I am Ahjamu Khalifah Baruti. I am 64 years of age, and I have been confined to prison going on my 36th year in the MDOC. I am also the father of Yusef “Bunchy” Shakur, who served 9 years in the MDOC; who has been home over 19 and a half years. My son, like many others, has shattered many myths and stereotypes that have faced formerly incarcerated men and women upon being released to a society that was (and still is) unforgiving. I would hope their contribution will influence you of the reason why many of us who are incarcerated deserve a second chance. WE DESERVE TO LIVE AND NOT DIE--NOT TO BE WAREHOUSED LIKE SARDINES, WAITING TO BE THE NEXT VICTIM OF COVID-19! William Garrison DESERVED TO LIVE! Yet because the MDOC refused to act with human compassion for him, HE DIED. Will you stand on the right side of history, or will you stand on the wrong side of history? I know, like many others, we prisoners face an uphill battle to receive your mercy. However, if I succumb to the coronavirus, I will do so as a man, not as a modern-day slave!

Peace in a time of war!
The death of George Floyd at the hands of Minneapolis police has caught significant public attention, re-kindling a global movement against the violence of policing. But as many of us know, this death is not a singular, isolated event. As a backdrop to George Floyd’s brutal execution, poor communities and communities of color experience the terror of police and prisons every day. Moreover, in a moment of global pandemic, the murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Tony McDade, Ahmaud Arbery, and countless others echo COVID-19’s disproportionate death toll on Black and Brown communities as well as incarcerated people of all races.

Ruth Wilson Gilmore, co-founder of the abolitionist organization Critical Resistance, defines racism as “the state-sanctioned or extralegal production and exploitation of group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death.” Racism is not an individual’s belief in the superiority or inferiority of another racial group. Rather, racism refers to the social mechanisms by which some groups are made more likely to die prematurely than others. These mechanisms include lack of access to healthcare and other material resources, confinement in institutions of punishment for most or all of the lifespan, the legal immunity of executioner cops patrolling Black and Brown neighborhoods, and many other factors.

The brutality of racist structures—from death-by-COVID to death-by-cage—has been met with a massive global movement for Black lives. The rallying cries for the defunding and abolition of police and prisons and the reinvestment of that money into Black and other marginalized communities have spread from cities to small towns. We see the spark of hope—that a different world is indeed possible—catching fire across the country and world, in multiracial crowds bound together in solidarity.

Abolition cannot wait for public officials who build their careers on promises of change while clinging to their position within the status quo. It cannot wait for the wealthy to have a turn of heart or a celebrity to champion its cause. Abolition rejects the logic of incarceration, that police and cages keep our communities safer. Abolition rejects the logic of hierarchy, that we need to appeal to those in power for their benevolence toward us. Like the movement for Black lives, abolition is for all of us who are tired of business as usual, who refuse to accept mass incarceration, execution-by-cop, imperialism, and state-sanctioned genocide as the “cost of freedom.” On the other side of abolition is a world that values people and relationships over property, collaboration and care over competition, and the thriving of everyone over the staggering wealth of the few. We move forward with love in our hearts and fire in our bellies.

A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE Adegun F.K.A. Edward Finley

This country was built due to the system of slavery, (forced labor) on the backs of “Alkebulan People”… In particular, who gave their blood, sweat, tears and lives. Those who refused or was unable to perform extraordinary labor were punished or killed. Slave codes were set in place to control, exploit and dehumanized our ancestors. They were forbidden to assemble in groups of more than five to seven, could not leave the plantation without a pass, could not beat drums (beating drums was used as a calling for our ancestors, a way to communicate and was used for other reasons that shall not be revealed), could not read books etc., could not hold religious meetings without white witnesses, could not raise a hand against any whites, regardless of the abuse or torture they may have inflicted upon our ancestors, had to obey whites without thinking or questioning, etc., could not have more than one or two trousers and a shirt.

As time went on, some slaves were freed in what they called confederate states (nothing more than a big ass union/gang together for illegal purposes). After the emancipation proclamation which was nothing more than an end to one phase of slavery on the verge of a new (Lincoln freed the slaves—yeah right, free my ass). “Prison” became the new system of slavery, which is a way for them to legally enslave more people, for more money, at the expense of the taxpayers, which include the “incarcerated” and “non-incarcerated.” We are subjected to forced labor as well. Prisoner slavery was simply re-titled “prison” and the slave codes were re-titled, “administrative rules”, “policy directives”, “operating procedures”, or “housing unit rules”, which is meant to control, exploit and dehumanize us.

We, the inmates, prisoners, criminals, which is just another way to say “slave”, built the “prison industrial complex.” We have given our blood, sweat, tears and many have died and are still dying mysteriously. Recently, Brother Dyson-Bey died at Cotton Correctional Facility. “Rest in power my brother” ase ase ase. It’s not a coincidence, that we are not permitted to do the same things that our ancestors were not permitted to do, such as assemble in groups of more than six (fear of unity), can’t leave the housing unit without a pass (paper tracking device), can’t beat drums, for the same reasons our ancestors were denied.
A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE Continued from Page 2

We are denied numerous books. Reading/obtaining certain information they feel will pose a threat to their system. Can’t hold religious meetings without a white witness and some well-recognized religions that pre-date Christianity, Islam, etc., such as “Yoruba/Ife” are denied to have services all together and no logical reason is given. Can’t defend ourselves against whites, even if they place hands on us unjustifiably. We must do what they say, without thinking or without questioning. This is called a “direct order” A.K.A. mental programming A.K.A psychologica slavety, only allowed two shirts, two pants, three socks etc., with the opportunity to wash them three times a week, (this increases disease). Considering we’re in the third phase of slavery, which is a reincarnated “prison industrial complex” (forced labor), off the backs of us, (slaves). They disguised the cotton fields as “horticulture”, or “yard crew.” Disguised the house work as “unit porter,” “laundryman” or “unit clerk” etc.

