech offensive is not sufficient reason for suppressing it. Indeed, if it is the speakers’ opinion that gives offense, that consequence is a reason for according it constitutional protection.” *Hustler Magazine, Inc. v. Falwell*, 495 US 45, 46, 108 SCt 876, 882. The government may not prohibit the expression of an idea simply because society finds the idea itself offensive or disagreeable, *U.S. v. Eichman*, 496 US 310, 319, 110 SCt 2404 (1990). “[A]bove all else, the First Amendment means that government has no power to restrict expression because of its message, its ideas, its subject matter, or its content.” *Police Dept. of Chicago v. Mosley*, 408 US 92, 95, 92 SCt 2286, 2290 (1972). ii, *Jones v. North Carolina Prisoners Labor Union*, 433 US 119, 97 SCt 2532 (1977). iii, *Pell v. Procunier*, 417 US 817, 822, 94 Set 2800, 2804 (1974). iv, *Turner v. Safely*, 482 US 78, 107 SCt 2245 (1987) v, *Turner, supra vi*, *Turner, supra vii*, *Pickering v. Board of Education*, 391 US 563, 573, 88 SCt 1731 (1968). viii, *Abu-Jamal v. Price*, 154 F3d 128 (3rd Cir., 1998); *X v. Blatter*, 175 F3d 378 (6th Cir. 1999)