Those that refuse or unable to work, are still punished, forced by the offsprings of the slave masters. Punishment consists of tickets, that deprive prisoners (slaves) of certain day to day living, which the overseers consider privileges. These tickets render toplock, loss of privileges (L.O.P.), confinement to a very small cell/room, shared with another person. It’s to the overseer’s discretion to let us use the restroom, whether its an emergency or not does not matter, go to receive medical treatment, go to eat, go to take a shower, get water or fresh air etc., all has to be permitted by the overseers.

For example, I’ve seen an officer refuse to allow prisoners to educate themselves, using the Edovo tablet that consists of college courses, down to basic fundamentals, because the prisoners were on L.O.P. I asked why?

His reply was “education is a privilege.” Without a formal introduction, that statement clearly identified who he was and his thought process. That mentality was the same as those who enslaved my ancestors. Its crazy that a prisoner loses his opportunity to rehabilitate himself, simply because he is on L.O.P., when they are within the Michigan Department of Corrections (MDOC), that has a mission statement of “expecting excellence everyday”, which is supposed to be to rehabilitate us and part of correcting us is providing education to those that are not educated. So, they will return back to society better than how they came in.

The mission statement is used as a pretext, because the goal is to keep us in prison or coming back, so they can receive that $35,000 or more. The officer’s response was delayed; I saw “This n----- thinks he’s smart” run across his forehead. His delayed response was “This is what the resident unit manager placed in a memo.” However, nothing was done to correct it. Prisoners are allowed to go to school on L.O.P. and Toplock and the teachers use the Edovo tablet to teach, but the prisoners inside their cells were denied to educate themselves. Make it make sense.

My ancestors built this country and when time went on, we built the prison industrial complex. “What’s the next phase of slavery?” The solution is simple my people (slaves) “remove what is needed to make these systems work and that’s the slave.” Quote by Harriet Tubman: “I freed thousands of slaves. I could have freed more if they’d known they were slaves.”

GENOCIDE Baba X

Eugenics, genocide, mass incarceration, they’re all the same. Not long ago, it was President Clinton apologizing to African Americans (in his last term as president) for the 50 years of government-sponsored syphilis experiments on Black people in this country. I still remember seeing bloated Black bodies floating down the streets of New Orleans, and the white folks and sheriff shooting shotguns over the heads of Black people trying to seek shelter from Hurricane Katrina or shooting at Black people trying to cross that bridge. Mass incarceration is nothing but a silent war against people of color, from Trayvon Martin, Freddy Gray, Sandra Bland, Pamela Taylor to Ahmaud Arbery. There should be picket signs, posters with the words: “America you can’t hide / We charge you with genocide!” Marches and demonstrations should also be on the steps of capitol buildings all over the U.S. “As a people we should never go quietly into their racist good night!”

A supporter wrote me and asked me, don’t all lives matter? Shouldn’t we be shouting that? His return address was missing, so I hope he reads this comment in The Opening Statement. My brother, if all lives truly mattered we wouldn’t be having to be out in the streets. Black lives matter! From Trayvon to Ahmaud Arbery to coronavirus genocide!
As Mr. Baldwin said: “white Americans do not understand the depths out of which such an ironic tenacity comes, but they suspect that the force is sensual, and they are terrified of sensuality and do not any longer understand it.” As it relates to me, a Muslim, Mr. Baldwin was right. The white man’s heaven is the black man’s hell, and one may object but it has been true for as long as so-called white men have ruled the world. Mr. Baldwin says the Africans put it another way: “When the white man came to Africa, the white man had the Bible and the African had the land, but now it is the white man who is being reluctantly and bloodily separated from the land, and the African who is still attempting to digest or vomit up the Bible.” This really resonated with me due to the fact that Mr. Baldwin wasn’t a religious man but he knew:

Historically, the tendency among U.S. blacks has been to retreat into Christianity and theologically Eurocentric Christian churches. This is most ironic, given the fact that for centuries American churches, more often than not, validated the oppressive conditions from which blacks sought refuge. “Even during times of slavery, the slaves often worshipped separate from their masters in different environments and Christianity was given to the slaves in a watered-down form. It was so watered down in fact that it did not include salvation because with salvation slaves would have realized that what they were experiencing was wrong. However, like all races that have been conquered by an opposing race, new religions are forced upon them and they abandon their original identity. If they were to focus upon the mind of the oppressed they would find hope and that hope would allow the mind to gain that which was lost. It is the pure awareness of the self that wakes an individual from a dead consciousness.

To carry on Mr. Baldwin said: “He could not feel, in those sorrowful years, that this human indifference, concerning which he knew so much already, would be his portion on the day that the United States decided to murder its Negroes systematically instead of little by little and catch-as-catch-can.” Which we are witnessing the systematic death as well as a physical death of black people from the hands of those who are supposed to protect and serve a community unable to protect themselves. By the removing of the man from the so-called black home, leaving the women to raise children on her own, from the black man being hunted down and slaughtered like wild animals in the streets by law enforcement. Creating another cycle of broken homes as well as broken minds from the young woman falling victim to unplanned pregnancy and the young man following in the footsteps of destruction to either be slain by injustice or thrown in prison due to the color of his skin. All created from a system that’s never been in favor of the black man or woman who is seen as subhuman. Pushing Oppressive Laws’ Injustice Causing Eradication of the so-called black person.

So is it safe to say the system is not only biased and broken but also has a license to kill? Because we know the crime that is committed without a license to kill is against the law. Meaning in power within government affairs, the white-centered American government is the biggest criminal and has incorporated laws that benefit its protection and laws that create more hardship on people of color within urban communities across the country.

We went from seeing the KKK wearing sheets over their heads to upgrading them for police badges and uniforms, also seeing the war on drugs to the war on crime but in reality it has always been a war on black lives. Which the government embraces all the above through the act of war which is the promotion of violence. This is how our government creates a modern day slave/prisoner and keeps crime going! In the 1920s, the United States had prohibition and a punitive war on alcohol era. But it soon came to pass as the government saw dollar signs and a way to kill legally, adding in tobacco to become a billion-dollar industry. Something that was once
JAMES BALDWIN'S STORY THE FIRE NEXT TIME REPRESENTS P.O.L.I.C.E. OF TODAY Continued from Page 4

considered against the law now is your gateway to death and a number one killer. It has just become another license to kill. Systematically providing a liquor store on every corner in the urban community and creating a law to say 18 to smoke and 21 to drink yourself to death, helping with breaking our laws to commit crime.

According to lawmakers, drinking and smoking yourself to death would be considered or declared a justifiable homicide. Whereas, if someone's only means to survive is breaking the law selling drugs, they'll be convicted and thrown in jail. Forced to work hard laboring jobs as a modern day slave/prisoner.

Now, 57 years after Baldwin wrote, so-called blacks can enter the front doors of white owned establishments, ride in the front seats of buses and can finally obtain employment within government agencies. But in the same breath still are not allowed to enter certain communities unless you are recognized as being rich, and what has remained the same from Mr. Baldwin’s time and era is that the people are still attempting to find their feet on the shifting sands of status. And the reason I agree with this is due to the fact that many of us so-called blacks are stuck behind an identity created by white American which is Negro, black, or colored, when there's no color inherent to the human race.

Bobby Kennedy’s assurance did check out when he said: “A Negro can become president in forty years to the unfortunate tone of warm congratulation with which so many liberals address their Negro equals.” As I mentioned earlier, more so-called blacks have been instituted into the positions that were unattainable in government for colored people. On that note, you still see puppets being strung along by the puppet master! The man behind the veil that’s really pulling the strings and calling the shots! No different from the house n-- -- doing what he is told to do. Becoming brainwashed to push the agenda of the slave master for the gain of a better lifestyle from the demise and devouring of their own people. Thinking they are equal to their master! but in reality would be considered a sell-out, Uncle Tom, bootlicker, or yes man.

I would have to disagree with some of Mr. Baldwin’s observations, for instance: “There are too many things we do not wish to know about ourselves. That people are not, for example, terribly anxious to be equal (equal, after all, to what and to whom?) but they love the idea of being superior.” Which I know with us becoming equal to white America means equal rights! Instead of granted privileges which is under the 14th and 15th Amendments.

But I do agree with Mr. Baldwin when he said: “And this human truth has an especially grinding force here, where identity is almost impossible to achieve and people are perpetually attempting to find their feet on the shifting sands of status.” And the reason I agree with this is due to the fact that many of us so-called blacks are stuck behind an identity created by white American which is Negro, black, or colored, when there's no color inherent to the human race.

So the only way to be equal is to be recognized as such by white America. As Mr. Baldwin said: “In order to change a situation one has to see it for whatever it is; in the present case, to accept the fact, whatever one does with it thereafter, that the Negro has been formed by this nation, for better or worse, and does not belong to any other—not to Africa, and certainly not to Islam. The paradox—and a fearful paradox it is—is that the American Negro can have no future anywhere, on any continent, as long as he is unwilling to accept his past. To accept one’s past—one’s history—is not the same thing as drowning in it; it is learning how to use it.”

In closing, the focus should continue to be upon the status of equal to white America as well as promoting helping inner cities, producing more jobs, better education, job training skills, housing, family support, ending mass incarceration, along with war against Pushing Oppressive Laws Injustice Causing Eradication. Because Protesting Opresion Leads Into Color Equality. If we do not continue moving forward, we will keep witnessing more Rodney King beatings, Trayvon Martin killings, Michael Brown, Eric Gardner, Breonna Taylor, George Floyd and Rayshard Brooks, etc. Falling victim to the hands of law enforcement while police brutality continues to take place and white America allows police to keep beating all charges.

As James Baldwin said: “If we—and now I mean the relatively conscious whites and the relatively conscious blacks, who must, like lovers, insist on, or create, the consciousness of the others—do not falter in our duty now, we may be able, handful that we are, to end the racial nightmare, and achieve our country, and change the history of the world. If we do not now dare everything, the fulfillment of that prophecy, re-created from the Bible in song by a slave, is upon us: God gave Noah the rainbow sign, no more water, the fire next time!”
If you ask me prison is a mind state, my mind state elevate
Consciousness allows me to escape this confined place
This confined place will confine your mind, that’s a confined state
My mind state, I’m beyond the limits of any confined space
Can’t box me, box me, I’m omni
Prison don’t define me, it revived me, I chose to take control
It only refined me, refined King
Prison is where I found me
Its a place of loneliness, isolation and despair
A place where hope turns to hopeless and the thought of hopelessness is too much to bear
See, this place tried to rob me, rob me of my inner being.
My inner being told me to continue being
Hypnotically, they tried to force me, force me to suicide,
Equivalent to murder, kidnapping, treason and grand larceny
Prison is no joy ride
I perceive their complexed superiority, a legalized mental and physical slavery, blanket over the eyes of the public
They can’t see, you’re trying to destroy my pedigree
They feed me, food labeled “only for prison consumption”
Knowing it put a strain on my spiritual functions
Can you blame me, for having these feelings inside me
I’m angry and damn it I got every right to be
However, can’t let anger enslave me, encage me so
I release that energy through my poetry.
Prison

PRISON Adegun F.K.A. Edward Finley

This is a heavy fucking time. The Opening Statement has begun to receive accounts of pandemic deaths in prisons—deaths from COVID-19, related health complications, and suicide in the face of the threat of the pandemic. Have you lost an imprisoned friend, comrade, or loved one to COVID-19 or related suicide? We want to help memorialize those who have died, who were killed by state negligence in a time of crisis, including those who have opted to end their own lives rather than live in fear.

You are invited to send us eulogies, obituaries, or any other form of in-memoriam writing about people you have lost. Photos are welcome, if you have them. Describe what the person meant to you or what they stood for in their life. Include specific memories if you can. Please indicate clearly if you want your own name attached to the writing.

We will compile these writings on our website as a record of the human cost of imprisonment in the time of COVID-19. We also hope to include these memorials in upcoming newsletter issues—this will depend on censorship and what mail rooms will allow. As we publish them, you can have family and friends find these writings at our website, www.michiganabolition.org or on our facebook page www.facebook.com/michiganabolition
COVID-19 has engulfed Michigan’s prison population, and more than 55 prisoners have perished thus far. Of Michigan’s 700-plus newly reported COVID-19 cases on May 18th, approximately 500 of them were prisoners.

In response to this epidemic, Governor Gretchen Whitmer and Michigan Department of Corrections (MDOC) officials have told the public they will be releasing prisoners. Unfortunately, May will be the first month that the number of released will exceed the monthly average of 650-750 parolees — assuming the MDOC meets its projected May numbers. But now that the virus has infected 70-plus percent of people in numerous prisons, the plan to release prisoners is a case of too little, too late. Is this what the Governor and MDOC officials sought all along?

From the outset of the epidemic, MDOC officials internally discussed placing staff in quarantine to curb the spread of COVID-19. But the MDOC decided not to do so, effectively choosing to speed up the spread of the virus and the development of herd immunity.

This position may be hard to accept. However, we must realize that the Governor and the MDOC never wanted to release prisoners in the first place, they even used deceptive tactics to keep from doing so. At a press briefing, the Governor boasted about the parole board releasing 700 prisoners in the past month. But this is simply the average number of monthly paroles — something the average citizen would not know. Such a position is also no different than our nation’s overall approach to this virus: manage the pace of spread, not truncate it.

The bottom line is that Governor Whitmer and MDOC officials never wanted to release prisoners, and the rapid spread of COVID-19 throughout the prison system plays right into their hands. The quicker COVID-19 spreads across the prison system and the faster herd immunity is established, the less pressure to release prisoners. And the longer the MDOC drags its feet, the fewer prisoners who will ultimately be released. For the Governor and MDOC officials, it is a plan well executed.

For decades, a battle has been raging in queer and trans communities about the relationship between our communities and the police. Pride celebrations mark the anniversary of the Stonewall Rebellion, in which queer and trans people fought back against the ongoing violence they faced at the hands of the police. That rebellion happened in the context of widespread anti-police politics of the 1960s and ‘70s, when uprisings against policing were raging across the country across movements against colonialism and racism. In the years after Stonewall, police forces reformed themselves in an attempt to restore their legitimacy, including by hiring cops of color and some gay cops, having cops march in Pride parades, and creating policies and propaganda aimed at portraying the police as protectors and saviors of women, children, LGBT people and other marginalized groups.

In many cities, especially in recent years, police departments marching in Pride parades have encountered protesters demanding that police be excluded from Pride. As the movement for Black Lives and against police violence grows, more police departments are simultaneously investing in messaging that they are “pro-gay,” and more and more queer and trans organizers are rejecting this messaging.

Hundreds of cities have adopted the police-initiated “Safe Place” campaign since it was invented in 2014 by Officer Jim Ritter at the East Precinct of the Seattle Police Department (SPD), the very precinct now abandoned by police in the face of recent anti-police protests. Ritter created the pro-SPD propaganda campaign four years after Seattle erupted in protests over the police killing of Native woodcarver John T. Williams, and three years after the Department of Justice launched an investigation of the SPD that found “the use of excessive force” and bias.

The Safe Place campaign encourages businesses to put a rainbow police shield sticker in their windows to let anyone fleeing anti-LGBT attacks know that if they come inside the business will call the cops for them. The Safe Place campaign takes a symbol from the queer and trans liberation movement, the rainbow flag, and puts it on a police badge to declare that the police are our protectors. Critics of the campaign rightly argue that police are leading perpetrators of violence against queer and trans people, not our protectors, and that the “Safe Place” campaign is about police PR, not about the well-being of queer and trans people. We would rather see businesses agree to not call the police as a way to make our communities safer.
This summer’s unrest against police violence has brought the debate about whether police can be reformed, or whether they need to be dismantled, into the spotlight. It raises questions about whether we could reform the anti-Black racism, homophobia, transphobia, ableism and sexual violence out of the police. Decades of failed reform efforts make clear that the answer is no. The last 60 years have seen waves of protest against police racism and violence, and waves of reforms aimed at fixing the problems. These reforms have diversified police forces, required police “diversity” training, declared that police would not discriminate, placed limits on use of force, and more.

Police are leading perpetrators of violence against queer and trans people, not our protectors.

Over the same decades, police budgets were expanding, police were getting more militarized equipment and training, and policing was infiltrating more parts of society with police presence pervading in spaces like schools, parks and housing projects. The lesson is clear: Reforms that declare that police will stop harming hated groups fail. So many of the police forces that have committed recent high-profile killings (not to mention all the violence short of killing they have been perpetrating) already have the 8 Can’t Wait reform policies on their books, but their violence continues uninterrupted. All the police departments marching in Pride and handing out rainbow police shield stickers still have cops profiling, harassing, assaulting and arresting queer and trans people every day.

In the national debate about defunding police, people around the country are learning to differentiate between empty reforms that name a system as “fair” and real change that makes our communities safer and our lives more survivable. Pride is a good time to think critically about the legal systems that govern our increasingly less survivable lives (in the face of economic crisis, global pandemic and ongoing law enforcement violence), while they tell us we are increasingly equal.

This month, the Supreme Court ruled that discrimination against gay and trans people by employers is illegal under the 1964 Civil Rights Act. This ruling has been widely celebrated. Unfortunately, the excitement about what “legal equality” might mean in the lives of queer and trans people does not square with reality.

Being ostensibly protected by civil rights laws does not necessarily translate into increased well-being or decreased violence against hated groups. One needs only to look to the fact that discrimination based on race and sex has been illegal for over a half century. In the decades since people of color and women supposedly became equal under the law, material inequality — meaning actual harm to the survival and well-being of these supposedly protected people — actually worsened in many substantive ways. This period saw the drastic expansion of imprisonment and immigration enforcement in the U.S., targeted at people of color and marked by gender violence, brutal cuts to programs and benefits for low-income women and children, and an expanding racial and gender wealth gap. Discrimination in housing and jobs may have become illegal, but it is very difficult to prove in court, especially since most people do not have access to legal help, so almost no one gets redress.

Queer and trans safety and liberation will not be delivered by courts or police departments. It will come from widespread collective action.

The United States’ shift from a legal system of explicit sexism and racist apartheid to one in which the state is cast as the supposed protector of women and people of color constituted what some scholars and activists call “preservation through transformation.” In the face of the global and domestic uprisings against colonialism and racism in the middle of the 20th century, the law changed just enough to make this system appear fair, while preserving the status quo of material inequality as much as possible.

The role of civil rights laws is not to actually change the harms faced by hated groups, it is to frame the very government whose policies and practices most endanger those groups as their protector. As we face a severe global financial crisis and as wealth inequality climbs to dizzying heights, we will continue to see poverty worsen for queer and trans people, especially those with disabilities, those of color and women, regardless of the Supreme Court’s declaration about protecting us from discrimination.

The Court’s other recent rulings, like the ruling green-lighting the Atlantic Coast Pipeline and the ruling saying that asylum seekers have no right to object in court before being deported, tell us more about what is to come for
queer and trans people, and for all people. The fact that the same court can say we’re equal and then make decisions that endanger our lives should be no surprise at this point, since the NYPD paints rainbow flags on its police cars while continuing to terrorize queer and trans communities.

This Pride season, we should see growing calls to get the police out of Pride celebrations and to get business to stop participating in Safe Place campaigns. This increasing rejection of surface reforms and demand for transformative change—including divestment from policing and militarism and investment in meeting human needs—should help us question celebratory declarations of equality coming from the Supreme Court decision. Queer and trans safety and liberation will not be delivered by courts or police departments. It will come from widespread collective action for what we actually need to live: housing, health care, child care, food, clean air and water, and transportation. We are past the point where putting a rainbow sticker or wrapping a rainbow flag around a cop car, a tank, a courthouse, or a brutally exploitative anti-worker economy can be mistaken for victory or liberation.

ANNUAL BOOK CLUB
The Opening Statement

*The Opening Statement* is excited to announce its third annual book club. Last year the book club read James Baldwin’s *The Fire Next Time* (1963) in order to think about how the concept of race has functioned in the United States. The response to this text was extremely enthusiastic, so we would like to continue this line of thinking by reading Toni Morrison’s collection of essays and speeches, *The Source of Self-Regard* (2019). The novelist Toni Morrison was the first African-American woman to win the Nobel Prize in Literature. This collection includes her eulogy for James Baldwin, in which she celebrates Baldwin’s capacity for courage, his willingness to oppose his society, and his tenderness despite the pain he had witnessed. Morrison’s essays speak to the call she heard from James Baldwin to “stand on moral ground” while knowing “that ground must be shored up on mercy,” as she discusses racism, fascism, economic inequality, immigration, and war.

*Participants are invited to:*

1. Request a FREE copy of the book! Write to us and let us know you would like the book and we will order it for you at not cost to you.

2. Join the conversation! We welcome your reflections on the book and hope to publish more original response essays in the summer 2021 issue of *The Opening Statement.*

If you want to read the book but are not sure if you will write a response essay, please request it anyways!

Readers are under no obligation to write a response; you are welcome to simply read the book for your own learning and enjoyment.

We invite the participants in the book club to pay closest attention to the first section of the book, “The Foreigner’s Home,” along with Morrison’s discussions of Baldwin and Martin Luther King Jr. The following are some prompts for *The Source of Self-Regard,* intended to help readers think through some of the major themes of the book. These questions can also serve to focus written responses if you find that helpful:

1. Morrison begins each section of the book with something like a eulogy—an address to those who died on September 11, a tribute to Martin Luther King Jr., and her eulogy for Baldwin. Why is mourning so central to this collection of essays? What is being mourned, and what does the process of mourning the past allow Morrison to do as she thinks about the forms of violence and injustice under discussion?

2. In the essay “Moral Inhabitants,” Morrison states that she is not “reasonable.” All progress, she insists, “depends on the unreasonable man.” What does it mean to be unreasonable for Morrison? What forms of injustice have we considered or do we consider reasonable in this country? How do these essays showcase the role that being unreasonable (and thinking about the history of what has seemed reasonable in the past) might play in enacting political change?

3. Morrison is in these essays very interested in borders, in the effort to contain others or keep them out. Why is this such a crucial question for her? Consider how her arguments about borders and migration might speak to our current political moment.
I, like ALL who were sentenced to serve time in a prison within the Michigan’s department of corrections, received an official JPay (email) message from the department. In part, it said all prison visits to inmates in Michigan were cancelled. GTL, the phone service provider for all Michigan’s prisons, in an effort to help keep incarcerated people connected to their families would be giving 2 FREE five minute phone calls to every prisoner once a week. Free, as in, out of the kindness of GTL’s heart.

In the first week of April, I placed a call using the money I pre-paid through the phone debit system. After four minutes of the call passed, the operator said, “you have one minute left,” indicating my call would be over in 60 seconds. I was confused knowing calls are fifteen minutes. I placed another call and the same thing happened. The call ended after five minutes. There was no way around it whether I had money on the phone or not. Even if I called collect, the phone would automatically use the FREE five minute calls first.

I couldn’t help but to be thankful, although it wasn’t much in comparison to what other prisoners in other states has been provided with. Although, with Michigan’s prisoner population, voters, who are their family and friends, continue to pay too much for a phone call. Nevertheless, I was very thankful and appreciative, the company that makes millions from our family members and friends, the poorest people in the nation, thought enough of us to give free 5 minute calls. Not to mention, we are in a crisis, a Coronavirus Pandemic and those who are less fortunate who couldn’t afford a call during this pandemic were now using the phone. They were blessed to check on their loved ones while also enduring the added stress of hearing about the devastation of lost lives and mass unemployment. The 2 free calls went on, once a week, for the month of April.

In May, all inmates in Michigan received an Official JPay (email) message from the department, it said in part, “Please let your loved ones know that for the month of May, GTL will reinstate the Internet and Mobile Fees. (These fees had been removed months earlier adherent to a Federal Communication Commission (FCC) ruling, protecting the incarcerated loved ones from paying predatory prices for phone services.) In this arrangement, the following charges will be made: The $2.95 per transaction fee will be reduced to $1.95.

The $1.95 per transaction fee will be reduced to $0.95.

During the month of May you will only receive one free phone call a week, for the first two weeks.”

Wow, just like “Magic,” right before our eyes. But not so fast GTL. If there is anyone in the world who knows about “3 card molly” it’s those of us who are in prison. These 10 so-called FREE phone calls wasn’t free after all. You forced the incarcerated in Michigan to use the calls, only to charge our loved ones the fee you knew you were attaching to the calls the minute you offered them as free.

Thanks for nothing GTL and the Michigan Department of Correction (MDOC) who allowed you to rob the poor, who already shoulder financial woes before COVID 19, now during this virus pandemic. GTL should be ashamed of themselves, taxing the poorest tax payers during the month of May to recoup profit from what was said were FREE Calls. What’s even more troubling, there is no oversight to see if the profit GTL is making from the fees charged during the month of May, will make our families pay more than what those 5 minute calls cost.
What is your definition of pain?  
Because the pain I know,  
It can’t be found in a Webster,  
You see, it can’t be sold and it won’t be told  
By those who inflicted and oppressed us.

When will we begin to recognize the affects  
of that Willie Lynch Syndrome,  
it was a mental suppression of our culture and our  
history  
Mentally embedded in our conscience to believe,  
that the man standing right next to you is your  
enemy.

And yet they say that pain is something,  
Words can be placed to

So you tell me what words can be spoken?  
When a parent gets that phone call that their child  
has been murdered  
by the hands of those chosen to protect and serve.  
But what else can we do? When our hands are held  
high and we saying, “Don’t shoot”  
But wait, I hope you didn’t think I was just  
going to focus on that man in blue  
Because the man most likely to kill you  
looks just like you.

Black Lives Matter is not just a mantra or  
a movement nor is it just an affirmation to  
acknowledge our existence.  
It’s a call for justice, a need for change and a must  
for equality.

When will we recognize that we’re living in a  
modern day slavery  
Where the ropes and plantations of old have now  
turned into the guns and prisons of today.  
They say that racism is dead  
that it no longer exists, yet  
why is it still found in the United States  
constitution?

See thats why I reject this nation’s notion that I’m  
only 3/5 human  
So I thought I would tell them this one true fact:  
What color can be made without first using  
BLACK! Pain!!!

— Joseph Green

These state blue pants  
wear me,  
#942297, convict, or inmate  
is my new name,  
locked behind these bars of shame.  
I reach out in a still small voice,  
crashing cymbals of the poetic gavel.  
Hear what can’t be said,  
about making money off my crime,  
about silencing a once victim into a criminal,  
about not being heard,  
becomes treacherous mountains of trauma.  
How can one tame a shrew of tormented  
tragedy?

Putting pen to paper bleeds out words  
longing to be told. A language all its own,  
a civilization built on generations of  
frigid beings, uneducated, lacking  
in multitudes the necessary needs.  
Proclaiming to be heard,  
only to become a prisoner inside themselves.  
Does an infant need milk from its mother  
to live?  
What about love to thrive or human touch?  
Do we question this?  
Then why is it okay to turn  
a blind eye or deaf ear?  
I cry out to my God, a just God, a loving  
God, a righteous God.  
When crimson blood boils over the melting  
pot of our country; who, if any can  
find rest?

Coronavirus brought nations closer,  
to work together, to survive. Why do we shun  
criminals to exile? Aren’t prisons a  
Pandemic  
in our nation? Don’t officers, victims, and CO’s put  
their lives in jeopardy because of them  
just like a virus?  
We criminalize… trauma victims, mental health  
disorders, the poor and nationalities.  
We criminalize statistics of recidivism.  
Stop… the… pandemic  
of this revolving door.  
Come together as a mother nation of love and  
responsibility  
to take care of our children  
who need us.  
Be the change we need in our world.

— Kaylee Booth

A NATION OF PANDEMICS

THE OPENING STATEMENT
Congressional Democrats want to make it easier to identify and prosecute police misconduct; Joe Biden wants to give police departments $300 million. But efforts to solve police violence through liberal reforms like these have failed for nearly a century.

Enough. We can’t reform the police. The only way to diminish police violence is to reduce contact between the public and the police.

There is not a single era in United States history in which the police were not a force of violence against black people. Policing in the South emerged from the slave patrols in the 1700 and 1800s that caught and returned runaway slaves. In the North, the first municipal police departments in the mid-1800s helped quash labor strikes and riots against the rich. Everywhere, they have suppressed marginalized populations to protect the status quo.

So when you see a police officer pressing his knee into a black man’s neck until he dies, that’s the logical result of policing in America. When a police officer brutalizes a black person, he is doing what he sees as his job.

Now two weeks of nationwide protests have led some to call for defunding the police, while others argue that doing so would make us less safe.

The Lexow Committee undertook the first major investigation into police misconduct in New York City in 1894. At the time, the most common complaint against the police was about “clubbing” — “the routine bludgeoning of citizens by patrolmen armed with nightsticks or blackjacks,” as the historian Marilynn Johnson has written.

The Wickersham Commission, convened to study the criminal justice system and examine the problem of Prohibition enforcement, offered a scathing indictment in 1931, including evidence of brutal interrogation strategies. It put the blame on a lack of professionalism among the police.

After the 1967 urban uprisings, the Kerner Commission found that “police actions were ‘final’ incidents before the outbreak of violence in 12 of the 24 surveyed disorders.” Its report listed a now-familiar set of recommendations, like working to build “community support for law enforcement” and reviewing police operations “in the ghetto, to ensure proper conduct by police officers.”
These commissions didn’t stop the violence; they just served as a kind of counterinsurgent function each time police violence led to protests. Calls for similar reforms were trotted out in response to the brutal police beating of Rodney King in 1991 and the rebellion that followed, and again after the killings of Michael Brown and Eric Garner. The final report of the Obama administration’s President’s Task Force on 21st Century Policing resulted in procedural tweaks like implicit-bias training, police-community listening sessions, slight alterations of use-of-force policies and systems to identify potentially problematic officers early on.

But even a member of the task force, Tracey Meares, noted in 2017, “policing as we know it must be abolished before it can be transformed.”

The philosophy undergirding these reforms is that more rules will mean less violence. But police officers break rules all the time. Look what has happened over the past few weeks — police officers slashing tires, shoving old men on camera, and arresting and injuring journalists and protesters. These officers are not worried about repercussions any more than Daniel Pantaleo, the former New York City police officer whose chokehold led to Eric Garner’s death; he waved to a camera filming the incident. He knew that the police union would back him up and he was right. He stayed on the job for five more years.

Minneapolis had instituted many of these “best practices” but failed to remove Derek Chauvin from the force despite 17 misconduct complaints over nearly two decades, culminating in the entire world watching as he knelt on George Floyd’s neck for almost nine minutes.

Why on earth would we think the same reforms would work now? We need to change our demands. The surest way of reducing police violence is to reduce the power of the police, by cutting budgets and the number of officers.

But don’t get me wrong. We are not abandoning our communities to violence. We don’t want to just close police departments. We want to make them obsolete.

We should redirect the billions that now go to police departments toward providing health care, housing, education and good jobs. If we did this, there would be less need for the police in the first place.

We can build other ways of responding to harms in our society. Trained “community care workers” could do mental-health checks if someone needs help. Towns could use restorative-justice models instead of throwing people in prison.

What about rape? The current approach hasn’t ended it. In fact most rapists never see the inside of a courtroom. Two-thirds of people who experience sexual violence never report it to anyone. Those who file police reports are often dissatisfied with the response. Additionally, police officers themselves commit sexual assault alarmingly often. A study in 2010 found that sexual misconduct was the second most frequently reported form of police misconduct. In 2015, The Buffalo News found that an officer was caught for sexual misconduct every five days.

When people, especially white people, consider a world without the police, they envision a society as violent as our current one, merely without law enforcement — and they shudder. As a society, we have been so indoctrinated with the idea that we solve problems by policing and caging people that many cannot imagine anything other than prisons and the police as solutions to violence and harm.

People like me who want to abolish prisons and police, however, have a vision of a different society, built on cooperation instead of individualism, on mutual aid instead of self-preservation. What would the country look like if it had billions of extra dollars to spend on housing, food and education for all? This change in society wouldn’t happen immediately, but the protests show that many people are ready to embrace a different vision of safety and justice.

When the streets calm and people suggest once again that we hire more black police officers or create more civilian review boards, I hope that we remember all the times those efforts have failed.

YES, WE MEAN LITERALLY ABOLISH THE POLICE Mariame Kaba
We say Iran is a totalitarian country ran by brute force of dictatorship. We label Iran's government as state-sponsored terrorists and condemn them for anti-humanitarian actions against their own people and neighboring countries in the region. However, this totalitarian government recently released nearly 85,000 prisoners in response to the deadly COVID-19 virus while States across our country refuse to do so.

With over 70,306 confirmed COVID-19 cases and 6,081 deaths in Michigan so far, Governor Gretchen Whitmer has failed to publicly address any concern for the 37,000-plus prison population in the Michigan Department of Corrections (MDOC). The MDOC has over 5,000 prisoners already at or past their release date with approximately 2,500 prisoners who are 50 years old or older with 20-plus years served. Not only have these elderly prisoners spent decades in prison while having the lowest recidivism rates, they are now the most vulnerable to the COVID-19 virus.

So why do we refuse to release prisoners while Iran—a totalitarian government—found the compassion to do so? Perhaps many Americans fail to view prisoners as citizens and, therefore, don’t see them as people. Some may not even be thinking about those in prison during a crisis such as this. Or maybe our political leaders are more concerned about their political careers than human lives. Whichever the case, governmental officials help citizens avoid inner-conflict about this calamity with false claims about how the law prohibits early release. If the concern for those imprisoned continues to be ignored, governmental officials in Michigan and around the country will find themselves faced with a high fatality rate in prisons due to the COVID-19 virus.

Since COVID-19 has a lengthy pre-symptom infectious period and some people are asymptomatic, corrections officials cannot adequately be screened. This means the virus will inevitably make its way into MDOC facilities. Once in the prison, the virus will rapidly spread and quickly overwhelm the ill-prepared corrections medical system. On-site prison health care lacks the equipment to treat infected prisoners, and corrections officials will balk at sending these prisoners to real hospitals. In all likelihood, prisoners will be locked in a cell to deal with their fate in what corrections officials call “isolation.” As a result, a number of prisoners will die, many of whom are over the age of 50.

It is time for us Michiganders to determine who we are as a people. Do we keep these elderly people in prison to face their fate as COVID-19 ravages our prison system or do we recognize these prisoners as people and grant them compassionate release? Iran has made its choice. Now it is our turn.

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.

WE WOULD LOVE TO HEAR FROM YOU.

If you would like to contribute to the ongoing discussion, please send critical essays, reflections on your own experiences, poetry, or artwork to the address below. Feel free to write something in response to the pieces in this publication. We are particularly interested in publishing pieces exploring the personal and political impact of imprisonment, as well as envisioning a new world without the violence of cages, walls, and borders. Please tell us clearly if you want us to publish your work with your full name, a pen name, or anonymously. If you submit material for publication, we will automatically add you to our subscription list and publish your work online unless you clearly ask us not to.

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